# Intellectual Discourse

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# Contents

# Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the Maldives: Past, Present, and Future

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**Abstract:** Quality assurance in higher education is a hot topic with the increased number of students graduating from postgraduate programmes offered by the higher education institutions. This qualitative study aimed to look at the history and the current status of the quality assurance mechanisms in the Maldives; identify its strengths and weaknesses; and make informed recommendations. Critical event narrative inquiry was used and data were collected through interviews and analysis of documents. Content analysis of data collected revealed that Maldives was one of the very first countries in the region to establish such a mechanism and it was very similar to that of Australia. The most significant finding was that the body mandated to assure higher education quality and did not have any power or regulatory authority. Therefore, it is important that the authority be an independent body established by an act of parliament with the regulatory power.

**Keywords:** quality assurance, higher education, Maldives

**Abstrak:** Jaminan kualiti dalam pendidikan tinggi adalah topik yang penting yang perlu diuruskan supaya selaras dengan peningkatan bilangan pelajar program pascasiswazah yang ditawarkan oleh institusi pengajian tinggi. Kajian kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji sejarah dan status mekanisma jaminan kualiti di Maldives; mengenal pasti kekuatan dan kelemahan mekanisma tersebut; dan membuat cadangan berdasarkan maklumat. Data telah

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dikumpulkan melalui temuduga dan tinjauan literatur dan telah dianalisa dengan menggunakan metod siasatan naratif peristiwa kritikal. Analisis kandungan data yang dikumpul menunjukkan bahawa Maldives adalah salah satu negara yang pertama di rantau ini yang telah menubuhkan mekanisma jaminan kualiti dalam pendidikan tinggi yang mirip dengan Australia. Penemuan yang penting kajian ini adalah bahawa badan yang diamanahkan untuk menjamin kualiti pendidikan tinggi tidak mempunyai kuasa pengawalseliaan. Kajian mengsyorkan supaya wujudkan satu Akta Parlimen untuk menubuhkan satu badan berkuasa bebas untuk tujuan pengawalseliaan.

**Kata Kunci:** jaminan kualiti, pendidikan tinggi, Maldives

## Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education is a debated topic in academia and has received substantial attention over the years particularly, with the increased number of students graduating from postgraduate programs offered by higher education institutions (Butter, Aguilera, Quintana, Pérez, & Valenzuela, 2017; Pham & Starkey, 2016; Sarrico & Alves, 2016). One of the key rationales for the discussions on quality assurance in higher education is the "mass production" of graduates from postgraduate programs offered by higher education institutions (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Butter et al., 2017; Eriksen, 1995; Oldfield & Baron, 1998; Pham & Starkey, 2016). Quality assurance in higher education was one of the agenda items of discussion at the Annual General Meeting of Private Higher Education Association of Maldives (PHEAM) which was held on February 27, 2018. The two main areas of this discussion were the importance of providing a quality education and private higher education institutions working together with the government in assuring the education quality provided, which has been always on the agenda since its establishment five years ago (Hassan, 2016; Nizar, 2018).

In the Maldives there are 91 registered local higher education institutions. According to the Maldives Qualifications Authority (2018), 12 of these institutions offer postgraduate programmes. Of these 12 institutions two institutions offer doctoral level programmes. Those two institutions are the only universities in the Maldives that are state owned. According to the statistics from the past three years, number

of students who graduate from postgraduate programmes offered by private colleges in the Maldives are relatively higher compared to that of the universities. Statistics indicate that more than 30% of the graduates from private institutions are from postgraduate programmes. At the graduation ceremony of one of the higher education institutions in the Maldives, the Chairman highlighted that one third of their graduates were from postgraduate programmes and questioned the quality of the graduates and criticized the quality assurance mechanism in the country (Graduation 2018, 2018; Nizar, 2018). This raised eyebrows and quality assurance became a hot topic among the general public. Following this, a research report entitled "*Mathee Thauleemuge Fenvaraamedhu Suvaalu!*" which roughly translates to "Questioning the Quality of Higher Education" was published by a local newspaper *Mihaaru*. According to the report, academics and top management of higher education institutions raised questions regarding the quality of education provided in regard to the modes of delivery and workload of students enrolled in universities and colleges. In addition, informants of the report who were well-known academics were very concerned about the fact that higher education institutions in the Maldives were highly dependent on part-time lecturers who most of the time took the workload of a full time lecturer at more than one institution within a week. Recruitment criteria used to employ these part-time lecturers were also criticized highlighting that a person who graduated from a bachelor's degree program is hired to lecture a bachelor's degree program within a year of graduation. The report also deliberated the quality of assignments and mechanisms set in place to ensure the work submitted is genuinely one's own work explaining that there were numerous local advertisements which offered to do the assignments of students for a fee. The report wrapped up by raising serious questions regarding the mandate, execution of the mandate, and role performance of the quality watchdog - the Maldives Qualifications Authority (Ali, 2018).

Maldives Qualifications Authority's mandate is to assure the quality of higher education. Starting 2017, the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA) has initiated external audit of higher education institutions for the first time in the Maldives. For this reason, it is timely to study the current status of quality assurance in higher education in the Maldives to identify the strengths and weaknesses. Identifying the

strengths and weaknesses would in turn contribute positively towards the improvement of quality assurance mechanism used in the Maldives. Moreover, the results of this study could contribute towards the enhancement of the system currently in place. Therefore, in order to ensure the quality of academic qualifications and to ensure that all the institutions adhere to the quality standards, it is important to investigate the current status of quality assurance in higher education in the Maldives. Given this context, this study aims to look at how the quality assurance mechanism was first established in the Maldives, identify the strengths and weaknesses in the quality assurance mechanism used in the Maldives, and make recommendations based on findings to enhance the quality of higher education provided in the country.

## Quality and Quality Assurance

Quality is an ambiguous term and education quality is rather a vague concept (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Butter et al., 2017; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Pounder, 1999). Past research suggested that quality measurement tools and models implemented in higher education institutions differed and therefore, quality assurance in higher education is a challenging task not only because there is no universal agreement on how best to manage quality within higher education but also due to the complicated nature of the educational outcome or product (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Martens & Prosser, 1998).

Education has been viewed as a system which consists of inputs, transformation processes, and outputs (Becket & Brookes, 2008). In education there are human, physical, and financial inputs that go through processes such as teaching, learning, research, administration, and knowledge transformation (Sahney, Banwet, & Karunes, 2004). According to Elton (cited in Becket & Brookes, 2008) accountability, audit, and assessment are the quality "As" which are concerned with the quality assurance and the people who assured quality in higher education while quality enhancement focused on quality "Es": empowerment, enthusiasm, expertise, and excellence. Quality assurance is carried out by government or other external bodies through accreditation and quality audits as external stakeholders are the ones who are more concerned with quality assurance procedures and the independence of these bodies are an important requirement in many countries (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Gümüş, 2018). Quality enhancement is rather an internal process

where internal stakeholders interpret and assess the quality of education provided which aims for overall increase in the quality of teaching and learning and this significantly contributes to the original efforts in quality assurance (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Hayward, 2017).

Foundation in quality assurance in higher education is the accreditation of education institutions through specialized accreditation agencies using mainly the process of audit which is one of the key elements in quality enhancement as well as in quality assurance as internal audit contributes to quality enhancement while external audit is part of quality assurance (Hayward, 2017; Schomaker, 2015; Welch, 2016). Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2019) defined accreditation as "review of the quality of higher education institutions and programs." Greenberg (2014) defined accreditation as:

> A first run at a new definition might contain these elements: Accreditation is a process by which recognized authorities validate that an institution meets minimal professional standards and accountability based on its mission. Standards established by professional groups and accrediting bodies are validated by government officials who also establish rules and regulations for the conduct of the accreditation process.

Hayward (cited in Hayward, 2017) defined accreditation as "the process of external quality review used in higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and higher education programs for quality assurance and quality improvement" (p. 21). Maldives Qualifications Authority (2017) defined accreditation in their *Manual for Conducting Programme Accreditation* as "a process whereby programmes initially approved by MQA to be offered and awarded by a Higher Education Institutions in Maldives are quality assured by the Qualifications Authority against a set of nationally accepted standards" (p. 4).

## International Developments in Higher Education Quality Assurance

In Australian higher education, autonomous universities established under State, Territory, or Commonwealth government legislation have the power to accredit their own courses while State or Territory governments retain the power to accredit courses developed and delivered by other higher education institutions (Shah, Nair, & Wilson, 2011). It is also noteworthy that there are slight variations in accreditation

arrangements and approaches among States or Territories. From 1980 to 1990 there was no national quality management framework so individual universities were responsible for the development, implementation and enhancement of systems and processes for quality assurance (Shah et al., 2011). First quality assurance framework for higher education was implemented in the year 2000 along with National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes, Education Service for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act and an external agency named Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was endorsed (Anderson, Johnson, & Milligan, 2000; Shah et al., 2011; Skilbeck & Connell, 2000). It is apparent that governments played key roles in initiating quality assurance reforms in Australian higher education to improve the quality and standard of higher education. In summary, Australian quality assurance framework consisted of five key elements, namely, Australian Universities Quality Agency Audits, States or Territories Accreditation based on national Protocols, Universities Responsible for academic standards, Australian Qualifications Framework National register, and Commonwealth monitoring of universities performance via Institutional Assessment Framework (IAF). Shah and colleagues (2011) reported that AUQA processes which comprised of the preparation of the performance portfolio, self-reviews, trial or mock audit, improvements as a result of self-reviews, AUQA visit, and post-audit follow-up led not only to the strengthening of quality assurance processes in the universities but also promoting quality culture and engaging staff in quality. It was also reported that "the audit itself, which allows institutions to undertake self-review and address areas, needing improvement before the actual AUQA audit has been valuable" (p. 479), however AUQA does not have the authority to place sanctions or penalty on institutions. AUQA's successor the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) was established in 2011 as a response to Bradley Review in 2009 to ensure that higher education providers meet minimum standards, promote best practice and improve the quality of the Australian higher education sector (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2017). TEQSA is Australia's single independent national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education whose *core elements are to apply standards (which are set out in HES Framework) and risk-based quality framework to protect and promote the interests of higher education students and the reputation of the higher education sector* (TEQSA, 2017). The current

legal framework that governs the Australian higher education consists of Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Act 2011, Higher Education Standards (HES) Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015, Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000, and National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018 (National Code 2018). Figure 1 shows TEQSA's graduated approach to exercising formal powers.

*Figure 1. TEQSA's graduated approach to exercising formal powers*
*(TEQSA, 2017)*
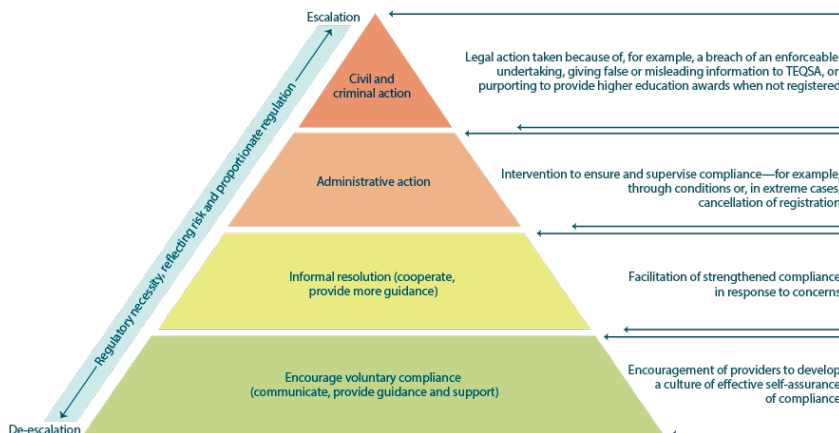


In Egypt, an independent body is responsible for assuring quality in education (Khalifa, n.d.; NAQAAE, 2019). The body, National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education (NAQAAE), was established by a president's decree in 2006 with the aim to assure education quality (both pre-university and university education) and to provide technical support for higher education institutions and to accredit educational institutions. This body provides institutional accreditation as well as programme accreditation as part of ensuring education quality. The standards set out for institutional accreditation focus on two major aspects, namely, institutional capacity and educational effectiveness while programme accreditation focused on programme management and educational effectiveness. (Khalifa, et al., n.d.; NAQAAE, 2019). Khalifa et al. (n.d.) noted that each institution has a quality assurance unit which is mandated to implement internal mechanisms to ensure quality. Nationwide quality assurance is done through NAQAAE. It is noteworthy that this authority reports to

the Egyptian President, Prime Minister and the Parliament (NAQAAE, 2019).

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) is an umbrella organization which represents quality assurance organizations from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member states (ENQA, 2019). ENQA published Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) in that seven standards to be followed by quality assurance agencies were mentioned. According to ENQA (2015, p 22-23) the standards are categorized under activities, policy and processes for quality assurance; official status; independence; thematic analysis; resources; internal quality assurance and professional conduct; and cyclical external review of agencies. It is noteworthy that ENQA also emphasizes the importance of having legal power so that the quality assurance agency could function independently without the influence of a third party.

Quality assurance system for New Zealand higher education consists of two parts, namely, internal and external quality assurance systems (NZQA, 2019; Shi, 2016). This is similar to that of other countries in the world and the current system in the Maldives. It is believed that self-assessment is the most powerful means for an institution to understand and improve its educational performance (Shi, 2016). There are two bodies overseeing the quality assurance of universities - Universities NZ's Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) and the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) established in 1993 by the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee as an independent body. The New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee (operating as Universities New Zealand) is the statutory body with primary responsibility for the university sector's quality assurance matters (Universities New Zealand, 2019).

In summary, as per international best practices, quality assurance is carried out mainly in two folds. Internal quality assurance mechanisms such as internal audit, internal assessments are set in place and there are independent external bodies responsible for higher education quality. In most of the countries it is mandatory that an internal quality assurance unit is established within the higher education institution. These external bodies have legislative power to regulate and take corrective

action. Roles of these bodies varied slightly, however, in some countries programmes were accredited and even institutions were accredited. The accreditation as given for a period of 5-7 years.

## Research Design, Methodology, and Approach

A critical event narrative inquiry method, which is a qualitative research design, is used to investigate the current status of quality assurance in higher education in the Maldives as this method was found most appropriate to investigate "human-centered and complex areas, such as higher education quality" (Mertova & Webster, 2009, p. 147) as experiences occur narratively they should be studies narratively, particularly educational experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Data was collected for this critical event narrative case study using semi-structured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews and through analysis of documents. In this study the critical events which voiced the important issues and concerns in the higher education quality assurance mechanism in place in the Maldives are extracted from the stories of academics, heads of higher education institutions, leaders of higher education quality assurance in the Maldives, and those who have worked at policy level and those who have been actively engaged in the process of higher education quality assurance mechanism through the establishment of Maldives Accreditation Board (by a Presidential Decree on 14 August 2000) which later was renamed as the Maldives Qualifications Authority on 17 May 2010 (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2019).

Data was collected from the 8th of June 2018 through 22nd of January 2019 from 12 different informants who were recruited using purposive sampling and then snowball sampling as these methods of sampling allowed to employ individuals who had the information required for this study as this is a critical even enquiry where data needed to be collected from a very specific group of individuals (Creswell, 2018). The guiding principle used to determine the adequate sample size was the concept of saturation (Baker & Edwards, 2015). As there was a high level of homogeneity among the population, saturation was reached after the seventh interview (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). However, as participants have given consent and appointments were confirmed, five additional interviews were carried out. It is noteworthy

that this helped to ensure that saturation was reached and there is no additional new information to be gained. A total of 29 interviews were carried as after the 12 initial interviews, another short 17 interviews were carried out as follow-up interviews during the data collection and analysis period to clarify and confirm findings.

Data collected through interviews and documents were analysed for themes and patterns using content analysis. Analysed and interpreted data was validated through member check to improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability of this study.

## Conceptualization of Higher Education Quality Assurance in the Maldives

According to the interviewees who were directly involved with the establishment of quality assurance mechanism in the Maldives, the initial discussion of establishment of quality assurance begin in the year 1999 during the implementation of World Bank's Second Education and Training Project which took place from 1995-2000 (The World Bank Group, 2019). The initial idea was that the Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE), which was established on 1 October 1998 by the government of Maldives to amalgamate the then existing institutions of higher education, needed a quality assurance mechanism and hence the first part of the three-part series of establishing the quality assurance in higher education in the Maldives was conceptualized.

The MCHE was established with the vision to be upgraded to a university at some point, therefore, it was planned to have a quality assurance unit called Accreditation Board within the MCHE according to the informants. Asian Development Bank provided the technical assistance to establish the Accreditation Board. Accreditation Board was to be an organ of the MCHE, hence, the mandate of MCHE included in addition to being a provider itself, accredit the programs of private institutions on delegated authority from the Ministry of Education (Hameed, 2019).

## Maldives Accreditation Board (MAB)

MCHE with consultants from the Ministry of Education was working on developing the Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF) in order to establish the Accreditation Board. According to the informants, a higher priority was given to developing the MNQF as there

were variations in entry requirements to academic programmes as well as certification standards due to lack of coordination in award criteria nationally. This was followed by the development of draft documents for programme approval.

It is also worth mentioning that at this time there were a few private higher education providers in the Maldives and they required the government to regulate the qualifications and one of the functions of Accreditation Board included regulation of qualifications. Considering all these, the education minister decided that it would be better if the Accreditation Board is under the Ministry of Education instead of being an organ or a unit of MCHE. Hence, the Maldives Accreditation Board (MAB) was established by a decree of the President on the 14th of August 2000, which is the general mechanism by which most government institutions have been established in the Maldives (Hameed, 2019; Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2019).

Establishment of the Maldives Accreditation Board was a significant step in enabling private providers to enter the higher education market, and positively contributed assuring the public of quality and confidence of the academic programmes offered by the private higher education institutions. According to Hameed (2019) "there were no such singular institutions of quality assurance in South Asia at that time, and the Maldives Accreditation Board was, in that sense, unique in the region". It is important to acknowledge that Maldives was one of the first countries to establish a quality assurance mechanism in South Asia.

According to the director general of MAB Dr. Ahmed Anwar (personal communication, January 7, 2019) MAB's mandate at that time was to enhance and assure quality of Tertiary Education in the Maldives and to validate qualifications awarded in testimony of educational attainments. Furthermore, prior to the founding of MAB, certificate validation of qualifications obtained overseas was carried out by the Department of Public Examinations. Data analysis revealed that the board composition of MAB included representation of MCHE, private higher education institutions, experts of specific subject areas or disciplines such as health, education, business, law, and higher education experts.

Initially the idea was MAB to approve programmes for five years and then start accreditation of programmes as at that time there was only

MCHE and a very few private colleges. According to the informants, although MAB targeted to start accreditation within five years of its establishment, it was unable to start accreditation process due to staff shortage and lack of staff with technical expertise. In addition, informants highlighted that a lot of time was taken for validating foreign qualifications and hence there was no time to carry out institutional audit. Therefore, accreditation had to be parked.

### Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA)

The MAB was renamed as Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA) on the 17th of May 2010 (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2019). Respondents confirmed that to date, the MQA has not accredited any programmes or institutions. Since its establishment in 2000, they have been approving programmes, and validating foreign as well as locally awarded certificates. However, validating local certificates was brought to an end in September 2016 and in the same year *Guidelines for Institutional Audit* was endorsed by the MQA (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2016). In 2017 for the very first time institutional audit was carried out by the MQA as a first step towards accreditation.

### Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF)

One of the first steps taken with the establishment of MAB was to design and develop a framework to protect qualifications awarded in testimony of educational attainments. The work of this framework began with the establishment of MCHE. This framework is called the Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF) and came into existence in 2001. Data analysis revealed that qualification frameworks of Australia, British, New Zealand, and United States of America were used initially as the main guides to design the Maldives Qualifications Framework. Interviewees explained that the main reason for using those frameworks was due to the fact that most of the Maldivians were going to those countries for higher education and to make sure credit transfer was made easy and possible, those frameworks were used. Somewhere about 2009 the initially developed framework was revised and the Scottish level descriptors were incorporated. This MNQF was revised again and released to public by the Maldives Qualifications Authority (formerly known as MAB) on the 31st of August 2016. In addition to that there were a few changes brought to the entry requirements with the recent revision, and it is specifically mentioned that the level descriptors

of Scottish Framework levels 3-12 are used as the level descriptors of MNQF levels 1-10 (one represents Certificate 1 and level 10 is equivalent to doctoral degree) (Maldives Qualifications Authority, 2016).

Interviewees noted that unlike the popular belief, the current MNQF do not exclude vocational training as technical expertise were used to purposefully include vocational training. Interviews with professionals who worked from the conceptualization to establishment and through the recent revision of MNQF emphasized that MNQF levels 1 through 4 was targeted for vocational programmes. Although MNQF closely resembled that of Australia, skill assessment procedures of Australian framework were neither considered nor adapted for the Maldivian context (Hameed, 2019).

## Concerns Raised by Stakeholders

Main concerns raised by the academics and the heads of higher education institutions included the MQA not performing the functions it was established to perform. One of the respondents said:

> "*up until 2017 the main role played by MQA was to approve the programmes offered in the higher education institutions in the Maldives and validate certificates including locally awarded ones. They never checked whether the programmes were conducted in compliance with their standards. I believe MQA should be more responsible. It is public knowledge that some institutions are freely distributing certificates*".

Typical concerns raised by heads of higher education institutions included:

> "… Institutions are openly advertising that students will have to attend classes only once a month for three days each month for a total of eight months. Some graduates have said that they don't have to attend classes. All they need to do is come and register after that submit a written assignment and do a presentation for each module. Some institutions are conducting block mode classes which MQA says they never approved. Graduates don't have any quality".

> "(Name of the institution removed) has enrolled individuals to a Master's programme which we have rejected because they do not meet the minimum entry requirement set by the MQA. MQA has not taken any action and our students have

raised that concern too. MQA needs to be an independent body because now we see MQA favouring the government higher education institutions - maybe because MQA is a unit under the Ministry of Higher Education they simply ignore these things done by Universities".

"As you know, MQA informed all higher education institutions that block mode classes cannot be conducted and MQA would revoke the registration of the institution if they were caught not complying with the regulations. I have a friend working in a very high post at a government institution and I have information that MQA has told them that MQA will be lenient with the universities. This is very unprofessional and unethical".

One of the academics who taught postgraduate programmes said:

"my friend and I were asked by X (name of the institution removed) to teach Y (module names removed) and we were given three days to cover the entire module. We are talking about modules offered as part of a Master's level programme. There was no assessment at all. You should talk to my friend".

An academic whose designs programmes said:

"…MQA has approved two Master's level programmes under two different names for a higher education institution. Of the total eight modules, seven modules are exactly the same modules. This remaining one module is the difference between these two Master's level programmes. If MQA is doing its job, how could they approve the same programme under two different names for the same institution? I believe curriculum should contain a certain percentage of a particular specialization in order for that specialization to be reflected in the name of the programme. MQA just blindly approves all the programmes. I don't think they are doing a good job. It is not surprising, considering the education level of their staff".

An academic who's worked in the student enrolment section said:

"MQA has validated same qualifications at different levels. There is no consistency. It seems that it depends on who is the head of the authority…"

The above comments are reflective of the concerns raised by the academics, the heads and senior members of higher education institutions. Respondents raised concerns regarding the ability of the staff working in the authority and here is one of the typical concerns raised:

> "MQA staff including the head are not qualified to be there. MQA head doesn't have a degree. Most of the staff haven't completed a University degree".

After the interviews were conducted MQA head was changed in January 2019 and the current head holds a PhD which was focused on higher education quality assurance model for small states. Organizational chart of MQA and the highest qualification obtained and area of specialization of the heads of three sections and the staff were requested. Organizational chart and staff details were available, however, MQA refused to share the highest qualification or their area of specialization. Therefore, the claim that MQA staff "haven't completed a University degree" could not be verified.

**Challenges in Assuring Higher Education Quality**

Data analysis revealed that the most significant challenge is the lack of a legislation to exercise formal power to take corrective action against those higher education institutions which do not comply with the standards set out by the MQA or breach the standards. According to the respondents MQA is "*the quality watchdog without any teeth*".

Secondly, lack of staff as well as lack of trained staff was identified as a challenge. Respondents highlighted the budgetary issues and other personal factors as challenges in sending the staff to attend overseas trainings. MQA acknowledged that in the past there have been some mistakes and certain areas were neglected. Therefore, at the moment they are working on identifying and correcting those mistakes. It was highlighted that systematic changes will be brought to strengthen MQA and improve their reputation and training opportunities will be sought and provided to staff.

Thirdly, MQA depends heavily on individuals in higher education in reviewing the programmes submitted for MQA approval and also institutional audit. As it is a small island nation, these academics teach at more than one institution there is always the conflict of interest.

External audit is carried out by a team consisting of MQA staff and independent academics who at some level are involved in these higher education institutions.

Lastly, respondents noted that MQA board and the certificate panel composition did at times negatively influence decisions due to conflict of interest for various "*reasons that could not be shared*."

**Way Forward**

One of the most important and critical challenges noted is not having the legislative authority to exercise power. MNQF and the role of MQA very closely follows that of the Australia and it is evident that in order to protect and promote the higher education sector it is important that a legal framework which gives MQA the legislative power is brought into existence to govern the higher education quality in the Maldives (TEQSA, 2017; Waheed, 2013). ENQA published standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies and it emphasized that "[quality assurance] agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognized as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities" (2015, p. 22) because "when external quality assurance is carried out for regulatory purposes, institutions need to have the security that the outcomes of this process are accepted within their higher education system, by the state, the stakeholders and the public" (2015, p. 22).

Private higher education providers have raised concerns regarding the independence of MQA. Therefore, it is vital in order to protect and promote the interests of students and private higher education providers and to gain the public trust, that MQA be an independent body that governs the higher education the in Maldives (NAQAAE, 2019; TEQSA, 2017). According to ENQA "to ensure the meaningfulness of external quality assurance, it is important that institutions and the public trust agencies" (ENQA, 2015, p. 22).

Quality assurance agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence (ENQA, 2015). In order to ensure a quality higher education and present MQA as a fair and a professional body, it is important that staff be very professional in a way that the standards are uniformly applied

and audited against a uniform standard irrespective of the ownership of higher education providers. ENQA guidelines also should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities as they need to be accountable to their stakeholders. Thus, high professional standards and integrity in the quality assurance agency's work is obligatory (ENQA, 2015).

As highlighted under ENQA (2015) guidelines it is important that MQA have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work. Given higher education's important impact on the development of societies and individuals, it is necessary that MQA is provided with adequate and appropriate funding which would enable them to organize and run their external quality assurance activities in an effective and efficient manner.

Lastly, MQA board and certificate panel composition need to be revised in a way that there is representation of all higher education institutions but this representation should be small enough so that decisions cannot be influenced or dominated by the representatives of higher education intuitions. It is important that more independent individuals are included so that there no conflict of interest. At the same time, measures can be taken to ensure that although the expert may be nominated by a third party, an expert is acting in a personal capacity and not representing their organization when working for MQA as independence is important to ensure that any procedures and decisions are solely based on expertise.

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