GUIDELINES FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT OF ACADEMIC AUDIT

3.1 Introduction

Quality in tertiary education is about improvement and accountability. The immediate questions that arise out of that statement are: (i) improvement on what, and (ii) accountable to whom? Education is a dynamic process which is evolving all the time. In pursuit of excellence, educationists have a duty to continuously discover better ways of teaching and learning, thereby shape education. Perfection or excellence can only be the result of determined effort and continuous improvement. Thus, by taking active steps to ameliorate performance, remedy faults and strengthen weaknesses, an institution moves in the direction of improvement. In a climate of constant change, continuous improvement is a means of timely adaptation, which is vital for an institution's growth and survival. A prerequisite for improvement is an awareness of one's weaknesses as well as the scope and opportunities for alternative and better ways of addressing certain issues. Both awareness and improvement require critical self-examination. Similarly, by critically examining the effectiveness and efficiency of the processes employed in discharging the assumed responsibilities and thereby identifying the strengths and weaknesses, an institution/faculty/school/department takes account of its progress, thus taking a step in the process of becoming accountable to itself and to a range of internal and external auditors/authorities. Therefore it is clear that accountability and improvement are inseparable. They can be likened to the two sides of the same coin.

Self-assessment also called self-evaluation serves as a tool for improvement and accountability. It is an exercise that institutions should engage in periodically. As it is fairly resource-intensive, it is recommended that it is undertaken biennially. At the opportune time the findings of an immediate exercise of this nature can be used to prepare an institutional portfolio for the purposes of an external quality audit.

Nowadays, it is common practice worldwide to monitor the quality of higher education by two well-known processes, namely quality audit (also known as academic audit) and quality assessment, although different countries have adapted them to suit their specific needs.

3.2 Quality Audit and Quality Assessment

A quality audit is concerned with the evaluation of the effectiveness of quality assurance system within an institution with a view to establishing:

i. that the institution uses its resources appropriately to uphold its mission and meet its stated objectives and that it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future; and
ii. the institution's ability and effectiveness of providing quality educational experience to its students.

On the other hand, a quality assessment is concerned with assessment of how quality and standards are maintained and enhanced at a programme level. The focus is on curriculum development and teaching and learning. Part of the exercise involves assessment of teaching to determine how well a particular subject is being taught. Hence, it is also known as subject assessment.

Both processes are undertaken by an external body. In the UK , for instance, the Quality Assurance Agency has been entrusted the responsibility to carry out quality audits and quality assessments. In

Mauritius , the Tertiary Education Commission will assume responsibility for external quality assurance for the tertiary education sector. Worldwide, an established system of undertaking quality audit and quality assessment is widely in use whereby institutions carry out a self-assessment also called an internal audit. In the case of an external quality audit, the findings of such an assessment which are compiled as a submission document by an institution are used as a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of the institutions' quality assurance systems by an external body. For the purposes of quality assessment, the self-assessment is rather different from that of the quality audit, and for this reason it will be considered in a separate document nearer the time of its implementation.

This set of guidelines is proposed to facilitate institutions in Mauritius to undertake their self-assessments in preparation for a quality audit.

3.3   Guidelines for Action

Self-assessment is a valuable means of identifying whether an institution is adhering to its mission and achieving its objectives. In undertaking this task the institution must consider the following:

- Planning – this must be carried out within the framework of the institution's principles of self-assessment.
- Scope of the assessment – who and what are to be assessed.
- Persons involved in the assessment must be knowledgeable, dedicated and have a thorough understanding of the plan
- The assessment should be deductive and not inductive

Undoubtedly, the self-assessment will generate lots of information and perhaps provide evidence to support certain assertions that the institution would make.

3.4   Planning

3.4.1   The need for an agreed plan

Like any important transaction, self-assessment requires careful planning to justify the required time and resources. The person who has overall responsibility for quality assurance in the institution calls up a Central Quality Assurance Committee (CQAC) meeting to discuss the self-assessment. The following must be discussed and agreed upon: the purpose of the self-assessment, drawing up of a timetable, identification of members with a view to assigning responsibilities and generally agreeing as to who will do what, when and how.

3.4.2   Prioritisation of Areas (specific areas of the institution, including services and their functions) that need to be covered

The plan must prioritise the areas that have been identified for the assessment. The CQAC may decide on the priorities and it may wish to refer to Annex 1 dealing with areas that are considered in a quality audit.

3.4.3 Identification of criteria

Self-assessment, by definition, must result in an outcome; that is, a judgement has to be made as to whether a particular practice is good or poor or otherwise. How does one decide on a practice? In the interest of objectivity, there must be clear guidelines and valid criteria for undertaking the assessment. The planning phase can be used to identify the criteria and standards that would constitute achievement of objectives. By default, the institution needs to refer to its strategic plan. Thus, as a first step, the strategic plan will guide the institution on the direction it should take and the objectives should indicate as to how the plan will be implemented. During and following implementation, it is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation process. The evaluation should reveal strengths, including good practice as well as weaknesses, if any. In the light of the evaluation, the plan must be reviewed and amended appropriately to better meet the needs of the institution. The whole system can be viewed as a continuous, cyclical process, with emphasis on continuous improvement. This cyclic process can be represented diagrammatically, as shown below in Figure 1.

3.4.4 Identification of information and possible generation of data

The criteria identified will facilitate the identification of information and data to justify whether a goal/objective has been achieved. The plan will identify persons responsible for collecting information and data. It must also state what use will be made of the data.

3.4.5 Who should be involved and what roles they will play

As mentioned above, planning involves identification of personnel who would be responsible for carrying out specific tasks. For an effective and meaningful self-assessment, taking a faculty as an example, it is necessary to involve all persons having direct responsibility in the delivery of a programme. Similarly, in all other areas of the institution, participation of persons having direct responsibility must be secured in the self-assessment.

3.4.6 Timetable and adherence thereto

A well-planned self-assessment must have a timetable for achieving the stated objectives on time, and it also means that allowance must be made for untoward occurrences. Progress on the plan must be monitored on a regular basis by the self-assessment group and the timetable adjusted as necessary. A stepwise timetable is provided in Annex 2.

3.4.7 Scope of the assessment

The self-assessment group needs to identify the scope of the exercise. Certainly, the major functions of institution have to be addressed and, by implication, all the departments lending support to the main functions also need to be addressed. The group may refer to Annex 1 dealing with areas that a quality audit panel would consider necessary to look at.

3.4.8 Persons involved in the assessment must be knowledgeable, dedicated and have a thorough understanding of the plan

For the successful outcome of a self-assessment, without labouring the point, it is crucial for all personnel involved in this exercise to have a thorough understanding of the plan. Without the basic understanding and the necessary drive, a self-assessment may suffer from serious weaknesses that can thwart the whole initiative. Hence, careful selection of the team cannot be overemphasized.

3.4.9 The assessment should be deductive and not inductive

A deductive approach implies that the assessment is carried out in an objective manner, moving from the known, assembling evidence to arrive at conclusions. On the other hand, an inductive approach implies that the assessment is carried out with the objective of providing evidence to support an opinion. In this case it is subjective.

A self-assessment is not merely a paper exercise designed to prove that a certain practice exists or that an institution is working in perfect harmony. Such an approach is self-defeating as the objective of this exercise is to improve, and improvement cannot be entertained if weaknesses are not identified. Flagging up is healthy if it confirms good practice that is worthy of emulation by other institutions, but unhealthy if done at the expense of improvement. Thus, it is important to be objective in the approach. (Institutions may wish to refer to Annex 3, which highlights the dangers of a conforming approach to self-assessment.)

3.5 Assembling the Information and Evidence

3.5.1 Information

Information for the sake of it serves no purpose in a self-assessment. It must be useful and add weight to certain assertions or arguments in relation to the functions of the institution. It can be quantitative and qualitative and is generally obtained from surveys, performance indicators, etc. Information can be obtained through questionnaires and interviews from many sources. A good way to approach this task is to adopt the strategy formulated by the former HEQC (1996) of UK , which is encapsulated in the questions that follow:

a) What are you trying to do?
b) Why are you trying to do it?
c) How are you doing it?
d) Why are you doing it that way?
e) Why do you think that is the best way of doing it?
f) How do you know it works?
g) How do you improve it?

This strategy may be employed to check whether the objectives of the exercise are being achieved.

The following is a list of possible areas that can be explored for gathering necessary information.

3.6 Sources of information

3.6.1 The Institution in Context

- Vision and Mission
- Aims and Objectives
- Strategic Plan

3.6.2 Curriculum Development and Course Assessment (including input from employers)

- Course design
- Course validation and approval
- Assessment, including moderation
- Course reviews

3.6.3 Students

- Enrolment, registration, admissions, entry qualifications, etc.
- Equal opportunities, access, mature students, etc
- Numbers on full-time and part-time/flexible mode or distance education
- Attendance, dropout rates and their reasons, completion
- Pass rate, awards, value added

3.6.4 Feedback from Students and Alumni

- Evidence, views and recommendations from staff/student meetings, course/programme committees, etc. must be sought.
- Students' views on effectiveness of teaching must be obtained.
- Tracer studies, employment within six months of qualifying, etc

3.6.5 Staff perceptions

- Staff perceptions of courses, course materials, assessments, staff-student ratio and factors affecting their performance must also be sought. Part-time lecturers must be included.

3.6.6 Staff development

- Who has responsibility for policy and implementation of staff development and how this is organised and effected?
- What mechanisms exist for identification of staff development needs?
- Record of who has benefited and how, over a given period

3.6.7 External perceptions

- External examiners' reports and action taken
- Feedback from examination and assessment board meetings
- Feedback from employers/trainers
- Feedback from faculty/school advisory groups

3.6.8 Resources

- Physical and financial: quantitative data and policy
- Human: numbers, qualifications, experiences, age, equal opportunities. Noteworthy achievements, including research and scholarship. Links with employers and professions. Support staff numbers, qualifications, etc.
- Library/learning resource centre: quantitative and qualitative data, policy, responsibilities and links between library subject specialists and teaching staff.
- Welfare: facilities and policy

3.6.9 Research

- Institutional approach to research; relative importance given to it etc
- Collaboration with industry or other institutions
- Achievements and contribution to country's development

3.6.10 Quality assurance

- An outline of the quality assurance system, policy and responsibility
- Quality assurance in the provision and design of programmes of study
- Review of established courses and programmes
- Quality assurance in teaching, learning, research and communications
- Quality assurance in relation to academic staff – staff appointment procedures, staff development and training, staff appraisal, promotion, evaluation of teaching quality, etc.
- Quality assurance in relation to assessments
- Mechanisms for quality assurance in the validation of courses, internal and external to the institution
- Verification, feedback and enhancement – external examiners, appointment of external examiners, student evaluation of courses and programmes, staff/student liaison committees and views of professional and external bodies
- Problems identified, actions taken and outcomes
- Future developments

3.6.11 Transformation and responses to change

- This section should describe changes that have been effected since the last review/self-assessment (where applicable).

3.7 Evidence

Mere information cannot be considered as evidence without supporting criteria. Criteria are necessary for a judgement to be made and information becomes evidence when it is linked to the criteria on which judgements are made. Thus,

Information + Criteria = Evidence

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In carrying out the self-assessment it is necessary to structure questions that will provide necessary information. Following receipt of the information, it will be possible to identify whether it is valid and reliable and whether it can be used to support an argument/judgement.

3.8 Judgements

A necessary part of self-assessment involves making a judgement to determine whether something/a practice is good or might benefit from change/improvement. Information per se does not provide evidence and it cannot be used to make a judgement, whereas, self-assessment requires judgement, judgement that the standard or a certain course is appropriate and acceptable or simply in need of improvement or radical change. Therefore, criteria must be developed to be able to assess information as to whether it can be used for making a judgement.

A self-assessment, therefore, should not be merely descriptive. It requires critical self-analysis and this has to be reflected in the report. The reader must not be left guessing as to what is implied in a statement. It has to be explicit. If a particular practice is found to be excellent, then it is necessary to give the reasons for such a statement and how other institutions could benefit from it. On the other hand, if a practice is deemed to be lacking in quality, then it must be spelt out in what way it is poor, what is lacking and how it can be remedied. Only then a self-assessment will serve its purpose. Therefore, a self-assessment, by its nature, must contain judgements and reasons for them.

Much of the information obtained from students, tracer studies, employers, professional bodies and external examiners are judgemental in nature and can be usefully incorporated in the report.

Judgements, therefore, should demonstrate the following:

- That the evidence on which the judgement is made is clear, valid and reliable
- That weaknesses as well as strengths are identified
- That the reader should not be left to guess on them; they should be explicit
- Assertions about quality without supporting evidence are avoided.

3.9 Reporting

The team assuming the responsibility for carrying out the self-assessment should decide at the planning stage on the preparation of the report, assembling information and making the judgements.

The purpose of the self-assessment will, to a large extent, determine the presentation of the report. Most reports have audiences other than "self". Where the report needs to be submitted for a quality audit, a thorough report is essential. In other circumstances, such as a periodic self-assessment, the full report may be kept for internal purposes (internal to the quality assurance group and the areas assessed), with the main findings and recommendations submitted to the higher level for information and possible intervention.

Whichever be the case, the committee entrusted the responsibility to carry out the self-assessment owns the report. Members of the committee take responsibility to compile data and prepare drafts. However, for consistency of style and coherence of arguments, final responsibility for writing the

report has to be assumed by a single person. Invariably, it is assumed by the person having overall responsibility for quality assurance in the institution, although he/she will be assisted by the team of assessors. Judgements, however, must be made collectively by the group.

3.9.1   Content and Structure of the Report

A self-assessment report is expected to cover the following:

- The institution in context
- The group undertaking the self-assessment
- The period covered by the self-assessment and the date of the last report
- The purpose of the report and who commissioned it
- The report's audience
- Who prepared the report and who takes collective responsibility for it
- Reference to the last assessment, including its recommendations. Any actions taken and outcomes thereof must also be included.
- A brief description of how the assessment was carried out, including people involved, especially when they are external to the institution, how evidence was collected – whether from students, employers, external examiners, etc.
- The data and evidence gathered
- Analysis of the evidence and judgements made, including criteria used to convert information into evidence. Identification of not only strengths, but weaknesses also
- Recommendations, including those who should assume responsibility and date of completion for all recommended activities. Included must be a statement on how the same will be monitored.
- Comments on the usefulness and efficacy of the self-assessment exercise, and in the light of the experience, suggestions on how it might be undertaken in future
- Date and period of next self-assessment.

3.9.2   Confirmation of the accuracy of evidence and the report

Before finalising the report, it is always a good idea to check on the accuracy of the data, evidence and the overall report. This can be done by consulting those who have provided the

information with the explicit request to verify the information and not comment on the judgements. The self-assessment group can then endorse the final draft before it is put together as the final report.

3.9.3   Impact of the report

Readers of the report should get a clear picture of the views expressed by the self- assessment group about itself and the institution as a whole, including its strengths and weaknesses. It should also state how the strengths will be maintained and there must be a frank appraisal of the weaknesses with identification of the reasons for their presence and a realistic way of dealing with them.

3.9.4   Guidelines for writing the report

At the very outset of the process, the self-assessment team should decide the following:

- Who will do what, how and when
- Who will prepare the draft
- The timetable, including dates for submission
- The structure

Confirm evidence with sources

Conclusions should:

- Reflect judgements based on evidence
- Avoid assertions which cannot be supported with evidence
- Be approved and owned by all the members of the self-assessment group

Recommendations should be:

- Explicit and attainable within the time frame
- Addressed to a specific person or body having the necessary power and responsibility for action

3.10   Actions and Monitoring

The self-assessment, whether carried out in anticipation of a quality audit or otherwise, must not be seen as a one off exercise. After the exercise it is very tempting for individuals to return to their usual mode of operation, in spite of the observations and recommendations of the group. This is understandable especially when one is faced with a huge workload, following a daunting audit period. However, it is more rewarding and comforting to be able to redress imbalances instead of ignoring them. Hence, this exercise must be seen as a good opportunity to implement the actions and recommendations made by parties who have responsibility for them.

The group should also identify how monitoring of the actions taken with respect to the recommendations will be carried out and who will carry them out. Clearly, the recommendations must be attainable within the time frame.

Following the assessment, there is a need to close the loop. Those who have provided the information and have been interviewed need to know the outcome of the assessment. If this is not done they would be reluctant to co-operate in the future. Those who have complained about the quality of service need to know what action is being taken, if any. They may be enlisted to provide feedback.

Upon fulfilment of the recommendations, a brief report describing the outcomes must be submitted to the self-assessment group and thereafter, disseminated to all parties concerned.