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Development of a quality assurance plan in line with UKM's status as a self-accreditation institution and research University

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Abstract

The Self-Accreditation and Research University status requires UKM to develop a quality assurance system that integrates a strong teaching and learning process with effective research and innovation activities to ensure that both processes can be consistently improved. To fulfil this responsibility, UKM established the Centre for Quality Assurance in February 2011 which plays the role of planning, implementing, monitoring and overseeing audit implementation and evaluation of all core processes handled by the University. This paper reports on the development of the Quality Assurance Plan and the establishment of the educational quality assurance process as well as the procedure for academic programme accreditation in UKM. UKM's strategic planning and direction in ensuring the integration of educational, research and service processes are also presented and discussed.

Keywords: Academic performance audit; accreditation; higher education; key performance indicator; quality assurance

1. Introduction

The term 'university' refers to an institution of higher learning that offers learning and teaching as well as research facilities, and at the same time is given the authority to confer academic degrees. In order for a university to operate adequately, the university Senate is given the authority to determine matters pertaining to academic, including teaching, examinations and research, whereas the university administration is responsible in administering the university under the surveillance or patronage of a particular body, for example the University's Board of Directors and the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia for universities in Malaysia as stipulated in the Universities and Colleges Act 1995 (Amendment, 2009).

As with other universities in the world, apart from its fundamental function as a generator and disseminator of knowledge through teaching and learning as well as research and development activities, the ideal aspiration of a university is of course to improve the quality of academic programmes, research projects and academic services. Hence, there are several definitions of quality that can be associated with activities within an institution of higher learning. Harvey and Green (1993) categorised quality in the form of five contexts as follows:

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- Quality is something special or excellent,
- Quality is something (an achievement) which is perfect or consistent,
- Quality is the ability to fulfil a specific purpose (*fitness for purpose*),
- Quality refers to the returns from an investment (*value for money*),
- Quality is a process of transformation.

Green (1994) on the other hand, looks at quality from the perspective of the stakeholders, in the way how an institution is able to fulfil the criteria perceived as the level of quality set out by the stakeholders. In this case, the stakeholders involve those within and beyond the institution, students and teaching staff, researchers and research grants providers as well as employers and clients or recipients of consultancy services, and so forth.

The implementation of quality is in accordance to specific mechanisms in the form of audit processes, self-appraisals, accreditation and evaluation by outside or third parties (Harvey and Newton, 2005). In managing quality processes, the activity that assesses and ensures the processes achieve the criteria or result targeted is referred to as quality assurance. Normally, audit refers to the internal examination of the institution or programme on the compliance of policies or procedures set by it and an authorized party as well as the needs of the institutional law and regulations. In the meantime, evaluation refers to the examination of the achievements of the institution or programme at a predetermined level to be achieved while accreditation refers to an examination to determine whether or not the institution or programme has achieved a particular level (Woodhouse, 1999). The results of all the audit and evaluations can be used to complete the quality cycle through continual improvement.

In the university's effort to spearhead itself forward, the implementation of all the processes need to be well-coordinated. In other words, rapid development in the field of research and expansion needs to be accompanied with an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning activities. For example, in its effort to place itself among the world's best universities, the National University of Singapore implemented a comprehensive quality assurance agenda focusing on three core areas, namely teaching and learning, research and staff management including the process of promotion to full professors (Shih, 2000).

2. Institutional Audit

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) was awarded the self-accreditation status by the Minister of Higher Education effective 29 April 2010 after having gone through a rigorous process of academic performance audit by the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA). The conferment of this award reflects UKM's ability in managing, administering and assuring the quality of its academic programmes, and other core processes, which are research and community service in line with the requirement of the Code of Practice on Institutional Audit (MQA, 2009) which focuses on the evaluation of nine areas comprising of:

- Mission, Vision and Educational Goals and Learning Outcomes,
- Curriculum Design and Delivery,
- Students Assessments,
- Student Selection and Support Services,
- Academic Staff,
- Educational Resources,
- Programme Monitoring and Review,
- Leadership, Governance and Administration, and
- Continual Quality Improvement.

The Academic Performance Audit Report from MQA was in the form of commendations, affirmations and recommendations on the areas as stated in the Code of Practice on Institutional Audit, COPIA. In addition, it also noted the preconditions that needed to be complied by UKM to retain its self-accreditation status to qualify UKM to implement autonomous authority in carrying out quality assurance processes on new and existing academic programmes, and henceforth register these programmes into the Malaysian Qualifications Register. For this purpose UKM needed to develop an effective system for implementation and monitoring of academic programmes quality assurance process. All the recommendations proposed by the panel of academic performance auditors were acted