

# External Quality Assessment of Higher National Diploma Programmes Offered in Sri Lanka: An Account of Best Practices

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**Abstract:** Quality assurance activities that are carried out in the Sri Lankan university system since 2002 were introduced to the alternative higher education sector in 2010. External quality assessment reviews of Higher National Diploma (HND) programme offered in eleven Advanced Technological Institutes (ATIs) located in different regions of the country were carried out to identify the best practices, strengths and weaknesses and make suitable recommendations to improve the quality of those programmes. The aspects reviewed were curriculum design, content and review; teaching, learning and assessment methods; quality of students, their progress and achievements; use of student feedback; peer observation; skills development; and academic guidance and counseling. The objective of the present study was to determine whether there are regional differences among ATIs when best practices that are in place in different HND programmes are considered. Best practices identified by the reviewers in external quality assessment review reports of HND programmes in Accountancy, Agriculture, Business administration, English, Information Technology and Management conducted in Ampara, Dehiwala, Jaffna, Kandy, Kegalle, Kurunegala, Labuduwa and Trincomalee ATIs were analysed using Principal Component Analysis to determine whether there are regional differences among ATIs with respect to best practices that are in place in each programme. Results indicated that the good practices identified by reviewers in different HND programmes do not depend on the location of the ATI, the ethnicity of the majority community and

prevalence of deterrent factors such as armed secessionist conflicts in the area. Differences in the resources available and the motivation and dedication of the staff may have contributed to the differences in the good practices that are in place in different ATIs.

**Keywords:** Quality assurance, good practices, Sri Lanka

## Introduction

Quality assessment reviews of HND programmes offered by ATIs (MOHE 2010). All members of academic staff of ATIs were trained in 2010 in carrying out self evaluations of HND programmes. Senior members of ATIs were trained as reviewers for external quality assessments. External quality assessment reviews of HND programmes were started in January 2011 (HETC 2012). Review teams of these quality assessments comprised of 3-4 members who are experienced academics from Sri Lankan universities teaching the same disciplines and had carried out external quality assessment reviews in the university sector, and senior members of the academic staff of ATIs who were trained as reviewers. In some instances, reviewers were selected from the industry too.



reports are published in the HETC website www.hetc.lk. The strengths and best practices indicated in these published reports were analyzed in the present study. The objective of this study was to determine whether there are differences in good practices and strengths among ATIs offering the same programme. Data were analyzed principal component analysis using Minitab Ver. 15.0 software package. Since the same curriculum designed by SLIATE is taught in all ATIs, in determining the regional diversity in strengths, the aspect of curriculum design, content and review were excluded from the analysis.

## Results

Best practices and strengths common to the curriculum design content and review of all HND programmes are given in Table IV.

**Table iv: strengths and good practices related to curriculum design, content and review of all HND programmes (source: WWW.HETC.LK).**

- Curricula are credit based, facilitating credit transfers.

**Table ii: The programme reviews conducted at each ATI (as at 30.09.2012)**

ATI	Programme						
	HNDA	HNDM	HNDEng (Mech)	HNDIT	HNDE	HNDBA	HNDT (Agri)
Dehiwala	√	√		√	√	√	
Kandy	√	√		√	√	√	
Badulla		√			√		
Labuduwa	√	√		√	√		√
Ampara				√			√
Mattakkuliya			√				
Kurunegala	√	√		√	√		
Naiwala							√
Jaffna	√	√		√	√		
Trincomalee	√			√			
Kegalle	√	/		√	√		

**Table iii: the aspects reviewed in programme reviews (Source: MOHE 2010)**

1. Curriculum design, content and review
  2. Teaching, learning and assessment methods
  3. Quality of students, their progress and achievements
  4. Use of student feedback
  5. Peer observation
  6. Skills development
  7. Academic guidance and counseling
- The total number of credits exceeds the minimum number required for a Higher Diploma Programme, which is 60 Carnegie credits.
  - Courses to develop skills in Information Technology are included in the curriculum.
  - Curricula contain courses aimed at developing communication skills of students.
  - Curricula consist of liberal education modules (15-20% of the total), occupationally/professionally related courses (15-20% of total) and core occupational/professional courses (60-70%

of the total) which help to get employed in the globalised knowledge economy.

- An industrial training component is included in the curriculum.
- Syllabuses are of adequate depth and breadth.
- Detail contents of each course module, time allocation for each topic, evaluation criteria and recommended text are given in the curricula.

In addition to these common good practices, there are some good practices specific for each HND programme when the aspect of curriculum design, content and review is considered. For example, best practices and strengths of the HNDA programme include covering a wide range of subject matter which helps to get exemptions from some modules of Bachelors degree programmes of universities and carrying out curriculum revisions as per the market demands in order to enhance employability. In addition, when the learning effort is considered, the number of credits in the HNDA programme is equivalent to that of a Bachelors degree programme. A similar strength was identified in the HNDM programme too. Regular revision of the syllabi and giving much emphasis to business communication are the other strengths of the HNDM programme. Regular revision of syllabi is a good practice identified in the HNDIT programme too. Providing opportunities to specialize in three broad areas, viz. developer track, administrator track and analyst track, availability of lateral entry and exit points and incorporation of current trends in IT in the curriculum are the other strengths of the HNDIT curriculum. Availability of optional modules is a strength observed in the curriculum of HNDT (Agriculture) programme.

Best practices and strengths of the aspects of teaching learning and assessment methods, and quality of students, their progress and achievements of all HND programmes are listed in Tables V and VI respectively.

**Table v: strengths and best practices of teaching, learning and assessment methods common to all HND programmes (source: WWW.HETC.LK).**

- Medium of instruction is English which helps in improving English language skills that facilitate employment of diploma holders.
- Monitoring of teaching at the ATI level by the Director of the ATI at Academic Board meetings and by the Director General of SLIATE at the Academic Syndicate meetings to ensure that syllabuses are covered.
- Variety of teaching methods such as lectures, practicals and field work are used.
- Teaching aids such as multimedia and handouts are used in teaching.
- Question papers are moderated by external examiners.
- Student evaluation is done through continuous assessments and semester end examinations.
- Panel marking of the answer scripts of semester end examination under the guidance and supervision of a chief examiner who is an experienced senior member of the academic staff in the relevant discipline is carried out.

**Table vi: good practices/strengths common to all HND programmes with respect to quality of students, their progress and achievements (source: WWW.HETC.LK).**

- Students should have passed the GCE (Advanced Level) Examination
- Students are selected through an interview.

There are several good practices and strengths specific to different HND programmes when teaching learning and assessment methods are considered. In the HNDE programme, a variety of teaching methods such as role plays and software packages are used. Software packages used in the industry are used in the

HNDA programme. In some ATIs, additional assignments other than those sent by SLIATE are given to the students in HNDA programme.

Use of a variety of teaching methods is another good practice common to all HND programmes. In addition to lectures, discussion classes and assignments are used in the teaching learning process. Industrial visits are also carried out in HNDA, HNDM, and HNDBA programmes. Field classes and laboratory classes are conducted in the HNDT (Agriculture) programme. Although most of the teaching learning process is teacher centered, student centered learning activities such as discussion classes and assignments also help to enhance knowledge and understanding of students.

All students who are recruited to HND programmes have fulfilled the entry requirements to national universities. However, due to unavailability of vacancies, they have missed the opportunity of following a degree programme. Nevertheless, due to the admission policy of the University Grants Commission where only 40% of the students are recruited a merit, 55% on a district basis and 5% from under-privileged districts, some of the students who enrolled in the HND programmes have performed in the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) examination, which is also the university entrance examination, better than some of those who had got admitted to state universities. In some ATIs, the reviewers have identified the good attitudes and behaviour among students as strengths. In addition, high employability of students in some programmes was also identified by the reviewers as a strength. However, a detail tracer study of the HND qualification holders has to be carried out to confirm such statements.

In some HND programmes student feedback is obtained in a formal manner using a questionnaire. In some programmes, the feedback obtained is quantitatively analyzed. The feedback is usually obtained at the end of the semester. There is a high variation in the way of obtaining student feedback among different ATIs as well as among different HND programme of the same ATI. Informal feedback is

obtained verbally from students in many HND programmes. However, in such instances due to the prevailing culture of respecting the teachers, it is very unlikely that the students provide adverse comments.

Peer observation of teaching is practiced only in some HND programmes. This culture was introduced to ATIs by the recent QA programmes. Even in the university sector, peer observation of teaching was not carried out until the implementation of external quality assessments. Reviewers have identified moderation of question papers and panel marking under the supervision of a senior teacher also as examples for peer observation.

Many best practices are in place for skills development of HND students. In order to develop English language skills, an intensive programme for new recruits is conducted in every ATI. Curricula of all programmes contain modules to develop English communication skills and IT skills. Software packages are used in programmes such as HNDA and HNDIT. In the HNDT (Agriculture) programme, laboratory practicals and field work are included to develop subject specific skills. In the HNDE programme variety entertainments and concerts are organized to enhance English language skills, which also help to develop leadership qualities. These activities vary from ATI to ATI as well as from programme to program resulting in different numbers as shown in Table VII, which gives the numbers of good practices/strengths with respect to quality assurance aspects of all HND programmes of different ATIs other than curriculum design, content and review.

In all ATIs a good practice is that academic guidance and counseling is provided in an informed manner. Recently student counselors had been appointed. All these counselors have undergone a short term training on student counseling. Career guidance counselors have also been appointed in each ATI.

The results of the Eigen analysis of the variables in the PCA are given in Table VIII. The bi-plots of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> components of the PCA are given in Figure 2.

**Table vii: The number of good practices/strengths with respect to the quality assurance aspects of different HND programmes in the ATIs (source: WWW.HETC.LK).**

Legend: **TLA** – Teaching, learning and assessment methods; **QA** – Quality of students, their progress and achievements; **SD** – Skills development; **SF** – Students’ feedback; **PO** – Peer observation; **AG** – Academic guidance and counselling; C1-C30: codes given to each programme in the Principal Component Analysis

### HNDA Programme

QA Aspect	ATI						
	Dehiwala C1	Jaffna C2	Kandy C3	Kegalle C4	Kurunegala C5	Labuduwa C6	Trincomalee C7
TLA	8	6	9	4	9	9	10
QS	6	7	6	7	6	6	8
SF	3	2	2	2	1	3	3
PO	2	4	1	2	0	3	0
SD	2	2	3	1	4	4	5
AG	2	2	2	1	2	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>

### HNDE Programme

QA Aspect	ATI					
	Badulla C8	Jaffna C9	Dehiwala C10	Kandy C11	Kurunegala C12	Labuduwa C13
TLA	8	10	6	9	13	7
QS	3	4	3	6	6	2
SF	2	1	0	0	2	3
PO	2	0	0	0	0	0
SD	3	3	3	3	4	1
AG	2	4	2	3	5	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>15</b>

### HNDIT Programme

QA Aspect	ATI					
	Ampara C14	Jaffna C15	Kandy C16	Kegalle C17	Kurunegala C18	Labuduwa C19
TLA	6	6	6	6	7	4
QS	5	8	5	6	9	6
SF	2	4	3	3	4	4
PO	1	1	1	1	1	1
SD	4	5	4	4	5	5
AG	1	2	1	3	1	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>24</b>

### HNDM Programme

QA Aspect	ATI					
	Badulla C20	Dehiwala C21	Jaffna C22	Kandy C23	Kurunegala C24	Labuduwa C25
TLA	9	8	6	8	6	3
QS	5	5	2	3	1	1
SF	3	3	2	4	3	2
PO	3	1	1	0	0	0
SD	4	3	3	3	4	3
AG	6	5	1	2	3	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>11</b>

### HNDDT (Agriculture) Programme

QA Aspect	ATI		
	Labuduwa C26	Naiwala C27	Ampara C28
TLA	5	8	7
QS	4	2	6
SF	4	2	4
PO	1	0	1
SD	3	6	7
AG	2	3	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>27</b>

### HNDBA Programme

QA Aspect	ATI		
	Labuduwa C26	Naiwala C27	Ampara C28
TLA	5	8	7
QS	4	2	6
SF	4	2	4
PO	1	0	1
SD	3	6	7
AG	2	3	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>27</b>

**Table viii: summary of the results of principal component analysis**

**Eigenanalysis of the Covariance Matrix of C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6, C7**

Eigenvalue	52.633	4.685	1.280	0.772	0.230	0.000	-0.0
Proportion	0.883	0.07	0.021	0.013	0.004	0.000	-0.0
Cumulative	0.883	0.962	0.983	0.996	1.000	1.000	1.0

Variable	PC1	PC2	PC3	PC4	PC5	PC6	PC7
C1	0.340	-0.109	-0.214	-0.652	0.363	0.246	0.457
C2	0.267	-0.615	-0.352	0.503	0.001	0.417	0.017
C3	0.418	0.130	-0.202	-0.125	0.367	-0.127	0.775
C4	0.240	-0.646	0.525	-0.161	-0.040	-0.470	0.032
C5	0.453	0.308	0.000	0.498	0.306	-0.418	-0.428
C6	0.345	0.062	-0.453	-0.178	-0.743	-0.294	-0.040
C7	0.506	0.278	0.555	0.029	-0.295	0.517	0.054

**Eigenanalysis of the Covariance Matrix of C8, C9, C10, C11, C12, C13**

Eigenvalue	57.440	2.430	0.673	0.372	0.085	-0.000
Proportion	0.942	0.040	0.011	0.006	0.001	-0.000
Cumulative	0.942	0.981	0.993	0.999	1.000	1.000

Variable	PC1	PC2	PC3	PC4	PC5	PC6
C8	0.288	0.277	0.862	-0.161	0.228	0.140
C9	0.459	0.034	-0.121	0.531	0.508	-0.483
C10	0.286	-0.299	0.301	0.361	-0.749	-0.216
C11	0.446	-0.544	-0.088	-0.663	0.096	-0.220
C12	0.589	0.047	-0.290	0.143	-0.054	0.737
C13	0.280	0.731	-0.244	-0.319	-0.341	-0.330

**Eigenanalysis of the Covariance Matrix of C14, C15, C16, C17, C18, C19**

Eigenvalue	29.806	1.640	0.686	0.172	0.063	-0.000
Proportion	0.921	0.051	0.021	0.005	0.002	-0.000
Cumulative	0.921	0.972	0.993	0.998	1.000	1.000

Variable	PC1	PC2	PC3	PC4	PC5	PC6
C14	0.371	-0.449	0.356	0.143	-0.716	-0.000
C15	0.468	0.242	-0.279	0.012	-0.045	0.802
C16	0.363	-0.385	0.195	0.532	0.632	0.000
C17	0.341	0.060	0.549	-0.711	0.270	0.000
C18	0.581	-0.020	-0.586	-0.181	-0.013	-0.535
C19	0.241	0.766	0.335	0.398	-0.110	-0.267

**Eigenanalysis of the Covariance Matrix of C20, C21, C22, C23, C24, C25**

Eigenvalue	22.980	2.708	1.122	0.556	0.102	-0.000
Proportion	0.837	0.099	0.041	0.020	0.004	-0.000
Cumulative	0.837	0.935	0.976	0.996	1.000	1.000

Variable	PC1	PC2	PC3	PC4	PC5	PC6
C20	0.428	0.548	-0.213	-0.467	-0.289	0.412
C21	0.464	0.505	-0.084	0.450	0.385	-0.416
C22	0.356	-0.232	0.433	-0.617	0.451	-0.221
C23	0.531	-0.265	0.518	0.417	-0.329	0.313
C24	0.399	-0.459	-0.540	-0.088	-0.369	-0.441
C25	0.187	-0.332	-0.448	0.132	0.566	0.563

**Eigenanalysis of the Covariance Matrix of C26, C27, C28**

Eigenvalue	14.976	2.024	0.567
Proportion	0.853	0.115	0.032
Cumulative	0.853	0.968	1.000

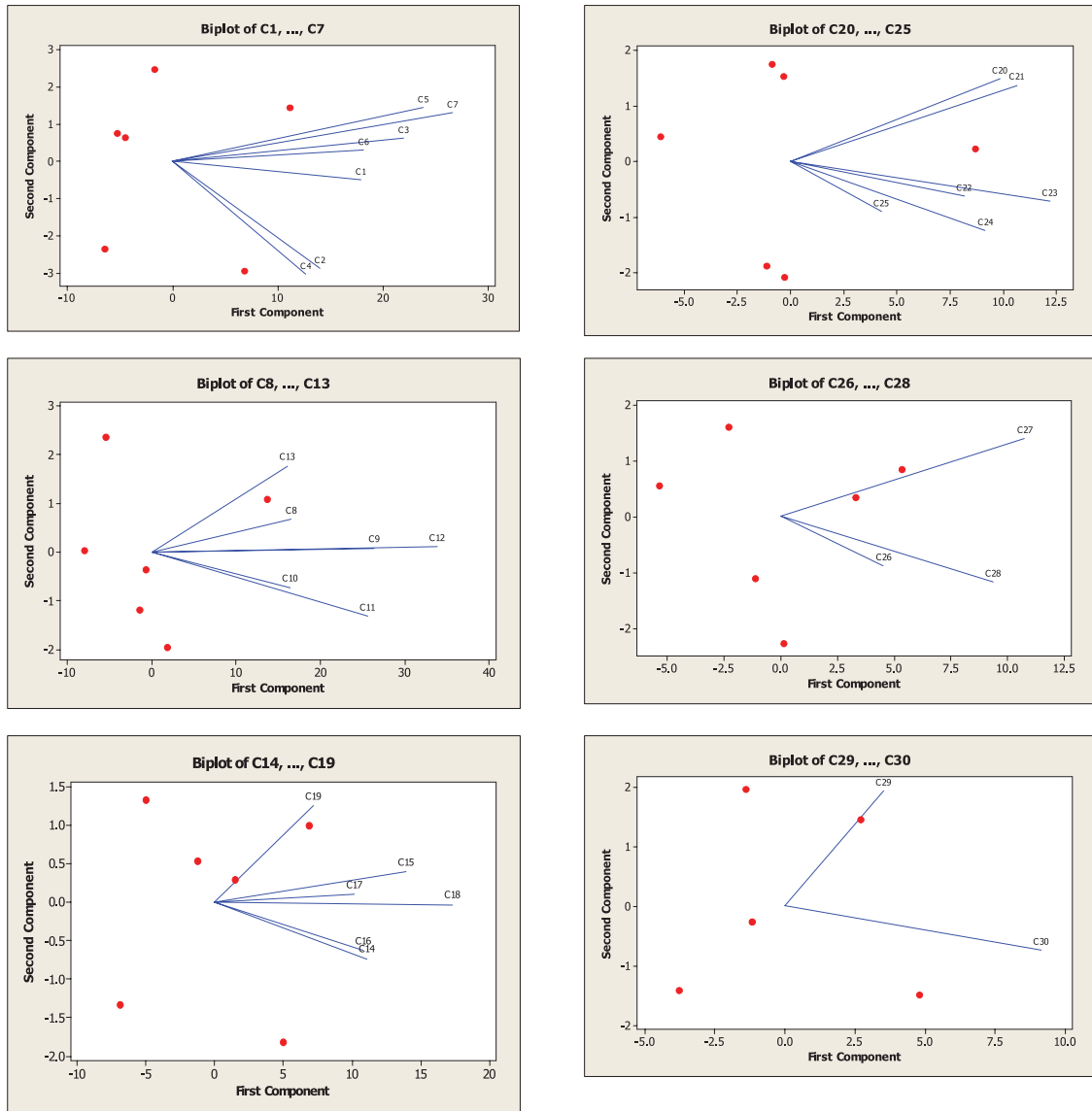
Variable	PC1	PC2	PC3
C26	0.303	-0.436	0.847
C27	0.719	0.688	0.097
C28	0.626	-0.579	-0.522

**Eigenanalysis of the Covariance Matrix of C29, C30**

Eigenvalue	9.8034	2.0632
Proportion	0.826	0.174
Cumulative	0.826	1.000

Variable	PC1	PC2
C29	0.360	0.933
C30	0.933	-0.360





**Figure 2:**  
**Bi-plots of the 1st and 2nd components of the PCA of variables C1 - C30.**  
**(The programmes conducted in different ATIs denoted by C1 – C30 are given in Table 7).**

## Discussion

Credit based modular system has been introduced to HND programmes since 2011. As indicated in the Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework, all HND programmes consist of more than 60 credits, where one credit is equivalent to 45-50 hours of learning effort which include lectures, practicals and self studies (SLQF 2012). Curricula of all HND programmes contain core occupational/professional modules which contribute to 60-70% while the balance consists of occupationally/professionally related modules and liberal education modules which help to develop interpersonal soft skills essential to get employed in the globalised knowledge economy. Curricula of all HND programmes conform to the benchmark statements of higher diploma programmes offered in Sri Lanka (HETC 2012). These curricula are designed centrally by SLIATE and revisions are also done in the same manner. The role of ATIs is to implement these curricula and no revisions are allowed in the ATI level. Therefore, there are no differences among ATIs, when the QA aspect of curriculum design, content and review is considered.

An industrial training component is also included in the curricula of all programmes. Every student is assigned to a state or non state sector establishment for six months, which helps them to get exposed to the world of work. After this training most students get employed in the same establishment. Therefore, such an arrangement enhances the employability of HND qualification holders.

Although the same curriculum is offered and the students sit for a common semester end examination, good practices in QA aspects such as teaching learning strategies employed, the quality of students and their progress, obtaining student feedback, peer observation of teaching, skills development and providing academic guidance and counseling may vary from ATI to ATI depending on the availability of resources and motivation of staff.

The accepted norm in higher education is “encouraging the identification of academic strengths and weaknesses in order to strengthen the former and

amend the latter” (Trow 1996). The external quality assessment reviews help to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the academic programmes offered by an institution, in this instance the HND programmes offered at ATIs. These reviews provide improvement oriented evaluation which helps development as done by the European University Association for its member universities (Rosa *et al.* 2011). For ATIs, this activity is carried out at present by the QA division of the World Bank funded Higher Education for the Twenty First Century (HETC) Project of the Ministry of Higher Education. However, when sharing good practices, some convergence would occur as observed in the European higher education system due to implementation of quality evaluation system (Cardoso *et al.* 2011).

The eleven ATIs in Sri Lanka are of diverse nature. Dehiwala and Mattakkuliya ATIs are located in highly urbanized areas closer to Colombo city. Jaffna and Trincomalee ATIs are in the northern and eastern regions of the country respectively that are severely affected by three decades of armed secessionist conflict of ethnic lines. Other ATIs are located in comparatively similar environments with respect to the local economy and urbanization. However, it appears that these regional differences do not affect the strengths and best practices that are in place in HND programmes. For example, when the PCA of good practices of HNDA programmes is considered, Kurunegala and Trincomalee ATIs, Kegalle and Jaffna ATIs and Dehiwala and Labuduwa ATIs are in three different clusters. Of the first cluster, Trincomalee ATI although in a war stricken area is more or less similar to Kurunegala ATI when best practices of HNDA programme are considered. Similarly, Jaffna ATI although located in a heavily affected area due to armed secessionist conflict is similar to Kegalle ATI which is located in a calm and peaceful area since its inception. Location of an ATI in an urbanized area in close proximity to the city centre also does not affect the good practices that are in place as evident by the fact that the Dehiwala ATI located in a highly urbanized area closer to the city centre and Labuduwa ATI located in a fairly rural area away from urbanized city centre are grouped together in the PCA of best practices and strengths of the HNDA programme. Similarly, when

good practices of HNDM programmes are considered Badulla and Dehiwala ATIs are clustered together. As Labuduwa ATI, Badulla ATI is also located in an area dominated by tea estates far away from Colombo city. When best practices/strengths of HNDIT programme are considered, Ampara and Kandy ATIs could be clustered together. When HNDE, HNDBA and HNDT (Agriculture) programmes are considered, none of the ATIs could be clustered based on best practices/strengths that are in place. Similar observation had been made by Rosa *et al.* (2011), for European universities who recorded that there are no significant regional influences on the good practices/strengths identified by external quality assurance reviews. The present study also shows that in addition to geographic location, ethnicity of the majority community and prevalence of deterrent factors such as internal wars do not affect the good practices and strengths that are in place in different ATIs. According to the review teams, most of the staff in the ATIs is highly dedicated and with whatever the shortcomings and difficulties they face employ as many best practices as they can. The good relationship between teachers and students had also contributed to this. Staff student relationship has been identified as a strength in several European universities too (Rosa *et al.* 2011).

External quality assessment reviews should trust and give high regard to internal quality enhancement processes within the ATIs as stated by Kohler *et al.* (2006) for European universities. These internal processes help to develop a quality culture within the ATIs. With the development of a quality culture, future quality assessment reviews could aim at accrediting individual HND programmes offered at each ATI. The external quality assessment reviews in the Sri Lankan university system were started in 2004 (Wijeyaratne *et al.* 2012) and the first cycle of reviews are being continued even today. After the first review cycle, it is expected introduces an accreditation programme to the degree programmes offered at these universities. Nevertheless, there is criticism on the external quality assessments as they are based on peer review. Too much friendliness has been identified as a risk in peer reviewing (Rosa *et al.* 2011). Further, over reliance on self evaluation report has also been identified as a

weakness (Stensaker 1999). However, in the quality assessment reviews of HND programmes, risk of over-friendliness was avoided by getting the services of university academics in review panels as the review chair. The over-reliance on self evaluation reports was also overcome by giving more emphasis to perusal of relevant documents, discussions with students, alumni, academic staff, administrative staff and non-academic staff and observing teaching and facilities available. Therefore, as Barblan (1996) has pointed out external quality assessment reviews carried out in ATIs were aimed at evaluating the procedures available for maintaining quality rather than individual units.

In conclusion, it can be pointed out that many good practices are in place at ATIs in order to promote and ensure quality of the academic programmes they offer. The review reports published in [www.hetc.lk](http://www.hetc.lk) list out all these good practices. The number of best practices that are in place does not depend on the location, ethnicity of the majority community and prevalence of deterrent factors such as internal armed secessionist conflicts. Differences in the resources available and the motivation and dedication of the staff may have contributed to the differences in the good practices that are in place in different ATIs.

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