

Professionals' Perceptions of the Quality of the Transnational Higher Education in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This paper discusses the professionals' perceptions of the quality of the transnational higher education in Sri Lanka. The main research questions focus on the priorities for quality in relation to the foreign degree awarding institutes of Sri Lanka and to what extent that the foreign degree awarding institutes of Sri Lanka implement and maintain quality in their institutes. Three different stakeholder groups, namely, lecturers and the senior managers of the foreign degree awarding institutes and the officials of the government organizations related to higher education were included in the sample. This study employed a vertical case study and the data were collected using a questionnaire survey. The findings revealed how quality can be understood differently by various stakeholder groups and the consequences of these various understanding to the quality of these institutes. Furthermore, the difficulties that these institutes face when implementing and maintaining quality were identified and a bank of solutions were suggested to these stakeholder groups by analyzing the data. It was evident from the results that the foreign degree awarding institutes of Sri Lanka face many issues related to quality due to lack of supervision from the government and their respective foreign providers. Since there is very limited research in this area, this paper may serve as a guide to quality of the transnational higher education of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Quality, Higher education, Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction

Quality in higher education is in paramount importance to a developing country like Sri Lanka, because "The world economy is changing as knowledge supplants physical capital as the source of present (and future) wealth" (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2000). Higher education provides the required knowledge and skills to nations and thereby prepares the countries to face global challenges successfully. The university education in Sri Lanka is mainly centered around the public universities of Sri Lanka. However, as Education Times (2015) indicates out of 250,000 students who sit for the G.C.E A/L examination 150,000 students become eligible for free government university education. Unfortunately, the Sri Lankan universities have the capacity to cater only about 20,000 students and therefore the other students have to look for alternative education opportunities. Private higher education institutes of Sri Lanka that are mainly involved in the transnational higher education in Sri Lanka seem to play a vital role in facilitating these disadvantaged students. Private higher education institutes contribute to the Sri Lankan higher education with a share of 12%.

Quality in private higher education of Sri Lanka is crucial for many reasons. Firstly, these institutes have to maintain quality to sustain their existence in the higher education sector because several political parties and student unions of government universities oppose the establishment of private universities in Sri Lanka (World Bank, 2009). Secondly, the quality will increase the image of these institutes. Thirdly, quality higher education will produce students who can contribute to the development of the country effectively. The private higher education institutes mainly offer foreign degrees in Sri Lanka and thereby engage in transnational higher education. Since there is no government body to regulate quality of these institutes it is necessary to investigate the implementation and maintenance of quality of these institutes. Various professionals' perceptions can bring out an insight to quality of these institutes and therefore, this study considered the perceptions of the lecturers and senior managers of the private institutes and the officials of three selected government organizations in Sri Lanka. The following research questions were designed to investigate the quality of the transnational higher education in Sri Lanka.

1. What are the main priorities for quality in relation to the private higher education institutes of Sri Lanka?
2. How do the private institutes of Sri Lanka implement and maintain the main criteria of quality in their institutes?
3. What are the difficulties that these private institutes face at their attempt to implement and maintain quality and what are the possible solutions to those problems?

2. Literature review

2.1. *What is Quality?*

Quality is a highly debatable term which can bring out multiple meanings (Mishra, 2006). Many researchers (Kalayci, Watty, & Hayirsever, 2012; Mishra, 2006) discuss the five definitions of quality identified by Harvey & Green (1993) in relation to higher education when investigating quality of higher education. These five definitions are as follows.

1. Quality as exceptional: Exceeding high standards.
2. Consistency: Having 'no defects' and “doing things right at the first time”.
3. Fitness for purpose: The service should fit to the stated purpose.
4. Value for money: Quality equates with its value.
5. Transformative: Qualitative change of the students.

Of the many quality gurus who contributed to quality, Juran is identified as the father of quality (Stephens, 2005) and according to Stephens (2005) he added a human dimension to quality (Stephens, 2005). The Quality Control Handbook is one of his major contributions to the quality field. Juran defines quality as “fitness for use or purpose” (Bank, 1992, p. 71, quoted in Beckford, 2002, p. 106) and this concept appears to be useful when deciding quality of the higher education of Sri Lanka. Ball (1985) also argues that quality should be identified as ‘fitness for purpose’. Juran highlights a quality trilogy namely, quality planning, quality control and quality improvement (Beckford, 2002) and his views on these aspects are beneficial to this study since this study focus mainly on quality implementation and maintenance of the foreign degree awarding institutes of Sri Lanka. It is necessary to plan quality of these institutes because “quality does not happen by accident, it has to be planned” (Logothetis, 1992, p.62, quoted in Beckford, 2002, p. 106) and quality control is essential to maintain quality of these institutes and thereby assure the survival of these institutes of Sri Lanka. Constant improvement is also necessary to cater to the numerous requirements of various stakeholders such as students and the government. This study utilizes Juran's ideas to some extent to explore quality of the foreign degree awarding institutes of Sri Lanka.

2.2. *Priorities for quality*

The implementation and maintenance of quality in higher education can be understood well by investigating how the institutes implement the priorities for quality in their institutes. However, the existing studies did not identify the priorities for quality in relation to transnational higher education in Sri Lanka. The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council of Sri Lanka (QAA) which monitors the local degree programs of Sri Lanka employs eight aspects to review each institution and each program (Stella, 2007) and they are as follows.

Institutional aspects are:

University goals and corporate planning, Financial resources and management, Research, Quality management and administration, Quality assurance, Learning resources and student support, External degree programs and University/Industry/Community/Other extension activities.

Program aspects are:

Curriculum design, content and review, Teaching, learning and assessment methods, Quality of students, including student progress and achievement, The extent of student feedback qualitative and quantitative, Postgraduate studies, Peer observation, Skills development and Academic guidance and counseling (Stella, 2007, p.30).

Even though these aspects may provide an understanding of the possible priorities for quality in the transnational higher education sector of Sri Lanka, more research is necessary to understand the priorities for quality in depth with regard to the foreign degrees.

2.3. Quality implementation in Sri Lanka

According to Peiris & Ratnasekara (n.d.) of the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council of University Grants commission of Sri Lanka some private higher education institutes do not provide quality education to the students and thus, wreck the future of their students. They argued that ‘even in the case of actual foreign university affiliations, the poor quality education provides results in many students failing examinations and finally abandoning the course after paying a large sum of money (Peiris & Ratnasekara). Since there is limited research on the transnational higher education of Sri Lanka it is necessary to conduct more research in this area.

2.4. Difficulties and solutions

A study conducted by Deloitte & Touche LLP and affiliated entities (2011) identifies top ten issues that the higher education institutes face as follows.

1. Over budget and underfunded – As funding declines, cost management is key
2. The rivalry intensifies – Competition to attract the best students heats up
3. Setting priorities – The danger of making decisions in the dark
4. Moving at the speed of cyberspace – Technology upgrades are needed across the board
5. Rethinking infrastructure – A renewed focus on asset optimization
6. Linking programs to outcomes – Where training and market demand intersect
7. The best and the brightest – Attracting and retaining talented faculty
8. A sustainable future – Enhancing environmental performance
9. Education for all – Tackling diversity, accessibility and affordability
10. Regulations and reporting – New responsibilities require better disclosure

(Deloitte & Touche LLP and affiliated entities, 2011, pp. 4-26)

The above ten issues can be a barrier for the implementation and maintenance of quality in higher education institutes. Peiris & Ratnasekara (n.d.) suggests some proposals to improve the quality of Sri Lankan higher education institutes as follows.

1. Imposing legislation for private higher education of Sri Lanka which should include registration, licensing and accreditation.
2. A modification to the current Universities Act by allowing the QAA Council to conduct external quality assessments and accreditation of private HEIs.

The above mentioned solutions may also help in improving the transnational higher education of Sri Lanka.

3. Methodology

The study employed a questionnaire survey and 150 lecturers and 60 senior managers participated in the survey from five higher education institutes which engage in transnational higher education. Also, 60 government officials in higher education were taken to the sample. The questionnaires were used since they are cost-effective and can get to a large sample within a short period of time (Thakur, 2005). This study adopted a vertical case study as Vavrus & Bartlett (2006, p 96) highlights the vertical case study as “a means of comparing knowledge claims among actors with different social locations in a vertically-bounded analysis”. Thus, this study attempted to compare the local level which was represented by the lecturers and the senior managers with the national level that was represented by the government officials. The study adopted the random sampling method to collect data as everyone in the population should get a chance to be selected to the sample. Since all the questions were open ended, the data were analyzed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software and significant themes were identified from the data. The findings are presented in this paper by summarizing the responses and also by using participants’ quotes where it is necessary.

4. Findings and analysis

As the findings revealed a large number of lecturers identified student assessment, lecturer qualifications, resources, student input and financial support as priorities for quality with regard to these institutes. The senior managers identified lecturer competence, Improving students' deep learning, curriculum, student admission and financial support to the students as priorities for quality. The majority of the government officials who represented the national level identified curriculum, employability of students and their contribution to the development of the country, student assessment, proper student entry criteria and financial support to students as priorities for quality. It could be seen from the findings that the priorities of the national level are somewhat different to the local level as the government officials mainly focus on broader level national goals. However, the priorities of all the three stakeholder groups could be categorized into three main themes. They are namely, teaching and learning, student admission and financial support. The implementation and maintenance of the priorities for quality are discussed below under these key themes.

Teaching and learning

Several lecturers stated that their institutes lack qualified lecturers and facilities such as new books and new teaching equipments. Some lecturers also revealed that the research facilities in their institutes are very limited. A large number of lecturers stated that they adopt proper assessment methods. The exams which were coupled with the assignments were considered as a way of safeguarding quality of these institutes.

Several lecturers also highlighted the importance of adopting practice which make students aware about the rules, regulations and the guidelines of the institutes. This will lead to the improvement of the quality of learning of the students. A lecture asserted:

If there is a deadline we have to work according to that deadline. In that case we should communicate with them, we should make them aware of the procedures, rules, standards, regulations in advance. That has to be informed to the student before. Also, other stakeholders, lecturers, everything has to be informed. For example, if they are not able to send us the marks of the assignments on time, we should tell them what penalties will be there. In that case, we can maintain it.

Proper communication increases the transparency of the institutes and thereby brings a positive impact on the quality of the foreign degree awarding institutes in Sri Lanka. It was revealed from the findings that the lecturers should receive proper training programs to improve their inter-personal skills while the students receive proper student counseling.

The senior managers stated that they hire competent lecturers, and thereby they attempt to improve students' deep learning. As many senior managers argued the lecturers' competence is strongly related to the students' deep learning. A large number of senior managers stated that their curriculum meets local as well as the international job market requirements. However, the government officials believed that the curriculum of these institutes does not meet the local needs in full as they do not provide many programs in hard sciences. The study of Stephen (2007) in relation to quality and the relevance of the foreign degrees offered in Sri Lanka also highlights that these institutes mainly provide Business and Information technology related programs. The findings from the government officials imply that these students' contribution to the development of the country is not up to the expectations of the government officials. However, several officials believed that these students' English language competence make them employable in the private sector in areas such as Marketing and management. It appeared from the findings that the government officials' perceptions are somewhat different from the senior managers indicating that proper communication and regulation are necessary to improve the image of these institutes in relation to the quality.

Student admission

The lecturers highlighted the importance of recruiting students who meet proper entry levels. The majority of the lecturers and the senior managers stated that their institutes meet proper entry levels. However, the government officials believed that many of

these institutes tend to recruit students who do not meet the entry levels in order to increase their numbers. This view highlights how the national level views can be different from the local level views in relation to the student admission.

Financial support

Many lecturers pointed out how the students have to undergo difficulties due to lack of financial support from the institutes and the government. They suggested that the institutes should provide more scholarships to these students with the help of the foreign providers and the government. The senior managers also admitted that they do not provide adequate financial benefit to the students since they have to consider about their profit levels. They stated that the government can provide loans to the students. Several government officials stated that the institutes should obtain the help from their foreign providers to provide financial assistance to the students.

5. Conclusion

This study which investigates the professionals' perceptions of the transnational higher education of Sri Lanka revealed a number of issues that the transnational higher education in Sri Lanka face in relation to quality. The professionals identified teaching and learning, student admission and financial support as three important priorities for quality. The findings from the professional revealed that there is a lack of communication between students, lecturers, and the senior managers. This issue had a negative impact on students learning. The government officials thought that the quality of teaching and learning of these institutes is low compared to the government universities. Several lecturers also supported the above idea by highlighting that some institutes do not provide sufficient facilities and resources. However, the senior managers believed that their institutes provide adequate quality levels in relation to teaching and learning. While the government officials thought that the admission procedures of these institutes are not tuff, many lecturers and the senior managers believed that their institutes meet high standards in their entry levels. All the three stakeholder groups admitted that the students do not receive adequate financial support from the institutes or from the government. This study suggested that these institutes should provide training programs to their lecturers to improve inter personal skills. It was also suggested that proper counseling programs for the students is required to improve their communication skills. The lecturers and the senior managers also suggested that it is necessary to establish a regulatory body to monitor their institutes so that they can improve their image and convince the national level authorities. The lecturers and the senior managers stated that there is a need for more financial support from the government in terms of student loans. Since there is limited research in this area this study may serve as a guide to quality of transnational higher education of Sri Lanka.

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