IMPLEMENTATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Quality Assurance (QA) in University of Malaya is not new. University of Malaya (UM) has traditionally used several mechanisms to ensure the quality of its academic programmes. Its constitution regulates and governs the universities management and functions. Use of external examiners, movement of academics around institutions locally and abroad, involvement of professional associations, allocation of research grants by competitive assessment have had continuous effect on the exchange of information and the maintenance of high academic standards. With the directive from the Quality Assurance Division, Ministry of Higher Education to implement Quality Assurance, formal steps have been taken to ensure its effective implementation. This paper will share UM's experience in (i) instilling the culture of quality (ii) increasing awareness and education on QA matters to the campus community (iii) assisting faculties with preparation of databases and (iv) coordinating internal and external review processes. The introduction of QA in UM is made easier with the existence and implementation of the Quality Management System MS ISO 9001:2000 and strong commitment from the top management. From our experience, implementing QA in UM has its challenges. Among them, more effort is needed to convince the university community to accept the importance of QA in academic programmes, ensuring a more consistent, knowledgeable and committed team of document writers, better comprehension of the criteria in the Quality Assurance Code of Practice in Public Universities of Malaya (3[rd.] Edition, 2005) and instilling good time management by meeting deadlines.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Quality Management System (QMS), Code of practice, ISO 9001:2000

1.   INTRODUCTION

There have been major changes in higher education in recent years as public universities in Malaysia have become more accountable to the government and the 'customers' for the quality of education which they provide. The establishment of a national Quality Assurance system focussing on the quality of the programmes offered in terms of the general criteria of the structure and process of higher education is timely. External quality assurance through mechanism such as accreditation, validation and audit by peer review has been proven effective to ensure continuous quality improvement. This paper analyzes and documents UM's experiences preparing faculties for quality assurance exercise. This paper also describes the review process, the opportunities and challenges as perceived by the university community. It is concluded that the approach based on QA for Public Higher Education Institutions served to provide evidence that University of Malaya has a soundly grounded approach to the assurance of quality and standards. On the other hand it leads to a 'culture of compliance' whereby methods endorsed by the audit team become those used by the lecturers. In general, it raises an issue whether quality assurance equate to quality improvements.

2.   QUALITY ASSURANCE AT UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

Being the premier university in Malaysia, University of Malaya play the pivotal role in providing quality tertiary education. UM is committed in enhancing its quality management system encompassing all its core processes in UM which includes, teaching and learning, research and consultative activities, and their supporting services. University of Malaya realized that, because of external demands that had been appearing through the increasingly competitive market in education the introduction of a new quality management system was inevitable. It was necessary to support the educational procedures and administration with a better and reliable quality assurance system, which will involve certification so as to promote public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of awards of tertiary education in University of Malaya are being safeguarded and enhanced.

These efforts are done through:

   i. Emplacing a university wide quality management system based on the framework and the requirements of MS ISO9001:2000 since June 2001. The University of Malaya Quality Management System (QMS) encompasses all the core processes in UM which includes, teaching and learning, research and consultative activities, and their supporting services. The certification of MS ISO9001:2000 bestowed to UM on 24th December 2002 verifies that it has fulfilled the requirements of the said standard and is endorsed to practice a quality   management   system.

   ii. Quality Assurance for Public Higher Education Institutions (PHEI's) by the Ministry of Higher Education through compliance with the Code of Practice, Quality Assurance in Public Universities of Malaysia. This is a uniform and systematic approach towards QA in public universities. This Code of Practice

is designed to achieve the purpose and to promote public confidence that quality in higher education is being maintained. Four faculties such as the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology, the Faculty of Dentistry, the Faculty of Economy and Administration and the Faculty of Business and Accountancy, had undergone external quality assessment by appointed assessors from the then Quality Assurance Division (QAD), Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia. Soon, by the end of 2007, Faculty of Education and Faculty of Science will be assessed.

2.1   Internal and External Assessment in Quality Assurance: UM Experience

As mentioned earlier, quality assurance measures have arisen in UM to ensure and enhance the quality of academic programmes offered by each faculty. The quality assurance process contains the following three components (i) internal quality assessment, (ii) external quality assessment and (iii) judgement as to the quality of the programme assessed.

2.2   Internal Quality Assessment

Internal quality assessment can be considered as self study and is the responsibility of each faculty. In the first instance, programme review or assessment rests on the self appraisal by the programme committee or staff involved. Legitimate self appraisal processes are guided by the mission and strategic plan of the university, department and the learning outcomes of the programme under review. A necessary part of the self-appraisal is the collection, presentation and analysis of relevant data about the programme. Specifically, a self study process involves collection and revision of data about the faculty and its educational programme, identification of strengths, areas of concern and opportunities, discussion of strategic planning to ensure sustainability of the strengths and ways of addressing problems and lastly, making recommendations for further quality enhancement. In this context, faculties in UM have set up committees to prepare both the data base and self study analysis.

The self study report and database cover nine areas of standards:
    i.   Vision, Mission, Educational Goals and Learning Outcome
    ii.   Curricular Design and Delivery
    iii.   Assessment of Students
    iv.   Student Selection and Support Services
    v.   Academic Staff
    vi.   Educational Resources
    vii.   Programme Monitoring and Review
    viii. Leadership, Governance and Administration
    ix.   Total Continual Quality Improvement.

Each area is divided into several criteria which cover input and performance or management indicators. Each criterion is defined at two levels of attainment or performance indicators viz. basic standard and quality development standard. Basic standard is the standard in higher education that *must* be met by the program. The quality development standard refers to the good practices in higher education that *should* be practiced by the institution.

Experience has shown that nothing is more important to the successful assessment of any programme than the self-appraisal by its members. During the first round of assessment, Quality Assurance Management Unit(QAMU) members from the Quality Assurance Section guide the faculties in preparing effective data bases and self study reports. Both documents should be reflective, analytical, self-critical and evaluative rather than descriptive. Faculties submitting ineffective data bases and self study reports were asked to rewrite the data bases and self study reports. Ineffective data bases and self study reports include those which are loaded with data that is presented rather than analyzed, defensive or self-justifying rather than aimed at quality improvement, prepared in a formulaic or mechanical way, as if completing a checklist rather than demonstrating that members of the programme are sensitive to and thinking about the programmes and no consultation with other members of the programme. Effective data bases and self study reports lead to quality improvement and make the reports of external assessors more useful to that purpose.

2.3 Preparation of the Database and Self-Study Analysis

The institution's internal quality assurance process is important because the quality of the programme offered depends among others on the curriculum design, methods of teaching and learning, facilities and the financial and human resources. All of these are covered in the above nine areas which is included in the institution's database.

In the process of preparing the database and self-study analysis of each programme, the institution sets up a committee chaired by the Dean and Heads of department, Assistant Registrars and selected academic staff as committee members. Besides allocating the task of writing each section in the database to the most appropriate and knowledgeable person in the committee, a coordinator is appointed by the Dean. The coordinator must familiarized himself/herself with the above mentioned nine areas of standards as outlined in the *Quality Assurance Code of Practice in Public Universities of Malaysia* and *Guidelines on Standard of Specific Disciplines at Bachelor Degree Level* published by the Quality Assurance Division of the Ministry of Higher Education. The functions of the coordinator are to ensure:

i.   all specific criteria in each nine area of standards are answered
ii. sufficient reliable data and information are provided
iii. the accuracy and consistency of data across sections of the database
iv. the write-up is done and arranged according to the sections and sub-sections required in the *Quality Assurance Code of Practice in Public Universities of Malaysia*
v.   wherever necessary, related quality document in the Quality Management System (QMS) University of Malaya, which has obtained SIRIM's certification MS ISO 9001: 2000, is also included in the database.

To lighten the burden of staff involved in the writing of the database, research assistant was appointed to collect the data and required information and to help with the administrative work. Feedback from students on the services and infrastructure in the faculty were obtained through customer's satisfaction survey. This provided input for continuous quality improvement and self-study analysis.

During the process of preparing the database, regular meetings or workshops were conducted to monitor the progress and to evaluate and assess additional input and feedback. The completed documents were edited for grammatical errors, accuracy and consistency of the data. Besides, it is crucially important to cross-check in order to minimize negative implications on the faculty that might arise from the data and information provided.

The completed self-analysis report and the database were then presented to the Quality Assurance Management Unit (QAMU), UM where they were checked for completeness. Comments and suggestions for further improvement by QAMU were conveyed to the faculty committee for consideration. The final draft of the documents was then submitted to the Dean or Deputy Dean for verification before being presented in the final workshop attended by staff and students. Finally, the self-analysis report and the database were submitted to the Quality Assurance Division, Ministry of Higher Education (Figure 1).
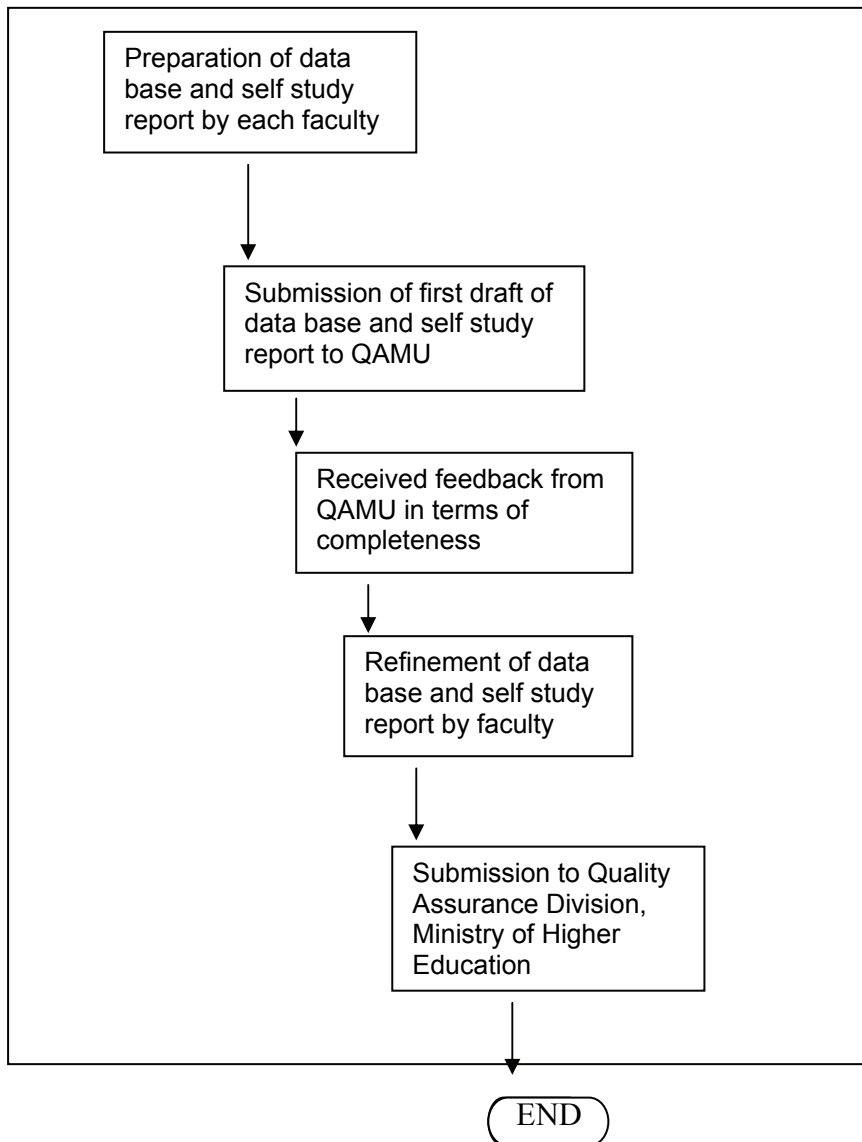

Figure 1:   Processes of internal audit assessment in UM

2.4 External Quality Assessment or Peer Review

External quality assessment necessarily involves external review. Effective quality assurance processes involve one or more external reviewers who report on a site visit. External quality assessment or peer review serves to verify and validate the information generated from the internal assessment process. In addition, the assessment also assists institutions to improve standards and quality enhancement. The process of the external assessment in UM is depicted in Figure 2.

In a peer review assessment through panel visits, the process begins and ends with the institution's own programme of continuous improvement. External quality assurance begins within the institution with a self-review or self study report which is not just an evaluation but which includes the institution's proposed quality improvement plans for moving forward. The assessment panel's thinking and recommendations begin from, and move out from, the institution's own quality improvement plans. The evaluation by the external assessors using the five point rating scale can be used by the institutions to implement its own continuous improvement plans.
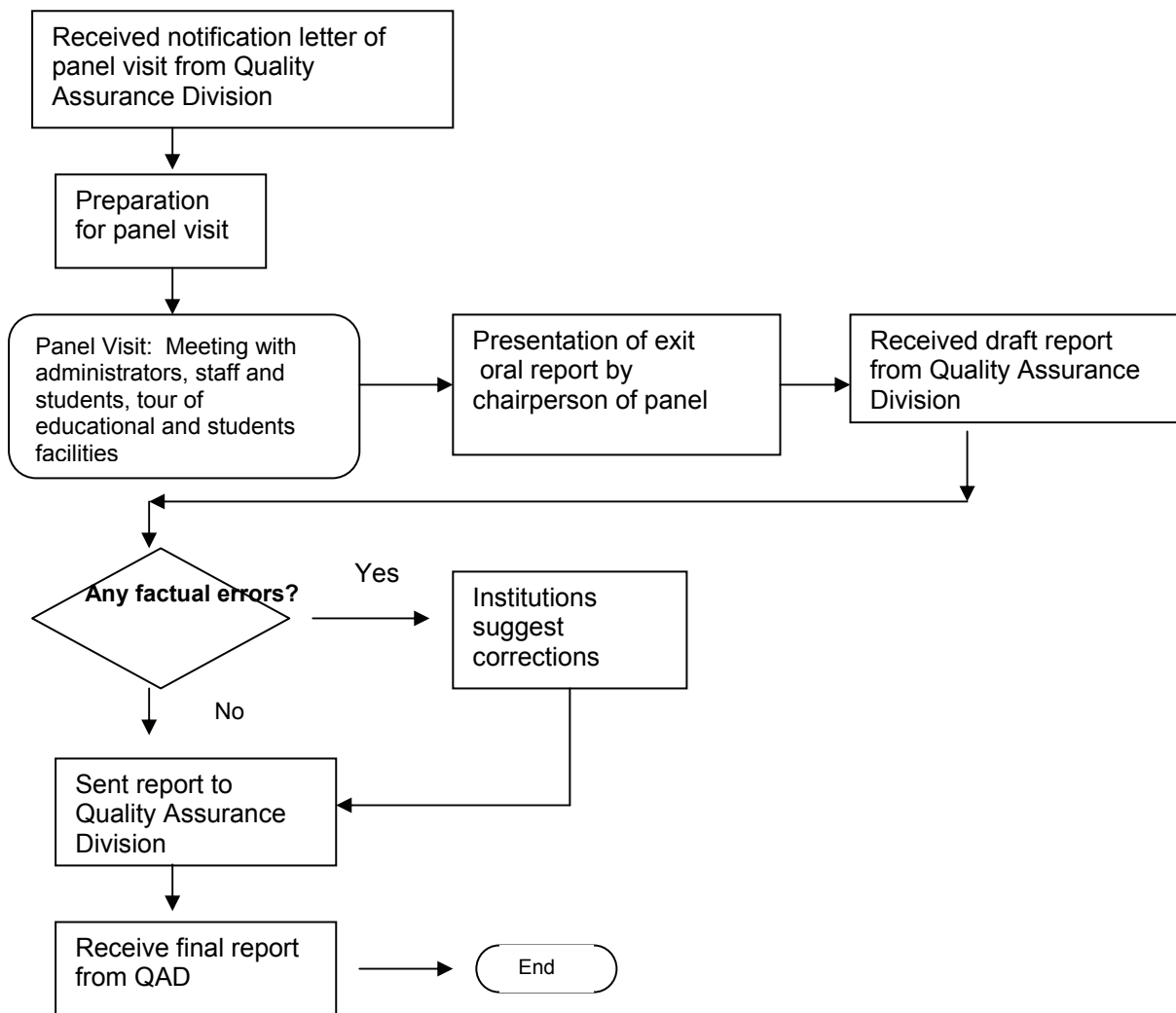
Figure 2: Steps in External Quality Assurance in UM

2.5   Institutional Preparation for Panel Visit

Prior to the external visit by the quality assurance assessment team, each faculty has to undertake several steps:

a)   appointment of a liaison person, preferably the coordinator of the database, to act as the key link between the institution and the quality assurance assessment team. The Dean should inform the Quality Assurance Division, the name of the liaison person. A steering committee should also be formed to organize matters related to the visit such as the opening and closing ceremonies, transportation, preparation of brochures, souvenirs, etc.

b)   providing additional documents and information or evidences to support the validity of the facts and figures given in the database and self-study report. These supporting documents should be arranged systematically for each nine areas of standards and kept in the secretariat's room to be inspected or examined by the panel of assessors. The secretariat's room should be equipped with computer and printer

c)   preparation of the power-point slides, which summarize the content of each nine areas of standards in the database, to be presented by the Dean during the briefing on the institution's program

d)   selecting student's representatives for each academic year (a balance selection in terms of academic performance, gender and race) and briefing them on their roles during the informal discussion with the panel of assessors. The student representatives should be informed about the purpose of the external visit viz. to get their opinion on:
   i.   the quality and adequacy of the programme
   ii. academic and personal counselling
   iii. health service and financial aid
   iv. student's role in providing feedback to institutional policy and   services.
   Students will also be expected to guide the panel of assessors during their visit to the teaching-learning facilities such as library, lecture halls, laboratories, etc.

e)   selecting representatives of the academic staff (a balance between senior and junior staff) and course coordinators and briefing them on their role during the informal discussion with the panel of assessors. The representatives should be informed about the purpose of the external visit viz. to get their opinion regarding:
   i.   staff development
   ii.   promotion and tenure
   iii. teaching skills
   iv.   understanding of institutional goals
   v.   role in the faculty governance
   vi.   perception of the curriculum, students and the culture in the faculty
   vii. appropriateness of the faculty facilities.

f)   informing other centres of responsibility in the university which provide various student facilities (such as the Main Library, Information Technology Centre, Sports Centre, Counselling Section, Students Health Clinic and Residential Colleges) about the purpose of panel of assessors' visit and the possibility of their centre being chosen to be visited by the panel.

g)   inviting the University of Malaya top management, especially the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and Internalization), Deputy Vice Chancellor (Student Affairs and Alumni), Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research and

Innovation), Deputy Vice Chancellor (Development), Registrar, Bursar and Chief Librarian to a meeting with the panel of assessors to discuss among others regarding the:

    i.   recruitment procedures for academic staff
    ii.   promotion, opportunities for training and development
    iii.   administration and governance
    iv.   authority and responsibilities
    v.   financial allocation.

The visit is over two and the half days. The schedules were tight and involved a lot of discussions and interviews with the administrative personnel, academic staff and also students regarding the nine areas stated earlier. The panel also visited educational and students' facilities. At the end of the quality assurance process, a decision has to be made by QAD pertaining to the quality of the programme and any remedial actions. It is important to ensure quality improvement does occur. There needs to be a mechanism for action to determine which of the recommendations arising from the self study and the reviewers' report will be implemented, to what extent, by whom, and on what schedule.

2.6   Issues and Challenges: Some Pertinent Questions

There are several issues and challenges with regard to the implementation of ISO 9001:2000 and QA for Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The demands of teaching quality assessment and quality audit have been felt as cumbersome and burdensome to certain staff members. Despite the adoption of ISO 9001:2000 and QA for HEI's standards for UM quality assurance, little has been done empirically to explore whether these standards have a positive impact or not. Some of the questions raised involved the following:

    i.   What are the perceptions of staff members on quality assurance practices?
    ii.   Should universities be subjected to rating and ranking?
    iii.   Do external audits encourage academicians and students to continuously develop better ways of encouraging and assessing meaningful learning?
    iv.   Do they rather lead to a 'culture of compliance' whereby assessment methods endorsed by the audit team become those used by the lecturers and students?
    v.   In general, do quality assurance equate to quality improvements?

Data were collected by means of analysis of documentation, observations during panel site visits and information given during meetings. Documentation included the self evaluation reports compiled by the faculties, reports written by QAD panel of Reviewers on the review and site visit findings.

2.7 Perceptions of Staff Members

i. Opportunities

It is noted that most staff members have positive perception on the QA review processes in the following areas:

- The QA review provided an opportunity for the University to be aware of the status of quality of the programmes in the faculties. Most agreed that engaging in QA programme reviews have demonstrated that our programme are among the best in the country and none of our programmes are of questionable quality.
- The evaluation process contributed to the build-up of a self-evaluation culture in UM. The evaluation has further assisted UM in becoming more reflexive about their practice, and the institutions have made their education programmes more transparent to the public and students.
- Programme reviews identified gaps in programmes that were already integrated and offered.
- Provided a platform of inculcating the culture of peer review system in UM.
- Inculcated quality practices at faculty and programme level, where quality is seen as an integral part of teaching and learning processes.
- Engaging in programme reviews aided lecturers to create scholarly interaction with experts outside the UM. The process cultivated professionalism and collegiality among staff in the university.
- The process improved programmes by pointing out the strong and weak points and areas for improvement.
- Programme reviews promote programme self knowledge because it involved critical self evaluation by programme groups.
- The outcomes of programme reviews help to improve programme planning.
- The internal self evaluation reports provided a baseline for continual improvement processes.
- It is cost effective.

ii. Challenges

During the programme reviews it was noted that:

- Some staff members tend to shift to a defensive mode due to the intensity of the programme review criteria, thus resulting in staff not being open and honest about the quality of their provision.
- Some staff members used the review process as an opportunity to blow their trumpet, thus resulting in some openly spelled out their grievances at the university to the panel of reviewers at the expensed of the programme.
- Although the quality assurance programme reviews were perceived as beneficial, it can be burdensome to the academic staff members.
- Some mistakenly viewed the programme review findings as information sources for confirming rationalization of the programmes, and redeployment of staff.

- Some see the programme review findings as a tool to mobilize hidden agendas by the initiators of the process.
- Some used the review process to pursue personal agenda.

3.   THE ISSUE OF RATING AND RANKING

The desirability of rating as an assessment outcome is accepted by UM's academic staff but the concern is that it may be used to rank universities. Rating is a motivating factor in large higher education systems where the universities vary to extreme degrees: from below average institutions to world-class institutions. Knowing one's standing on the quality scale can help institutions plan for the future. The then Quality Assurance Division, in MOHE has justified rating, from the onset, as a necessary element of a QA system. As far as the authors are aware, in UM or other institutions, no QA ratings have been challenged or disputed. It demonstrates that the relevant debate should not be about whether or not to rate, but about how to use the rate awarded by the QAD for continual improvement.

4.   DO QUALITY AUDITS LEAD TO A 'CULTURE OF COMPLIANCE'?

There is no doubt that quality audits can improve the quality of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, certain academicians and students sometimes feel disempowered by external quality assurance. Researchers, teachers and students in universities should be given a chance to comply with intrinsic standards of excellence rather than with those imposed from outside. In quality assurance one has to adhere to a set of procedure and comply with a set of standards. The most common objection is that it promotes a 'culture of compliance' within the university. As pointed by Harvey and Knight (1996), the demands on teaching staff to respond to external monitoring can adversely affect efforts to enhance the student learning experience.

5. DO QUALITY ASSURANCE EQUATE TO QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS?

In trying to adhere to the set of procedures and comply with the standards set, UM have improved its QA procedures tremendously. Newton, (2000) realized that QA can improve quality assurance procedures in universities. The danger is that it not necessarily improves the quality of student learning.   In the present quality assurance systems, quality is defined and monitored by those outside the university. Commonly, it is quantity not quality that is measured. In teaching among others, the reviewers tend to pay attention to the number of graduating students, the grades they attain, the teacher to student ratio and student to computer ratios. In research, concerned is on the number of refereed journal articles and the size of research grants. This in turn steers the sort of assessments that are used in universities. The danger of this is that those within the university might abrogate their responsibility for defining and assuring the quality of assessment.

6.   CONCLUSION

Despite the issues raised and challenges faced, quality assurance involving external reviews in the University of Malaya are here to stay. The high leadership commitment towards a quality management system cannot be questioned. Thus, It is important that university staff be involved with them in a positive way. It is recommended that a

study be done to explore the impact of quality assurance practices on teaching and learning.

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