

## Sri Lanka's Higher Education Quality Assurance Practices: An Institutionalization Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study is an outcome of a preliminary review forming a part of a broader research project that examines how quality assurance practices have been institutionalized in the Sri Lankan higher education field and how they impact accountability and governance within public sector universities. This preliminary review was mainly concerned with identifying the institutional challenges that have been highlighted in the literature connected to the institutionalization of quality assurance practices in the higher education field in Sri Lanka.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study was conducted as a desk review. The review was performed using Sri Lanka's quality assurance literature and documents, which included regulations and guidelines issued by various government authorities governing Sri Lanka's higher education institutions since 2000.

**Findings:** Findings suggest that quality assurance (QA) is evolving into a distinct institutional field of practice within the higher education sector in Sri Lanka with coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphic pressures. Coercive pressures operate mainly in the form of regulatory measures by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Quality Assurance Council (QAC), which have prescribed formal quality assurance frameworks that universities need to comply with in institutional and program reviews. Normative isomorphism is prompted by peer review mechanisms and training and awareness campaigns by the UGC, QAC, and various other donor-driven projects. Mimetic forces operate in the form of the adoption of benchmarking practices against successful universities and courses. The literature, however, suggests that the process of embedding quality assurance practices varies across universities; while some universities embrace QA as a mechanism for continuous improvement, others tend to view it as an external imposition. University actors tend to view QA practices as a bureaucratic requirement and, thus, an additional administrative burden rather than an opportunity for improving actual performance and accountability.

**Research limitations/implications:** The findings are informed by a review of extant literature and documents. Though it provides us with a grounding for theoretically informed dialogue and detailed empirical investigation, the empirical evidence may, however, challenge these initial findings. The variation in QA practice also highlights the need to examine human agency and how it is shaped by extant structures and power dynamics.

**Originality/value:** Though a body of literature that examines the QA practices in higher education institutions in Sri Lanka has emerged, these works have not been investigated in light of the institutionalization of QA as a practice. Such insight is important for policymakers to implement measures to embed the QA practice so that it reproduces its existence over time.

**Keywords:** *Quality Assurance, Sri Lanka, Higher Education, Institutionalization*