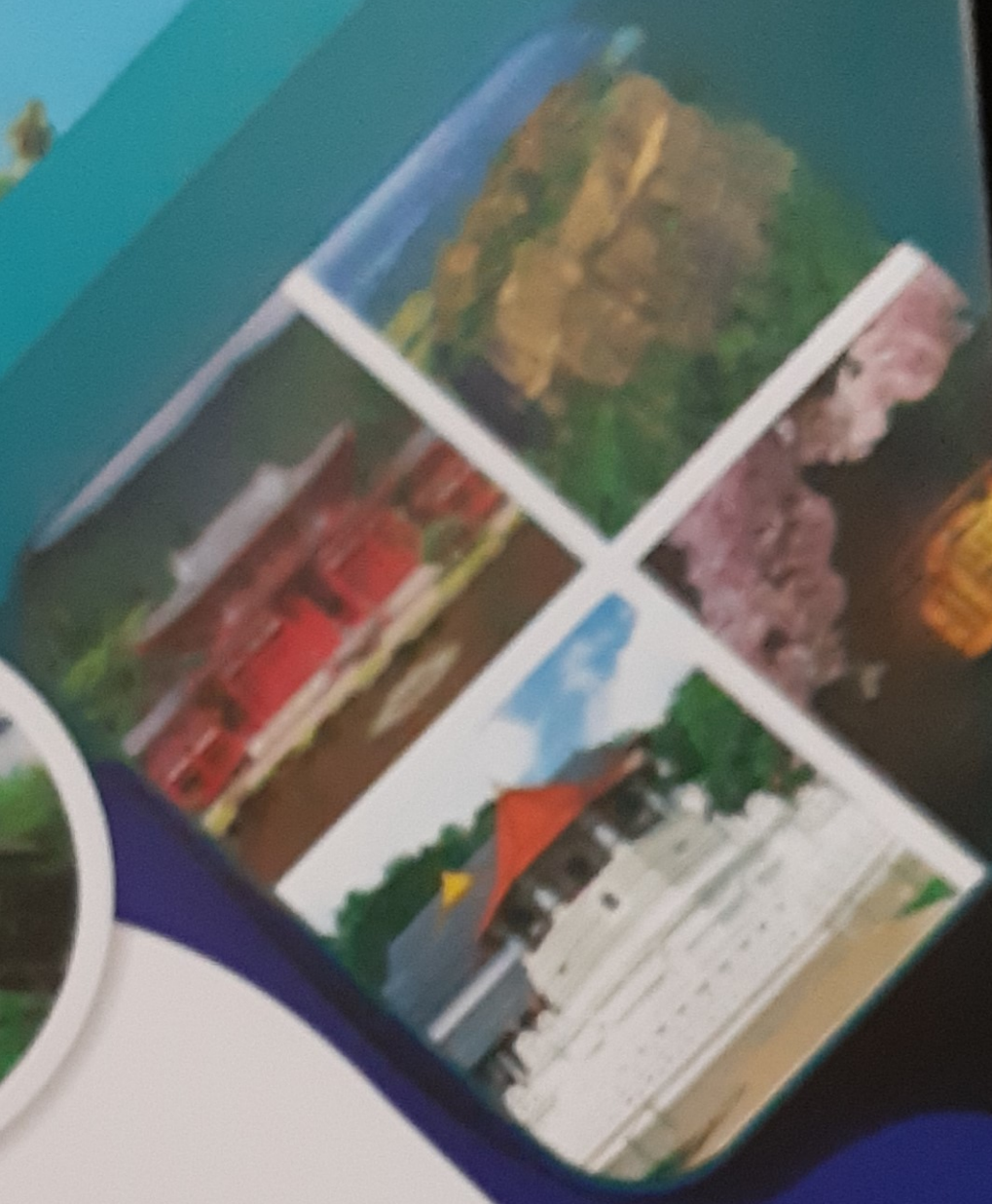
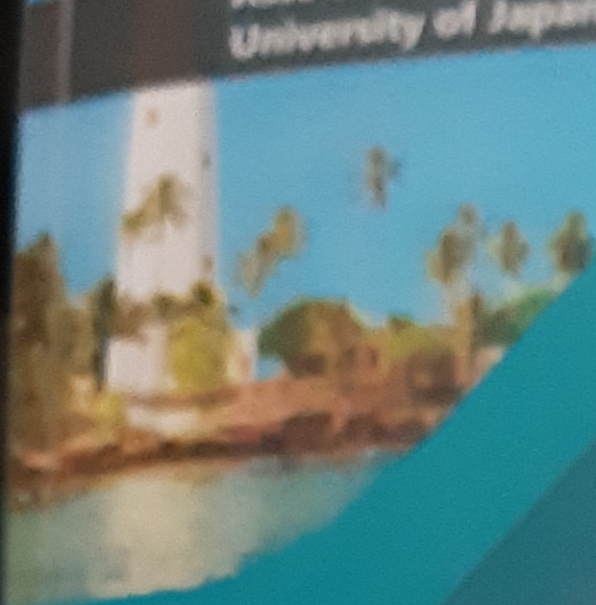


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BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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Tracing Symbolic Compliance of Higher Education Institutions towards the Quality Assurance System: Evidence from Universities in Sri Lanka

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Introduction of ranking, demand for research and innovation, unemployable graduates, commercial orientation and financial constraints have intensified competition in Universities. Quality improvement is recognized as the key to improving competitiveness. University ruling and regulatory bodies have introduced Quality Assurance Systems (QAS) together with institutional frameworks, standards and guidelines for continuous improvement of quality and accountability of Universities. However, the realization of expectations of QAS has raised doubts. External evaluation plays an important role in assuring the quality of higher education. But, whether external evaluation captures the real picture?" and "whether the quality improvement is assured in this process?" are in question. Quality Assurance Systems (QAS) were introduced to the Universities to ensure continuous quality improvement. However, Universities tend to pretend that they follow guidelines and standards, but maintain a gap between the QAS and internal operations of the institution. The real picture of QAS operations in the University is hence disguised. Considering the significance of unveiling realities of the QAS in higher education, this study examined this behaviour of Universities towards the QAS. Qualitative methodology is used in the study. The literature on 'Universities' responses towards QAS' available in worldwide peer-reviewed journals was analyzed to understand how the above nature of compliance has been identified and described elsewhere. The scope of the empirical study is limited to the semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted with University stakeholders and to the perusal of statutory documents related to QAS of Sri Lankan Universities. Stakeholders comprise QA Council authorities, external quality reviewers and internal stakeholders comprising University top management, Internal QA Units' Directors, faculty level QA cell members, academic staff and administrative officers. The display of compliance towards the external evaluation of QAS through documentary evidence and performance indicators without integrating it to the culture, practices and behaviours of individuals and organizations is identified, in the literature, as 'Symbolic Compliance' (SC). The study finds 'non-integration of QA standards into routine operations, temporary compliance, lack of ownership, manipulation, fabrication, extra effort and cost and emphasis on the achievement of minimum standards' as characteristics of SC. It is identified that external evaluation remarkably affects the manner in which Universities comply with QAS. Technical nature of QA evaluation, focus on processes, policies, structures and quantifiable indicators rather than substance induce Universities to display SC. Thus, the evaluation shall become more vigilant beyond looking at information readily made available by Universities. The evaluation process should be strengthened by incorporating cross-checking the facts produced by Universities with external stakeholder feedbacks and auditor general's concerns on University performance. External stakeholder feedback before the onsite University evaluation, cross-checking the documentary evidence and findings from Universities, spontaneous interviews with every segment of internal stakeholders and unanticipated review visits are recommended to trace and mitigate symbolic compliance. The results of this study are significant to the policymakers and practitioners of the QAS.

Keywords: External Evaluation, Higher Education, Quality Assurance System, Symbolic Compliance