Full Length Research Paper

Management development of internal evaluation in the Islamic Republic of Iran (case study)

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During the last two decades, many higher education systems in the world have attempted to evaluate and improve the quality of education, research and services at the university and higher education level. Countries which have been successful in these attempts have initiated continuous evaluation and applied internal evaluation as a basis for promoting quality culture. Quality assurance as a comprehensive term encompasses all policies, processes and actions maintaining and developing higher education quality. Quality assurance emphasizes on external goals of evaluation, one of which is to assure learners, public and government that each unit, department, program or institution manages its quality. Thus quality assurance focuses on accountability. In Iran, also, implementation of continuous evaluation projects started in 1996. Since then attempts were made to institutionalize departmental internal evaluation at the university level. The main purpose of this research was to conduct an 'internal evaluation' of PhD program in Department of Persian Language and Literature of Tehran University This article describes importance of quality assurance and internal evaluation and the necessity to conduct it.

Key words: Quality assurance, system and development, internal evaluation, Iran.

INTRODUCTION

Policy-making and management of higher education have traditionally been concerned with the maintenance and enhancement of academic standards and processes. The expansion, diversification and privatization of higher education systems worldwide have brought with them an increased concern with the quality of higher education, in both developed and developing countries. In addition, globalization is widely affecting higher education and is creating new challenges for its regulation. An increasing number of students travel abroad to study in foreign countries. In addition, institutions and programmers move across borders in the form of e-learning, franchising or branch campuses, and add considerably to the traditional offerings of local public higher education institutions. While the provision of higher education is becoming ever more diversified, increased mobility among professionals requires greater standardization among qualifications so that they can be assessed by national authorities for decisions relating to recognition. New instruments to assess qualifications are also needed to combat the academic fraud that accompanies diversification of higher education. Within this context of change, new methods of quality assurance such as accreditation systems have

become a concern in higher education policy agendas (Martin and Stella, 2007).

According to Vlăsceanu et al. (2004) quality assurance has the following meaning: "Quality assurance: An all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programmers. As a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgments (not ranking) through an agreed and consistent process and well-established criteria. Many systems make a distinction between internal quality assurance (that is, intra-institutional practices in view of monitoring and improving the quality of higher education) and external quality assurance (that is, inter- or supra-institutional schemes of assuring the quality of higher education institutions and programmers). Quality assurance activities depend on the existence of the necessary institutional mechanisms, preferably sustained by a solid quality culture. The scope of quality assurance is determined by the shape and the size of the higher education system. Quality assurance varies from

accreditation in the sense that the former is only a prerequisite for the latter Quality assurance is often considered as a part of the quality management of higher education, while sometimes the two terms are used synonymously (Vlãsceanu et al., 2004). Importance of issues like quality, evaluation and quality evaluation and quality assurance in the process of reforming higher education systems is extensively appreciated and is frequently confirmed. Establishment of an evaluation system for quality of education provides a tool for universities to revise their activities, to determine their strengths and weaknesses and to choose suitable options to reform their programs. Related experiences show that the first step in path, internal evaluation, leads to participation of all staff of educational system not only in education and research but also in propitiation, finance and management.

An accountable system provides opportunities to run debates between institutions, and experts on one side and interested parts of society on the other side, therefore leads to survival and development of the entire higher education system. It has been proved through experiments that whenever external experts are consulted, change and development will begin more easily (Kristoferson, 1998).

Evaluation helps quality improvement in higher education and makes higher education accountable. Maintenance and improvement of higher education quality are considered as shared responsibility of every person in an academic institution (Barnett, 1995). In this respect; the process of quality improvement (QI) requires faculty members to play a major part. This could be achieved through internal evaluation (Bazargan, 1995). Higher education system structure in Iran is composed of more than 80 universities and about 1000 center of higher education. Higher education system in Iran is divided into two major sub-systems:

(1) Medical university system (MUS).
(2) Comprehensive higher education system (Bazargan, 2006).

The MUS is under the Ministry of Health and Medical Education and the comprehensive higher education system is under the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. In 2007 about 2.5 million students enrolled in higher education institutions. Furthermore enrolment in private higher education accounted for about 52% of total enrolment. In recent years, several attempts have been made to measure and enhance quality of higher education in Iran. In 1990 a proposal was prepared to assess academic activities of universities and rank them according to certain national criteria.

In 1996 the Ministry of Health, Treatment and medical education, which is responsible for medical sciences universities, initiated a project on internal evaluation (self-evaluation). One of the purposes of the project was to motivate faculty members to participate in the process of quality improvement of their departments (Bzargan, 2000). The impact of the pilot internal evaluation project was so impressive that the ministry of health treatment and medical education decided to request all the departments of internal medicine, at the medical sciences universities, to carry out an internal evaluation project. Based on this, during the past decade, more than 400 university departments in the medical sciences and comprehensive universities have indicated willingness to conduct self–evaluation. However, only 10% of them have been successful in completing the process and prepare a comprehensive final report (Bazargan, 1999). In this context, the question is "what is quality assurance?" Therefore in answering this question, this article, first, reviews briefly definitions of quality in higher education and a short history of the internal evaluation of programs in higher education systems. It then elaborates the project of the development of internal evaluation in Iran.

Global initiatives for quality assurance capacity in higher education levels (GIQAC)

Quality of education at all levels is a key to poverty reduction and economic growth. Stakeholders frequently lack reliable information about the quality of the education being provided. Governments wish to assure stakeholders that students are receiving a minimum standard of quality. Quality assurance (QA) in higher education is a systematic process of assessing and verifying inputs, outputs, and outcomes against standardized benchmarks of quality to maintain and enhance quality, ensure greater accountability and facilitate harmonization of standards across academic programs, institutions, and systems. QA is typically conducted by QA agencies - government and NGO bodies. Nevertheless, there is a need to strengthen capacity for quality assessment in many developing countries. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2008).

Over the past two decades developed and developing countries alike have increased their efforts to apply evaluation approaches to measuring and improving the quality of higher education in this regard, differences in condition between the developed and developing countries have been particularly striking: the former are using ever more sophisticated means to give their higher education system the highest possible level of performance; many of the latter are striving simply to meet a minimum standard of quality for all in institution (Ecuyer and Peace, 1994). Quality assurance and accreditation mechanisms are being applied to collect data and to determine the extent to determine the extent to which higher education systems (programs /department/schools/universities) meet the criteria of

merit. These criteria include pre established standards or stated program goals have served as the source of criteria of merit (House, 1994). Hence, according to this fact, one of the main concerns of higher education institutions is quality. The issue of quality is becoming more complicated as higher education is increasingly pressed by the external environment. Despite the progress being made through research and debate, and a considerable amount of literature in the area, there is still no universal consensus as to how quality should best be managed within higher education (Mehralizadeh, 2005; Becket and Brookes, 2005; Luckett, 2004; Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003; Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002; Middlehurst, 2001; Cheng and Tam, 1997; Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996; Harvey and Knight, 1996). Quality assurance refers to the means by which an institution can guarantee, with confidence and certainty, that the standards and quality of its educational provision are being maintained and enhanced (Harman, 1998). Quality assurance at the university and departmental level has two parts: self-evaluation by the departments and external evaluation by an external review committee consisting of experts. Internal evaluation is a form of action research and is an organizational intervention focused on practical concerns shaped by political and organizational constraints. Consequently, the results of internal evaluation may be organization specific and not generalizable (Cowin, 1994). Internal evaluation as a mechanism for quality assurance is sometimes called self-study, self-assessment, or departmental review, and is becoming a feature of academic life in higher education institutions in many countries. Studies on quality assurance in higher education have focused on two separate but related issues, namely internal and external evaluation (Brink, 2003).

For the purpose of this paper, we addressed those aspects of the study that deal with internal evaluation. When we look at the research in the area of internal evaluation, we can see various recurrent themes. For instance, Yonezawa's (1999) study focused on identifying the strengths and weakness of the Japanese system and showed that self-evaluation reflects market differences which different types of universities face. In South Africa, the National Plan for Higher Education paved the way for major restructuring, transformation and quality assurance, and identified internal evaluation as a steering element in the transformation process (Wilkinson, 2003). The European student handbook on quality in higher education recently addressed the concept of quality culture. The term "quality culture" is currently the focus of a joint EU-European Union project. Van Berkel and Wolfhagen's (2002) evaluation of the Dutch system of external quality assessment revealed that the mere existence of the system does affect the way of thinking within the university. Perhaps the most important effect of an external quality assessment can be described as "promoting the quality debate" (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

Common's (2003) study revealed that self-assessment makes a major contribution to improving the quality of college provision for students and also promotes a range of management practices, especially evaluation. Hulpiau and Waeytens (2001) research focused on the introduction of systematic internal evaluations at the University of Leuven-Austria in 1993 and 1994. They found that the problems which frequently appear are of a didactical type or relate to either educational or organizational conditions. Problems of the organizational conditions concern infrastructural facilities, staff, internationalization and integral quality assurance.

Their results also indicate a lack of follow-up for the majority of problems detected in the course of an evaluation process. Some of the research results in relation to internal evaluation in Iran have provided conflicting messages. Bazargan (1995, 2000) conducted research on improving the relevance and quality of higher medical education in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The research concluded that through the process of engaging faculty members in empowerment evaluation, they are motivated to revitalize the department in which they are members. This has developed a positive attitude towards responsiveness in higher education and planning continuous improvement of activities. Bazargan asserted that the process of self-evaluation (internal evaluation) would develop the necessary culture and conditions for accountability in higher education systems. Nevertheless, the results of Saedy (2004) on internal evaluation in statistics department and of Mehdipour (2005) on evaluation in Iran's schools of physical education show management and cultural resistance to internal evaluation.

The above studies indicate a continuing debate about the importance and role of internal evaluation in higher education. Thorn (2003) notes that there is a significant lack of formal research into the effectiveness of the self-evaluation process in bringing about improvements. Thorn (2003) and Sallinen and Konttinen (1994) reported that internal evaluation has positive effects on institutions. Other studies pointed out that the limitations of self-evaluation and peer review include the inherent subjectivity and lack of clarity in the criteria being used to make decisions, lack of sufficient time, the fact that self-evaluation takes place at a busy point in the academic year, and the absence of hard data (Valimaa, 1994; Brennan et al., 1998). Valimma also notes a lack of research into the criteria used for making judgments and the "interpretative process" undertaken by peers (Lillis, 2005).

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this research was to conduct an internal evaluation of PhD program in department of Persian Language and Literature of Tehran University. In

this regard, the following questions were posed and answered.

(1) What are the mission and objectives of PhD Program in Department of Persian Language and Literature of Tehran University?
(2) What is the desirability rate PhD Program in Department of Persian Language and Literature of Tehran University based on the internal evaluation results?

Internal evaluation was conducted based on the following steps:

(1) Introducing goals, principals and methodologies of internal evaluation to the faculty members of the unite assessed.
(2) Establishing internal evaluation committee.
(3) Developing a timetable for the implementation of internal evaluation.
(4) Determining factors, criteria and markers of internal evaluation.
(5) Determining requirements for judging quality.
(6) Specifying required data for internal evaluation.
(7) Selecting or developing measurement instruments for data collection.
(8) Data collection.
(9) Regulating and analyzing data and judging the quality of the factors being evaluated.
(10) Reviewing and clarifying the objectives of department.
(11) Developing a primary report and distributing it among faculty members of departments to attain their opinions on proposals to improve the quality of department.
(12) Developing a final report (Bazargan et al., 1387).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by data collection and therefore is descriptive-analytic in nature. It is also considered "applied" which has utilized quantitative and qualitative tools to attain its goals. Instrument for collecting data at the first stage, that is, internal evaluation, was 5 questionnaires having been designed for each one of the five subgroups, namely (1) (current and previous) department directors (2) faculty members (15 members) (3) students (35 PhD students) (4) the graduates (15 PhD graduates) and (5) employers (15 individuals) for the second stage qualitative measures like interview and observation were used, especially when determining objectives. According to the small size of the population, to make an in-depth examination, a complete census has been conducted.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research question 1

What are the mission and objectives of the Department of

Persian Language and Literature? Most Iran's academic departments do not usually have any objective and established goals. Although these objectives are generally described within these departments, one cannot make use of them as measurable criteria in evaluation. The Higher Education Policy-Making Council defined the following objectives for the PhD courses of Persian Language and Literature department: The main goal of the establishment of PhD courses of Persian Language and Literature is promoting the training, teaching and research level. It also aims at fostering individuals who fulfill the teaching and research requirements of Persian Language centers in particular and understanding the principles of Persian Language and Literature, in general.

As has been made clear, these goals are not transparent and objective. The ambiguity of missions and objectives can lead to different interpretations and postpone the achievement of the main goal. To describe the objectives of in PhD courses in Persian Language and Literature, the pattern of extracting departmental goals was utilized which was based of five information resources, namely:

(1) University objectives
(2) Society requirements
(3) The knowledge structure in the job market
(4) Conditions and facilities of academic system
(5) The educational needs and expectations (Bazargan et al., 1387).

According to this paradigm, the PhD program perspective, its missions and objectives (in three parts of input, output and process) are recognized as follows:

Perspective

Directing the society's Persian Language and Literature programs, towards education, knowledge production, diffusion and, employment for the development and improvement of Iranian culture.

Educational mission

Creating required contexts and opportunities for training required experts in teaching and training part relative to the department specialized area.

Research mission

Creating required contexts for research in the field of Persian Language and Literature and fostering strong researchers in this area for the recognition of country's educational and training problems and providing proper solutions.

Administrative missions

Providing required guidelines and other specialized services in the field Persian Language and Literature for stakeholders, related and interested individuals and groups. To realize the above perspective and missions, the established objectives are as follows:

Input objectives

1. Updating the educational programs and lessons in order to foster the cognitive, skill and emotional capabilities regarding the highest level of Persian Language and Literature knowledge within the society and job market expectations.
2. Attracting professional faculty members proportional to the department expertise and maintaining and developing their capabilities.

Process objectives

1. The development and promotion of the culture of Persian Language and Literature and debate among professors and students through basing the education on the negotiation and debate.
2. Emphasizing on research along with educational activities in the area of Persian Language and Literature.
3. Maintaining and promoting students performance during their education period.
4. Maintaining and promoting faculty members performance as a basis for students' performance improvement and eventually the whole department.
5. Fostering the positive view and scope in students regarding Persian Language and Literature and more attempts in this regard.
6. Fostering and training students and graduates capable of applying the obtained knowledge and skills and also creative individuals in updating and developing their knowledge and skills.
7. Fostering graduates capable of self-training and self-steering after their graduation in areas of Persian Language and Literature.

Output objectives

(1) Providing the required context for PhD students' And graduates' occupation and further education.
(2) Providing specialized services and consultation

regarding Persian Language and Literature for different parts of society specially educational centers.
(3) Providing expert human forces in the field of Persian Language and Literature, relative to the regional, national and international requirements.
(4) Providing expert human forces that are familiar with scientific research methods in the field of Persian Language and Literature and have got the required creativities and skills in the area of research.
(5) Attempting to promote country's Persian Language and Literature and removing the existing ambiguities in this area.
(6) Leading the Persian Language and Literature of the country in order to organize it and direct it towards the specified direction.

Second research question

According to the internal evaluation results, what is the desirability rate of the PhD Program in Department of Persian Language and Literature in terms of quality? The internal evaluation of the mentioned was conducted based on 7 factors (consisting of 22 criteria and 64 markers). In the study, the seven factors evaluated were as follows:

(1) Student
(2) Faculty members
(3) Curriculum
(4) Applied resource
(5) Teaching-learning process
(6) Graduates
(7) Group management

Generally, the following steps were taken to obtain scores in each section:

The collected data were analyzed by the SPSS Software after being regulated; then current condition of factors, were determined according to criteria and markers; then markers, criteria and factors were evaluated respectively, and finally the condition of the total department were judged through a 3-degree desirability scale. This 3-degree desirability scale is shown in Figure 1.

After determination the desirability level of each marker, scores in criteria, factors and total score in the PhD program being evaluated were obtained through the following formula and the obtained results were compared with the aforementioned 3-degree desirability scale so that scores for each would be determined.

$$\text{Score in markers} = \frac{\text{Sum of the numerical value (Its weigh) of each option of a markers item} \times \text{its frequency}}{\text{Total number of respondents to the question}} \xrightarrow[\text{With desirability scale}]{\text{Compatibility}} \text{determining the desirability level of a marker}$$
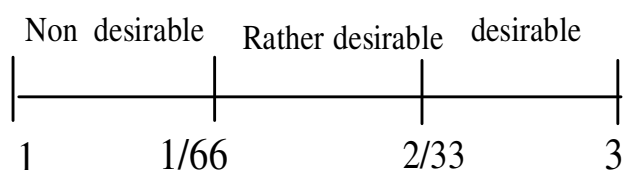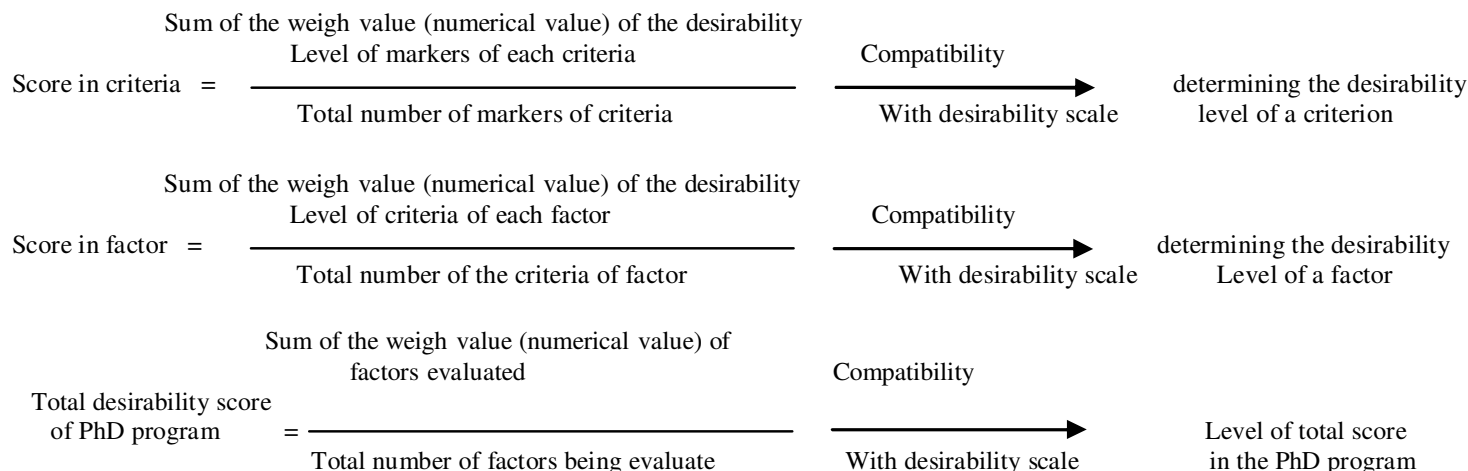
$$\text{Score in criteria} = \frac{\text{Sum of the weigh value (numerical value) of the desirability Level of markers of each criteria}}{\text{Total number of markers of criteria}} \xrightarrow[\text{With desirability scale}]{\text{Compatibility}} \text{determining the desirability level of a criterion}$$

$$\text{Score in factor} = \frac{\text{Sum of the weigh value (numerical value) of the desirability Level of criteria of each factor}}{\text{Total number of the criteria of factor}} \xrightarrow[\text{With desirability scale}]{\text{Compatibility}} \text{determining the desirability Level of a factor}$$

$$\text{Total desirability score of PhD program} = \frac{\text{Sum of the weigh value (numerical value) of factors evaluated}}{\text{Total number of factors being evaluate}} \xrightarrow[\text{With desirability scale}]{\text{Compatibility}} \text{Level of total score in the PhD program}$$

Non desirable   Rather desirable   desirable

| | | | |
1   1/66   2/33   3

Figure 1. 3-degree desirability scale.

According to the obtained data, answering the second question, we can say that the department general quality is desirable. Table 1 shows the results of quality evaluation of PhD Program in Persian Language and Literature.

One of the main applications of evaluation is to gain awareness of present conditions to identify the requirements and problems of higher education system and to examine how much the goals have been met. Determining what extent these goals have been met is one of the effective steps in planning and improving the quality of higher education at each level. Evaluation guarantees how much higher education activity has been designed and achieved according to acceptable goals. So each university has its own program for educational evaluation. Because of the role of PhD program in training specialists and knowledge production, quality evaluation of PhD programs is of noticeable importance. So, today quality evaluation of PhD program is considered by universities evaluation systems. With respect to the vital role of quality evaluation of PhD program Keshavarz (2009) conducted research titled "Quality Evaluation of PhD Program on Persian Language and Literature at Tehran University". The research concluded that through the process of Internal Evaluation, firstly, objectives, mission and institutional status of the program would be determined, and secondly the present status of the department would be clarified; these will help improve weak points and reinforce positive

points. Therefore in this article in addition to reviewing the concept of higher education evaluation and quality, quality evaluation of PhD program in Persian language and literature was also considered. Results of evaluated factors indicated that the overall quality of the PhD program on Persian language and literature at University of Tehran was desirable. However, the above studies clearly show several lessons. First, there is growing awareness of the need to strengthen an internal quality culture planning and management for it that has its origin in a range of factors that have prompted universities to become more pro-active in quality matters. These factors to diversify income sources, the rise of the "knowledge society", increased internationalization and increased globalization. Secondly, there is management and cultural resistance to applying and implementing internal evaluation in higher education.

Conclusion

Higher education and strong academic commitment is needed for EQA to become an instrument for quality enhancement in all cases. However, it may also be necessary to put in place a system of quality assurance oriented towards controlling minimum standards when it is known that there are many low-quality providers in the system. Review of internal evaluation in the universities of Iran and other world universities, revealed new lessons for policy makers in higher education. We came to the conclusion that internal evaluation processes are potentially valuable. But if this value is to be realized on a continuous basis, it needs to become an integral part of each department, university and nationally accepted framework of quality assurance and management. However to ensure that internal evaluation functions in a useful way in Iran's higher education we should bear in mind that first of all we need a restructuring of university management and decision making. Higher education

Table 1. The results of Quality Evaluation of PhD Program in Persian Language and Literature at Tehran University.

Number	Evaluated factors	Number of criteria	Number of marker	Scores of factors	Results of evaluation
1	PhD students	4	8	2/5	Desirable
2	Faculty members	3	11	2/67	Desirable
3	Curriculum	2	8	2	Rather desirable
4	Applied resource	3	3	2	Rather desirable
5	Teaching- learning process	6	14	2	Rather desirable
6	Graduates	2	8	2	Rather Desirable
7	Group management	2	12	2/5	Desirable
Total sum	7	22	64	2/42	Desirable

policy needs to be more concerned with the creation of greater autonomy in structure and management systems. Higher education institutions should give priority to developing effective decision-making and planning processes at all levels within their institutions and these processes should be integrated within a national quality assurance system. Furthermore, we need a cultural transformation. Failure to focus on the big picture in developing and implementing internal evaluation leads to unsuccessful programs for the improvement of departments. Therefore, working towards a cultural transformation and developing a big picture of quality assurance and internal evaluation in the management of higher education are two important questions which need to be investigated more thoroughly by future researchers in the higher education systems of developing countries. Generally, the quality assessment model applied in Iran is comprised of a collegial self-evaluation followed by external quality assessment. Based on this, during the past decade, more than 400 university departments have indicated willingness to conduct self-evaluation. However, only 10% of them have been successful in completing the process and prepare a comprehensive final report. Self-evaluation is sponsored by the state, through the Centre for Evaluation Studies and Research (CESR). It is mainly concerned with the allocation of budget to the university departments for conducting self-evaluation. Although the CESR is willing to be considered as a national quality agency, it lacks operational autonomy. The CESR has neither been able to gain the confidence of the faculty members, nor influence policy-makers at the national level to arrange a framework for the self-evaluation for the provision of rewards /incentives, policies/structures related to promotion of evaluation culture at the institutional and national level. Furthermore, the process of self-evaluation that is in practice at Iranian universities requires the participation of academic staff and a cultural transformation. However, in practice the level of academic staff participation depends to the commitment of a departmental self-evaluation steering committee. These are composed of input, process, product, output and outcome indicators of the departmental system (Bazargan, 2002). Then, judgment against the departmental

objectives is made. Finally, recommendations are made for quality improvement of the department. Subsequently, external assessment is conducted through peer review. However, the numbers of departments that have completed external assessment are less than 10% of those that conducted a self-evaluation. To improve this situation, planning and management of evaluation systems in Iran, should be encouraged and promoted. Such values should be practiced by management process in higher education. In this respect, there is much room for improvement. As a final point, it should be mentioned that although the private higher education institutions account for more than half of total enrolments in higher education in Iran, they have neither participated in the self-evaluation process nor in the external evaluation practice. Therefore, to institutionalize a fully-functional quality management and assurance process for the whole higher education system, there is need for participation of both public and private higher education institutions in the policy-making, planning and implementation processes. Towards this end, there is much to be desired.

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