

Role of Evaluation in Improving Quality and Planning in Higher Education System

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Abstract: Higher education system, as a leading and policy determining system, is able to pave the way for development in social, cultural and, human dimensions and affect other areas. Awareness of degree of realization of Higher education goals and knowing about shortcomings and status quo are basic tools that can help decision-makers, policy-makers and planners in order to improve the methods and achieve to goals and increased efficiency. Universities are among the most important institutions and communities that need them and transparency, accountability and quality improvement are needed in them. Dynamism and growth in higher education require monitoring and evaluation. Evaluation has been considered as a method for increasing social output of higher education as well as the mechanism for accreditation, the rational allocation of funds, public accountability, informing the stakeholders, assurance of the realization of goals and continuous improvement. Given the extent of the activities of the educational system, evaluation of programs, staff and services, educational organizations can play key role in providing educational quality. The main goal of performance evaluation is access to accurate information about the performance of staff. This information has several advantages such as speeding up the decision-making process by showing the strengths and weaknesses of the various operations, accountability of officials, increasing the sense of solidarity and loyalty, enhancing leadership power of managers, better communication between managers and staff, identifying remedial approaches and goal-oriented educational programs.

Key words: Evaluation, quality improvement, higher education, enhancing, remedial

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is highest and final stage of the formal education system, in other words, it is the head of education in each country. Education in courses that take place after the completion of high school education leading to gaining an associate, bachelor, master and PhD degree is called higher education. Objective and role of higher education in the country is to educate skilled manpower needed by the community, to promote and enhance knowledge, to expand research and pave the way for the development of the country and transfer of values and norms and generally maintain and promote the culture of society to the younger generation. In fact, higher education in all countries follows more or less the following specified general and fundamental objectives:

- Conducting fundamental, academic, applied and development research in order to develop and expand the science and knowledge in the community

- Training and providing skilled, expert and efficient manpower required in different sections of society
- Facilitating the realization of social and cultural objectives and promoting the cultural level of society

The main philosophy of evaluation in universities and higher education and research institutes, especially in developing countries, is constantly improvement of indigenous education, research and professional services. (Bazargan, 1997) In addition, experts believe that evaluation as one of the functions of higher education management system should not be viewed as separate activity, but it is management and planning cycle that without evaluation we cannot take step to improve and promote education and plan it continuously. Evaluation is a method for increasing social output and the mechanism for accreditation of higher education, the rational allocation of funds, public accountability, informing the stakeholders, ensuring the realization of goals and continuous improvement. Due to extensive coverage of the educational system activities, evaluation

of plans, staff and service of educational organizations can play an important role in providing quality of education (Bazargan, 2001). After more than a decade of life evaluation in higher education systems, rarely we can find systematic mechanism for using the findings and results of the evaluation in applied way, aimed at making improvement in our country, especially in non-medical education that is study area of this research.

Evidence suggests that evaluation results are not used sufficiently in our higher education system at present time. Although evaluations are performed, lack of clear and specified mechanism has caused that it results to remain unproductive and even presented recommendations in the internal evaluation are not used systematically. Therefore, the goal is that university system use of results of evaluation and its suggestions systematically to improve the academic quality:

- Main body of study
- Definitions and concepts

Quality: In UNESCO definition, quality in higher education is a multidimensional concept depending highly on environmental conditions (background) of university system, mission or academic discipline conditions and standards (Bazargan, 1997). Despite numerous definitions proposed for quality, (Bazargan, 2001) it can generally be considered equivalent to utility (Dadras and Sharifi, 2014). Similarly, in this study, we consider quality as part of the concept of quality improvement showing the ideal situation. In the realm of higher education, there is no consensus about the meaning of quality. The main source of difference is caused by differences in principles and philosophical foundations. The most important problems in defining the quality in higher education is due to cultural issues and the independence and freedom of universities and and the issue of power and control in the organization.

Quality improvement: deliberate actions to improve the effectiveness of student's learning experience are called quality improvement. In this paper, quality improvement means actions and planning to eliminate quality defects and improve the quality of different factors playing role in enhancing academic quality.

Higher education quality assurance system: it refers to purposeful and systematic processes that through them stakeholders are assured regarding the existence of the necessary conditions of effective mechanisms to deploy, maintain and improve the quality in higher education institution or program.

Accreditation: Accreditation in this way: "The accreditation is formal monitoring of programs and

institutions by external members to assess their quality". This monitoring leads to the awarding of rank to them. He has stated accreditation process in order as follows: internal evaluation, external evaluation (formation of peer board, visiting, judging). Bazargan (2001) also defines this process as internal and external evaluation (Bazargan, 2001).

Evaluation: Identifying the status quo to achieve optimal conditions Higher education evaluation not only considers realizing the goals, it also makes judgment on operation process and its inputs. In the internal evaluation, by collaboration of faculty members, the unit is evaluated, its mission and functional goals are stated. Then, judgments are made on realization of goals. To improve the quality, after the internal evaluation, external evaluation must be conducted so that required actions to be done to improve the evaluation unit (Bazargan, 2001). However, the implementation of internal assessment alone cannot improve quality and assure its continuity. For this purpose, external evaluation should also be implemented. External evaluation is necessary since scientific community to assure the quality of education system requires approval of peer board, in addition to internal evaluation. The process of internal evaluation is done following the evaluation of the performance of educational departments. Internal assessment aims to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and factors inhibiting optimal performance of each academic unit usually educational department (Yamani, 2001).

Quality in high education system: Nowadays, the issue of improving the quality of academic educations is an integral part of political and official discourses of officials related to the management of higher education without essential attention to concept of quality and mechanisms needed to improve it. In some organizations, it is said even said that university policy has relied on quantitative growth but and qualitative growth will be from now on. These types of analyses show ignorance of this concept and qualitative and quantitative dimensions cannot be separated. It must be admitted that every little action will have its qualitative impact (Eaton, 2006). Bazargan (2003) considers quality in higher education system as adapting of input factors, process, output and outcomes of this system with predefined standards that these standards are defined and developed based on missions, goals and expectations of community of high education. However, despite different views and opinions about the quality, we cannot provide comprehensive definition of it, so determining the qualitative indicators by audiences of education system play an important role (Ruienstein, 2003)

Performance quality in high education: Today, quality is at the head of the organization's affairs and to improve the quality is their main concerns. Continuous quality improvement requires ongoing evaluation. Quantitative expansion of higher education without considering available capacities and ability of cultural, social and economic context of society will lead to reduced quality in higher education, leading that universities change and review their plans and policies.

Since universities are among the most important institutions that communities need for them to develop, transparency, accountability and quality improvement are mandatory in them and a prerequisite for dynamism and growth in higher education is monitoring and evaluation. In today's world, universities and higher education center undertake three major duties: teaching, research and providing service. Given the importance of these institutions in various economic, social, cultural and political aspects of society, assurance of their high quality performance is necessary in to order to prevent the loss of human and material capital as well as having the ability to compete in a future world where quality is the most important component for the life of any organization. Therefore, paying attention to the functions and missions is very importance and has a significant impact on the effectiveness of the university (Nourshahi, 2003).

Process and challenges of quality evaluation in higher education in Iran: The issue of quality in Iran was raised out in nineties and quality evaluation activities and improving the quality of programs with policies such as improving the higher education courses, creating scientific and cultural space for development of knowledge and personal and social skills of students, support of increased production were followed since that time. During this time, improving the quality has been considered as important policy but due to lack of clear and appropriate approach, development policies and quality improvement programs have always been in limbo (Abadi, 2008). Structures formed after the revolution in Iran to evaluate higher education had bureaucratic structure established by the government. For this reason, they were mostly inefficient to promote and assure the quality of higher education. Supreme Council of Evaluation and Monitoring was formed since 1982 following Cultural Revolution Committee approvals. Evaluation by this council was conducted by sending visiting groups and evaluation and monitoring board in universities. In 2000, the Supreme Cultural Council formed the "cultural and scientific board to monitor and evaluate" in its own subset. It was responsible for performing tasks

relating to supervision and monitoring and evaluation of education at the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education at that time. Monitoring and Assessment Office in Division of the Ministry of Education was formed since 1982 and forming the monitoring and assessment units and assessing the education of universities was proposed in their educational deputies. Then, Monitoring and Assessment Council of Education was formed in Education and Ministry Deputy. Under this council, forms was prepared and sent to the university to complete and restore them (Farasatkah, 2010). In Higher Education and Culture Ministry of that time, units known as office and headquarters of monitoring and supervision undertook the evaluation of higher education. In 1997, "comprehensive plan of monitoring and evaluation of higher education" was adopted in te Council of Ministry Deputies so that Department of Monitoring and Evaluation evaluates teaching, research, administrative, financial and developmental affairs of universities and higher education institutions (Madhoushi, 2010). Monitoring and evaluation councils of institutions were working under the ministerial monitoring and evaluation office. Since 2005, the Monitoring and Evaluation Office of Ministerial Higher Education universities proposed the plan of monitoring and evaluation of higher education universities and institutes. Based on this proposed plan, the results of evaluation and monitoring should have impact on distribution of higher education credits. Supreme Council of Monitoring and Evaluation is in the highest level of the proposed structure to approve macro policies that Evaluation and Monitoring Office acts as its secretariat (Farasatkah, 2008). This type of structure and organization that was based on government and linear involvement was associated with lack of attention to complex areas of higher education and academic norms. On other hand, the participation of all stakeholders has been ignored in it, as it is one of the effective factors in the evaluation, validity and reliability of evaluation results. For this reason, many activists and theorists in the field in Iran have tried to find a way to improve the existing structure. The result of these efforts in the second half of nineties and first half of twenty leads to support of Measurement and Evaluation Organization of Iran to credit and professional support of internal evaluation of university groups and their external evaluation voluntary by their scientific peers and other beneficiaries (Maroufi, 2007).

Need to pay attention to quality evaluation in higher education: The increasing demand for higher education, in turn, requires that applicants want sufficient

information of higher education so that they can be assured on demand-oriented and customer-oriented of its various functions. Thus, we can expect from higher education institutions to be expected transparently by their stakeholders and they provide required information on their resources, processes and outcomes and report accountably that how they work how they cost what is the effectiveness of their costs and more importantly, if they create value added and how (Lim, 2002). In addition, higher education institutions face with multi-faceted problem at present. On the one hand they must adapt themselves with the requirements of the changing environment. On other hand, creative adaptation with external environment requires change in viewing the internal problems (such as students, faculty member, staff, processes, structure, culture organization, procedures, models, leadership styles, methods of teaching, level of research and interactions, professional services and so on) and all of these are associated with quality issue. Academic evaluation system, as an academic sub-system must be established from the beginning of thinking about the plan of each university or institution so that realization of special mission and goals and five tasks of university to be assured. This will be possible when the university system makes judgment about the desirability of input factors (students, faculty, curriculum, etc.), process (teaching, learning, etc.) and output (learners) consistently and accurately and its results to be used by decision-makers to improve the affairs (educational, research, service, publications and professional development affairs) and providing expertized services. In this regard, elitist higher education has been changed and developed to inclusive nowadays and development of learner community has been adjourned to qualitative development and qualitative improvement of "access to learning at a high level" (Farasatkah, 2010).

Quality improvement program: Quality improvement program is set of activities developed to different objectives such as improving the quality of student learning in educational institutions. This program is developed usually for five-year periods according to the needs of students and the requirements of society. This program is developed according to the strategic plan of the university and results of the university evaluation and identification of areas that their qualitative improvement plays a key role in increasing student achievement.

Any quality improvement program has goals and elements that accreditation is requirement of accepting such programs by institution monitoring and examining

these programs and universities and institutions are ranked based on that. This rank leads to university success and achievement in competing with other universities to receive more funds or attracting top students and more financial independence obtained in light of reputation.

Prerequisites of evaluations effect in improving the quality: Internal and external evaluation can be effective if capacities have been prepared to it implementation. For this purpose, the following conditions are necessary:

- Improving the academic quality of universities must be based on actual needs not based on administrative circulars
- Evaluation must be based on a simple model
- Expectations of evaluation implementation must be realistic
- Financial and physical resources required for the implementation of the evaluation should be available as much as possible
- Before implementing the evaluation system, higher education leaders and managers should realize the need to establish quality assurance systems and announce their readiness to support it
- Faculty members in the mentioned system should participate at the beginning to establishment in the related processes
- Higher education quality assurance system must emphasize on strengths aspects of Higher Education units, rather than zooming on dysfunctions and inadequacies
- Mechanism of identification and superior performance praise must be established to honor educational departments and higher education units doing evaluation and striving to improve the quality
- Higher education quality assurance system not only must be equipped with proper mechanism of internal evaluation but also it must provide doing the external evaluation
- A scientific institution, independent of administrative organization of higher education, should undertake the offering of support services of internal and external evaluation (Van, 2000)

Outcomes of the evaluation system and ranking performance quality: In most countries, there are accreditation systems measuring and assessing the quality of performance and activities of universities and ranks them based on the results. This ranking, based on political and administrative system of countries, may lead to more funding or an accepted document about spent

costs at university. On the other hand, it is clear as university or educational institution is more reliable, more students will have willing to continue their education in such university due to its higher quality and even they will have willing to pay its costs. More importantly, top students prefer to universities that have higher ranks.

As a result, a greater number of graduated people will have continue their education at universities that are prestigious at national, regional and international level and this will lead to attraction of better and more top students. Based on what was said, in period when university's financial independence is more important than any time, enjoying such conditions is regarded as significant competitive advantage (Dadras and Sharifi, 2014). Therefore, enhancing the quality of performance of universities is not just spending the costs but it is an investment playing important role in the promotion of knowledge and wisdom.

CONCLUSION

Monitoring and evaluation in the developed communities pave the way for efficiency and effectiveness of their systems and they always have important role deserving much attention. Its importance in higher education is higher in higher education system, as leading and policy determining system, is able to pave the way for development in social, cultural and human dimensions and affect other areas. Therefore, awareness of realization of goals of higher education and having knowledge of defects and strengths (status quo) are basic tools that can help decision-makers, policy makers and planners of higher education to improve the methods, achieve the goals and increase the efficiency. Organizations are formed to achieve specific objectives. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly monitor and evaluate the quality and and their performance so that activities and actions to be guided in line with realization of objectives by identifying strengths and weaknesses in the light of results obtained. International experience suggests that protectionist and lenient models in evaluation, independent of government intervention in the evaluation conducted voluntarily on the base of academic freedom and scientific freedom will have better efficiency and more sustainability than strict models with government intervention. Students' views are important source in evaluating the learning quality in universities, as views of graduates and employers and external external stakeholders are taken into account in evaluating the higher education. On other hand, appropriate philosophical approach to evaluate Iran's higher education is critical approach based on motivation, attachment, dialogue, collaboration, empowerment and indigenous participation with the aim of sustainable

change through continuous improvement of quality. Finally, internal and external evaluation (accreditation) is better option for Iran's higher education's transition to a global quality levels with the cooperation and interaction of all stakeholders such as universities, scientific societies, NGOs, government and labor market (world class) (Farasatkhah, 2010). Evaluation without any action to improve the quality has been considered useless. Based on the definition, evaluation is identifying the status quo to achieve optimal conditions. Identifying the status quo is a step to awareness of strengths and weaknesses and although in practice it may be acted in various methods, theoretically, take an action to improve is an important part of evaluation circle in evaluation models. Reports of internal and external evaluation of educational groups compatible with internal evaluation model include suggestions to improve quality at various levels. The implementation of these recommendations will be subject to follow-up of group and other university officials. By creating quality evaluation organizations in each department, the following of these suggestions will be provided. Woodhouse believes that successful implementing of evaluation and quality improvement plans depends on following conditions:

- Enhancing faculty members and university managers' awareness of need to evaluate and improve quality
- To familiarize faculty members with accreditation model (consisting of internal and external evaluation) and convince them of the suitability of this model for improving the academic quality
- To hold educational workshops and scientific meetings and motivate faculty members toward improving the quality and honoring it
- University administrations and directors of university departments and educational groups must be aware of importance of evaluation and quality improvement and motivate the faculty members and staff of university toward desired university achievements (Dadras and Sharifi, 2014)

When these conditions are met, preparation to change is achieved, resistance against changes declines and appropriate changes in performance of people and university centers are created, quality increase. In this case, evaluation can be appropriate solution to improve the quality for performance of university performances.

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