
Quality in Higher Education in UAE with Special Reference to the Experience of UAE University

Ahmed Mustafa Elhussein Mansour
UAE University, United Arab Emirates

Abstract

The major objective of this paper is to analyze and document quality in higher education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with special reference to the experience of UAE University to institutionalize quality education in all its academic fields and processes. To achieve the objective of the paper, the paper is divided into two main sections. The first section aims to provide a conceptual perspective to the study. The second section reviews the drive for quality in higher education in UAE and UAE University.

Keywords: *Quality, UAE University, student, traditional view, business model*

Introduction:

Objective and Methodology

Globalization guided by the political philosophy of neo-liberalism and the revival of classical market values, made the quest for quality in higher education a world-wide movement. Most universities in developed and developing countries are now striving to achieve some level of quality and acquire international recognition. The term *higher education*, in general, refers to the post secondary level of education. However, in this paper, the term is used in a limited sense to refer to education provided by academic institutions such as colleges and universities.

The major objective of this paper is to analyze and document quality in higher education in United Arab Emirates (UAE) with special reference to the experience of UAE University to institutionalize quality education in all its academic fields and administrative processes. To achieve the

objective of the paper, it is divided into two main sections. The first section aims to provide a theoretical perspective to the study. The major goal of this section is to answer two questions: is the business model of quality applicable to higher education as a service? Why many educational professionals resist the introduction of quality techniques to their organizations? Hence, it addresses quality in higher education in general and the relevance of the business model of quality to this endeavor in particular. This section also considers the major approaches to quality in higher education. The second section reviews the drive for quality in higher education in UAE and concentrates on the strategic goal of the UAE University to aim “for top of the table” (The National, 2008).

Section 1: Conceptual Framework of Quality in Higher Education

Definition of quality assurance and accreditation in higher education

Generally, the term quality may be used to denote several meanings ranging from the most general to the most specific and technical. In the general sense, the presence of excellence or quality is determined and defined by the service or product provider as an expert. In its technical specific sense, quality is defined by customers or stakeholders’ requirements (Tenner, 1992). The two meanings are used in one way or another in the context of higher education reflecting different philosophical orientations. The general meanings are associated with traditional views of education and are related to the bureaucratic model of public administration. However, the last specific meaning is related to the business management model of quality.

The common focus shared by all the business and technical definitions of quality is that the quality of a product or service is defined by its customers or stakeholders. In the case of higher education, there are multiple customers and stakeholders with varied and highly complex requirements. Despite the fact that these customers may even ignore what their requirements are, or may provide vague definitions of them, all modern higher education institutions all over the world, including the Arab countries, are under tremendous pressure to meet their customers' or stakeholders' expectations.

Quality Assurance and Accreditation are two important terms in the vocabulary of quality drive in higher education. There are many overlapping definitions of quality assurance (QA) in the context of higher education. Although some definitions of QA in higher education concentrate primarily on the element of accountability to stakeholders, others include also the elements of enhancement or improvement (see for example, Duff *et al.*, 2000; CHEA, 2001; Kisuniene, 2004). The UNESCO defines quality assurance as...

“An all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous *process* of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programmes” (Vlasceanu *et al.*, 2004, pp. 48–49)

Until recently the concept of accreditation was exclusively confined to USA's higher education institutions (Fraser, 1994, 106). Later it was adopted by Central and South American and Eastern European countries and integrated into the European Union

educational systems as part of the Bologna Process. In the developing world, India has been involved in institutional accreditation since 1986 (Analytic Glossary, 2009). In the last two decades, accreditation has become a catchword for higher education institutions in most Arab Gulf countries (Al-Dossari, 2005).

Accreditation may be applied to individual programs or to institutions as a whole for a limited period of time after which re-accreditation is required. The American Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2001) defines 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](#). Success results in an accredited institution and/or program.

Quality assurance is different from accreditation because quality assurance is a process by which an institution obtains accreditation. Although sometimes the two terms are used interchangeably, quality assurance often refers to the system of quality management in higher education. The relationship between the two varies considerably between countries, but both concentrate on similar consequences such as...

‘...the capacity to operate and to provide educational services, the capacity to award officially recognized degrees, and the right to be funded by the state. Quality assurance is often considered as a part of the quality management of higher education, while sometimes the two terms are used synonymously’ (Vlasceanu *et al.*, 2004, pp. 48–49).

Business Model of Quality and the Nature of Higher Education

The question now is: Is the business model of TQM relevant to the particular nature and essence of education? Needless to say there is no one business model of quality and variations in the meaning and concepts of quality are abound. To answer this question, it may be appropriate first to discuss the basic prerequisites that qualify a product or a service for the business model of quality. Competition in general and market competition in particular, is a prerequisite to organizations' drive to provide quality services and products (Mansour, 2008). A monopolist does not have to worry about his customers' expectations.

The importance of competition to quality production is especially relevant to marketable (private) goods as compared to pure public goods (defense) or semi public goods (healthcare and education). The business model of quality is definitely applicable to all private goods and semi-public goods and services. The latter is actually a private good in essence. To qualify as a private good, a service must possess two characteristics: rivalry in consumption and excludability in ownership and use. Rivalry in consumption means what one consumes cannot be consumed by other people and excludability means that the owner of a product or a service has full control over its use (Weimer and Vining, 75). Education as a service possesses the two characteristics and this is why it can be provided by private sectors.

However, the positive externality in consumption (i.e. the private provider will produce less education than needed by society) associated with its production by

private providers only in the market place gives us the phenomenon of the coexistence of private and public education (Sharp, Register, and Grimes, 2008). This means that education can be a business activity in theory and practice, and like all other business activities, all concepts of service quality may be applicable to it. However, this conclusion is not always acceptable to traditional views and ethical foundations of professionalism in education which warrant some discussion here because it affects modern drives to institutionalize quality in higher education. The traditional view represents sometimes implicit or tacit resistance to the introduction of quality concepts to higher education institutions.

The Traditional View of Education and Quality

Educationalists and teachers trained in the traditional idealistic culture and philosophy of education usually do not find many business quality concepts tasty and acceptable. In most cases, this traditional philosophy enhances and is enhanced by command and control management mechanisms and bureaucratic cultures. It also detaches the process of learning from chances of employment in labor markets.

Morgan and Murgatroyd (1995) have provided a list of cultural factors in traditional educational environments that militate against the introduction of business quality concepts in school and college settings. These include: "the rejection of industrial models vocabulary and an anti-management tendency; a tradition of individualistic rather than collectivist responsibility for quality; a traditional belief that performance achievement is the product of inputs; the organizational context of the school but not the classroom can be

a focus for TQM; and a tradition of management by centralized decision-making". In this paper we are going to consider the first three factors because of their particular relevance to higher education.

The rejection of industrial models and vocabulary: an anti-management tendency

The traditional view does not reject the idea of quality education as such but it defines it in the general sense of quality as excellence and ward off the technical specific meaning of quality associated with the business model. This traditional concept of quality, which represents the stem from which all other objections branch out, does not accept the introduction of quality management techniques and vocabulary like customer, fit for purpose, product and measurement to the college environment.

Deeply rooted in the paternalistic, sentimental, and idealistic nature of the student-teacher relationship, the *commercial or market* dimensions implied by quality vocabulary annoys traditional educators and therefore, they are not prepared to accept to link what they do to any market concept (Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1995-99). For example, many traditional educationalists will find it very difficult to digest W. Edwards Deming's assertion (1986) that concentrate on "the efficient production of the quality that the market expects" or his assertion that "Costs go down and productivity goes up as improvement of quality is accomplished by better management of design, engineering, testing and by improvement of processes" (Walton, 1988).

A related traditional objection is concerned with the difficulty to apply highly sophisticated statistical techniques required by many business quality models to the soft nature of data in education processes. It is true that many of the sophisticated business models that are currently fashionable in business are difficult to apply to educational processes. These include, for example, statistical Quality Control (QC), Zero Defects, Six Sigma and Taguchi's model (Ealey, 1988; Sriraman, 2008). For example, the more fashionable Six Sigma approach defines quality as the number of defects per million opportunities (DPMO). It is difficult in the case of higher education to define and apply operationally the (DPMO) concept. Notwithstanding these true objections, many other soft techniques such as quality assurance (QA), performance and benchmarking are readily adaptable to educational processes.

A tradition of individualistic rather than collectivist responsibility for quality

The traditional individualistic tradition in the environment of education emphasizes the autonomy of educators as professionals. This view is shared by many other professionals such as engineers and doctors. Under this view the quality of education defined as excellence in general, is defined by the teacher in and outside the class and cannot be determined by any internal or external "customer" (Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1995, 100). The main consequence of this belief is the discouragement of collective efforts and teamwork.

This view makes the Quality Gurus' and quality experts' central concept of customer, who determines the level of

conformance or non-conformance to quality standards and how the latter can be established and corrected, irrelevant to education (Deming, 1986; Crosby, Philip 1979). The problem with these definitions in the case of higher education is that the customers' requirements may not conform to the required academic rigor and professional standards. For example, Noriaki Kano's (1984) concept of "attractive quality" refers to what the customer would love. According to the traditional view, the customer (i.e. student) may love the wrong specification which may lead to consider even lowly bottom-of-the-range educational services as conforming to quality standards if they meet a market need.

This problem arises because the traditional view failed to distinguish between course content (syllabus) and course delivery (method of teaching). The student as a customer can have a say on how the lecture is delivered to him. This is the base now for students course/teacher evaluation. In fact, many studies find that the treatment of higher education students "as either customers or products will have a direct impact on the dynamics created within and outside a learning space" (Umemiya, 2008, 14). To establish a modern quality system in higher education facilities, professors should learn to consider the interests of their students and other stakeholders and try "to balance the expectations of students without compromising on academic rigor. Learning support should be complemented by being student-centered rather than merely task-driven (Umemiya, 2008, 14).

Finally, by enhancing individualistic professional traditions, this view encourages what may be termed *academic*

tribalism. Academic tribalism in sciences in general and social sciences in particular, refers to the tendency of each discipline to lock itself up within rigid boundaries and to practically deny any interrelationships with other disciplines. It is clear that academic tribalism is not consistent with the modern integrated multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches required to address social problems. In effect, this view rejects the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches required by quality education to satisfy businesses and governments as employers and stakeholders. Therefore curricula must be continuously updated by consulting business organizations and prevailing economic trends (Umemiya, 2008).

Traditional beliefs that performance achievement is the product of inputs

This traditional belief is actually derived from traditional bureaucratic management that holds that good performance is a function of inputs such as budgets, personnel and equipments. This view is consistent with traditional concepts of quality that see excellence as the same as 'expensive' (Tenner, 1992). Consequently, performance achievements in education result from...

certain key input factors such as pupils' intrinsic competences, or certain levels of resourcing such as the class size, the amount of money available for books etc..."(Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1995, 101).

This view quarrels with Peter Drucker's assertion, which is shared by many quality specialists, that "...Quality in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for" (Drucker, Peter 1985). The

connection between willingness to pay and the provision of quality education shocks the conscience of traditional professors because it implies that those who can't pay the tuition fees are not eligible to receive quality education.

Approaches to Quality and Professional Organizations in Higher Education

The globalized context of higher education led states and regions to try to ensure the quality of their higher education institutions and to attract many disciplines and academics to the field. There is now growing pressures on the institutions of higher education in the world to adopt quality concepts to improve their performance and to consider their customer satisfaction as a building block in providing quality education.

This quest for quality is documented in experiences of many universities around the world and attracts the attention of scholars in the academic arena (Boyle and Bowden, 1997). It is reflected in two developments, (1) the proliferation of professional literature in the last decade concerning quality assurance (QA) in higher education and (2) the establishment of professional organizations that are mainly concerned with providing the bases for establishing and monitoring quality in higher education. In this context, Ronald Barnett (1992) distinguishes two dominant and rival approaches to quality in higher education: institutional audit and quality assurance.

The Institutional Audit Approach

The institutional audit or institutional review approach, in its generic form, is “a process by which an external person or team checks that procedures are in place across

an institution to assure quality, integrity or standards of provision and outcomes” (Analytic Quality Glossary, 2009). It usually concentrates on evaluating the administrative structure of an educational facility as well as its financial, research record, and educational quality assurance processes (Kristoffersen, 2003). The UNESCO distinguishes between two functions in this audit approach: institutional audit and institutional review.

Institutional Audit/Institutional Review: An evidence-based process carried out through peer review that investigates the procedures and the mechanisms by which an institution ensures its quality assurance and quality enhancement. When it specifically addresses the final responsibility for the management of quality and standards that rest with an institution as a whole, the process is called an institutional review (Vlasceanu *et al.*, 2004, 23).

The distinction is really immaterial in practice because the process of institutional audit investigates whether the institution's processes are effective and reviews the institution at different levels. Duff explains this by arguing that...

An institutional quality audit is a review of the overall institution in respect of its quality assurance systems. The aim of a quality review or audit is to evaluate the academic structures, procedures and standards of the institution, faculty or department in order to satisfy customers of the institution, other stakeholders and the funding authorities that the educational awards of the institution are of the quality claimed (Duff *et al.*, 2000, p. 130).

The evaluation process, usually, depends on self evaluation reports and documents presented by the institution itself, however, “in theory, the higher education institutions need provide no special documentation” (Woodhouse (1999, p. 31). Basically, the institution is required to provide answers for a set of questions that include “how does an institution know that the standards and objectives it has set for itself are being met? On what evidence is the assessment of the quality of its work based, and are there procedures in place to ensure that the significant processes are followed up and continuously improved? (Campbell and Rozsnayai, 2002, p 31).

While the evaluation usually emphasizes the level of stakeholders’ satisfaction with the performance of the institution as a whole, it may also consider sometimes potential reviews at sub-institutional levels (Duff *et al.* 2000). This approach, though very important to modern quality assessments, will be acceptable to the traditional view of education because it does not interfere with the delivery of the educational service in the classroom and the autonomy of the professor.

Many quality assurance professional organizations in higher education, especially in the British tradition, adopted this approach to assess quality in higher organizations. These include, for example, International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the European Association for Quality Assurance for Higher Education (EAQA) (HEQAPAPR, 2009) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in Britain. The latter is established in 1997 and affiliated to ENQA. QAA adopts an *institutional audit*

approach to provide an integrated quality assurance service for United Kingdom higher education (University of Manchester, 2009).

In the developing world, the Southeast Asian countries established, under the auspices of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ASEAN University Network as one of the most successful arrangements that employ the institutional approach to oversee quality in *higher education* institutions (Umemiya, Naoki, 2008). Unfortunately, there are no similar well-established regional arrangements in the Arab World. At the collective level in the Gulf States, there were several attempts made through the Arab Gulf Education Office (Al-Dossari, 2005).

Quality Assurance Approach

The quality assurance approach in higher education in its generic form consists of a “process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to threshold of minimum requirements” (Analytic Glossary, 2009). The approach looks at higher education as a systematic production process that uses inputs to produce outputs or products i.e. students (Barnett 1992; Melia, 1994; Szanto, 2003; Tempus, 2001). Whereas the institutional audit approach concentrates mainly on the institution as a whole, the quality assurance approach deals with specific academic programs and seeks to apply many business quality concepts to academic programs such as: performance indicators, fitness for purpose, value added, peer review, total quality management, benchmarking and academic audit.

In this approach, the quality of the system is understood in terms of its “performance” as reflected in performance indicators. Effectiveness of the system is evaluated in terms of its ability to produce outputs that satisfy its stakeholders (Barnett, 1992). Therefore, it is concerned with the “student experience, skills in the curriculum, transferable skills, competence, critical thinking, and the idea of the reflective practitioner”, and “continuing improvement of the quality of higher education” (Barnett, 1992).

In QA, the services and operations of an educational institution or program are evaluated by an external agency to determine if applicable standards are met. In case of meeting the standards, the agency grants accredited status to the concerned institution. However, many writers think that while many developments have occurred in approaches to QA in higher education, QA is conducted in many institutions in ‘piecemeal, non-systemic’ manner (Boyle and Bowden, 1997).

In the United States of America, where, higher education quality assurance process is performed by private associations, the business model of quality is dominant. Currently, the majority of these organizations work under the umbrella of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Established in 1996 and based in Washington DC, CHEA houses approximately 3,000 academic institutions as members (CHEA at a Glance, 2006).

Usually, both approaches of institutional audit and QA are used in a complementary way in accrediting institutions. Whereas the quality assurance approach seeks to

establish stakeholders’ confidence that the outcomes of academic programs satisfy their expectations or minimum requirements, the institutional audit focuses on reviewing the suitability of procedures or standards for quality assurance and the level of integrity in provision of learning. The distinction between these two approaches in practice is blurred because professional organizations of quality assurance in higher education may employ the two approaches simultaneously. Analytic Glossary (2009), explains this issue by arguing that quality assurance ...

...is formally restricted to establishing whether the explicit or implicit pledge made by an institution or programme has been met. However, the mechanisms for quality assurance, both internal and external to an institution or programme, are so diverse that they overlap with mechanisms and rationales for reviewing and checking quality. Hence, it is often difficult to be precise about the dividing line between assuring, evaluating, assessing or auditing quality...

However, the distinction between the two approaches is important to this paper because it distinguishes quality assurance of academic programs from other non-academic programs.

Section 2: The Drive towards Quality in the UAE Higher Education

The Drive towards Quality at the National Level

The drive towards quality in UAE University and other higher education facilities in UAE is part of the whole

country's drive towards quality in private as well as public sectors. At the Emirates' level, both Abu Dhabi and Dubai have launched substantial efforts to institute quality in both public and private sectors. These efforts are reflected in two of the most successful Arab World quality prizes: Sheikh Khalifa Excellence Award and Dubai Quality Award (Mansour, 2008). Abu Dhabi has even established Khalifa Award for Education (Khalifa Award for Education, 2008).

In many developing countries in the world, the function of educational accreditation is conducted by a government organization, such as a ministry of education, in collaboration with an international body. However, in 2002 Van Damme, described and analyzed four modes of development of international quality assurance in higher education. These include: "(1) strengthening national capacities for quality assurance and accreditation; (2) promoting cross-border quality assurance and mutual quality assurance and accreditation; (3) developing meta-accreditation on an international and global level; and (4) establishing international quality assurance and accreditation schemes" (Van Damme, 2002).

The UAE actually utilizes the four models. Since 1980 it has participated in regional efforts through the Arab Education Office of the Gulf Countries to establish a regional accrediting organization (Al-Dossari, 2005). Moreover, the Gulf States, and especially UAE and Qatar, seek quality accreditation for their universities from international American and British professional institutions. There are now more collaborative efforts in UAE among *quality* assurance agencies and *higher*

education institutions for *quality* assurance at the international and regional levels as 'globalization' of *higher education* accelerates. It has also considerable efforts to establish and strengthen national capacities for quality assurance and accreditation.

Organizational Setup of Higher Education Quality in UAE

The federal nature of the political and constitutional system of UAE has greatly affected not only the organizational set up of higher education quality but also the diversity of standards and the quality of systems used. The constitution of UAE, which is issued in July 1971, provides for two formal layers of government: federal and local (*Emirate*). Therefore, the organizational arrangements of quality in higher education are influenced by these constitutional arrangements and found at federal, emirate levels.

Higher Education Quality at the Federal and Emirates Levels

Under Articles 120 and 121 of the UAE Constitution, education, in general, is a federal government responsibility shouldered by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR). There are now three federal higher institutions in UAE: UAE University, Zayed University and Higher Institutes of Technology, as well as 32 private universities located in different emirates (Araa, 2006, 48).

The Gulf States' efforts at the regional level have encouraged many attempts to institutionalize quality assurance in higher education in the Gulf countries. Accordingly, some GCC countries, Oman, Saudi Arabia and UAE, have established a

commission for Academic Accreditation (Al- Dossari, 2006). MOHESR established a Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) as a federal body to oversee quality assurance in federal government higher education and private universities and colleges. All private higher education institutions in all emirates, except those located in the Knowledge Village in Dubai, must be licensed and have their programs accredited by the federal Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA).

The accreditation standards used by CAA are adapted from quality assurance standards used by regional accreditation agencies in the United States of America. The standards consist of clear purposes, institutional governance and effectiveness, policies of admission and faculty recruitment, educational programs, educational support facilities, and administrative functions (CAA, 2005, 2007). These standards employ both approaches of quality: institutional audit and quality assurance.

At the local level, both Dubai and Abu Dhabi have shown considerable attention to the quality of education in general and higher education in particular. Abu Dhabi approach to quality is comprehensive and addresses the issue at all levels of education with close cooperation with MOHESR. In September 2005, Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) was established as an independent corporate body by the Abu Dhabi Executive Council. ADEC has the authority to oversee educational initiatives and growth within Abu Dhabi Emirate (ADEC, 2009).

Dubai adopted similar arrangements and established the Knowledge and Human

Development Authority Dubai (KHDA) as free zones to play a role similar to that of ADEC in Abu Dhabi. KHDA is entrusted with licensing all educational institutions at all levels and types in Dubai with a mission based on improved quality, access, reliability, and transparency (DUBAI City, 2008). At higher education level, in 2008, KHDA established the University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB) as an expert body to evaluate and license universities operating in the education free zones in Dubai like Academic City (DIAC) and Knowledge Village (KV) (AME Info, 2007).

Although some courses offered by institutions operating in the Knowledge Village in Dubai are accredited by the CAA, some foreign universities housed by the Knowledge Village (KV) are exempted from the federal CAA licensing and accreditation requirements. However, the UAE federal government demands that the concerned university is accredited and recognized by official authorities in their home country and perform at the same levels as the home institution. However, many of these universities seek CAA accreditation because it enables their graduates to apply for federal jobs and scholarships and allow them to operate outside Dubai free zone (Dubai Business Minds, 2009).

The Experience of Quality in UAE University

The UAE University: An Overview

The United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) was founded in 1976 in Al-Ain city and officially opened for students in the academic year 1977/1978. It is the first higher education institution in the country.

It is now one of three federal higher education institutions that include also the Higher Colleges of Technology and Zayed University. The UAEU started with four colleges and currently consists of nine colleges: Humanities and Social Sciences, Science, Education, Business and Economics, Shariah and Law, Food Systems, Engineering, Information Technology and Medicine and Health Sciences. These colleges offer more than 70 undergraduate bachelor degrees and a number of graduate programs (UAEU Yearbook, 2006, 227).

The annual growth rate of higher education students in UAE is 22, 5 percent in the period 1990-2000, the highest among the GCC countries (Al-Dossari, 2005). This high rate reflects the high demand for higher education from both citizens and residents that led later to the establishment of many private colleges and universities. However, the UAE University remains the most comprehensive of them all in term of size, scope and specializations offered.

The number of students at UAE University increased from 502 in 1977/1978 to more than 16,000 students in 2008. Around ninety five percent of those are Emiratis and the rest came from other GCC, Arab and Islamic states (UAEU Homepage, 2008). The experience of UAE University in quality education can be sorted out in two main and interrelated phases. The first phase witnessed the prevalence of the traditional view and the second phase represents the University's search for quality. This categorization does not mean that the two phases are separated by clear borders because the second phase is still not complete and the legacy of the first phase is still lingering on.

The First Phase: The Prevalence of the Traditional View

This phase starts in 1977 and ends around 1998. The major characteristic of this phase is the lack of competition in the area of higher education in UAE. The UAE University was then the only university in the country and this gave it a monopoly status in providing the service of higher education to the citizens of UAE. It is needless to say that as a monopolist the UAE University did not have to worry about "quality" in the modern technical sense because its customers had no choice in demanding higher education services. Therefore, it supplied society with services less in quantities than society demanded and less in quality than society expected.

The UAE University as the sole provider of higher education did not have to worry about attracting students to its campus. Students, employers and families as customers and stakeholders had no choice but to accept and consume what it delivered. Jobs were available for its graduates in the labor market. With rising demand, the question of quality from the perspectives of the students and other stakeholders was immaterial. Hence, there was persistent complaint that the output of higher education was not compatible with the labor market requirements in the light of the dependence of UAE on expatriate labor (Al-Dossari, 2005).

This monopolistic culture of the University was enhanced by central, bureaucratic top-down administrative approaches and values that guided University management. Quality in this phase coincides with the traditional concept of excellence within an educational culture that resembles the traditional view of education closely. This

situation was evident in two areas: the lack of customer focus and lack of institutionalized quality assurance and evaluation.

Lack of customer focus

The relationship between the University's external customers-business and society who received its end product, was weak and not institutionalized. This was evidenced by the weak representation of those customers in the university bodies to facilitate the incorporation of their requirements in planning and implementing the curricula and designing educational programs (Al-Dossari, 2005). In fact, at that time the modern ideas and concepts of quality, especially the customer focus, had not arrived at educational institutions in Arab countries. It was then considered as something relevant to the industrial private sector only because of the dominance of the traditional view of education.

The bureaucratic culture also influenced not only administrative matters but also the curricula content and methods of delivering it in the classroom. This environment also encouraged "academic tribalism" by allowing only very limited interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. Academic tribalism was evident in the numbers of credit hours allocated to majors which ranged between 50 and 60 credit hours. Consequently, critics of this phase referred especially to the failure of higher education to provide skills required by the market such as business skills, communication abilities, command of English, usage of IT and problem solving approaches (Al-Dossari, 2005). The curricula was not designed to address these issues directly and focused on...

memorization, passive instruction, lecturing, and theorizing without giving consideration to developing the students' capabilities of critical thinking, problem solving, self learning and the application of teaching to practical life (Al-Dossari, 2005, 123)...

This traditional trend is not compatible with the modern belief that "*quality service in higher education* should aim at offering experiences that promote dialogue, inquiry and reflection *in the long term*" (Umemiya, 2008).

Lack of institutionalized quality assurance and evaluation

Quality assurance is a systematic process that requires measuring academic or administrative performance against predetermined goals and outcomes that reflect customers' requirements. In the first phase, there was no such system of quality assurance or performance evaluation beyond the bureaucratic supervision of the educational process despite the fact that since 1980 there have been several attempts at the GCC regional level to institutionalize academic accreditation among higher education institutions in the region through the Arab Education Office of the Gulf Countries.

Throughout this phase, like other universities in the Gulf, the UAEU had not encountered any internal or external pressures to subject its programs, plans and performance to any quality evaluation (Al-Dossari, 2005). Bureaucratic quality control concentrates on rule application and close surveillance and inspection which was wasteful and expensive (Tenner, 1992). Because it concentrates on punishment, bureaucratic quality control prevents innovation and keeps performance within

safe bureaucratic rule ceilings. Despite these pitfalls, the first phase succeeded to provide the country with local administrative and professional personnel in different sectors of the public service.

The Second Phase: Quality and World Standards

In the second phase, the whole old environment of higher education in UAE has undergone tremendous and profound changes. New universities and higher education facilities of every type, nationality and brand have emerged. Some of these have come to UAE accompanied by their international reputation and academic credibility. These include more than 32 officially recognized private colleges and universities housing in 2005, about 57% of the total higher education student population (Al-Dossari, 2005).

This new environment created a competitive market milieu that led UAE University to lose great portion of its previous intake from the Emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah. Although UAE University and other federal institutions provided higher education for free they have faced fierce competition from private universities (Arra, 2006). Coupled with the national drive for quality, the new competitive environment encouraged the move to adopt quality concepts in UAE University and other universities. Earlier this year, Zayed University gained accreditation from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

From traditional learning to planned quality

The point of departure from the first phase is marked by the University strategic quality planning in 1997. Until now the

University has produced two strategic plans: the 1998- 2008 and the 2008-2012 plans. The visions and missions of the two plans vow to “ensure the quality of all programs and services through international accreditation and external quality assurance reviews” (UAEU Strategic Plan, 2008). In both plans, the UAE University has adopted a comprehensive approach to quality that combines institutional audit and academic program quality assurance that “is committed to excellence in undergraduate and graduate education, research and service to the nation and beyond” (UAEU Strategic Plan, 2008).

Quality, in its specific technical meaning, has become conceptually integrated in the comprehensive strategic planning processes of the University. The new focus shifts from bureaucratic rule application to customers or stakeholders’ requirements and satisfaction. The first comprehensive strategic plan, which was completed in 1997 and covered the period 1998-2008, laid down the foundation for quality culture by introducing new concepts such as international benchmarking, innovative teaching and the use of technology, community service, research emphasis and academic excellence (UAEU Strategic Plan 1998-2008).

These concepts continued in the second 2008-2012 Strategic Plan which was designed to define the fundamental direction and priorities of the UAE University for the next five years. The second plan commits the University to eight essential goals for the next five years. These include student centrality, academic quality, community outreach and service, research productivity, resource diversification,

faculty and staff quality, identity clarification and performance excellence.

The centrality of the student as an end product

The process of strategic planning places the student and his interests at the center of all University activities. Other strategic goals are treated as means to realize the centrality of the student. The second strategy approaches the issue of student centrality in a specific manner that presented specific practical activities to be performed and required operational measures to evaluate progress in their performance. Students are now represented in college councils and required to evaluate the performance of instructors in the class as well as the content of courses they deliver.

One important criticism here is that no institutional mechanism was suggested to channel the students' interests. It seems that the students' interest is predominantly defined by the University top management and professionals whose perceptions of student needs may not reflect students' actual needs exactly. For example, many studies and also field experiences of instructors show that the students are motivated less by academic interests than by employment prospects (Voss, Gruberand & Szmigin, 2007).

Implementation of Quality in UAE University

There is no sufficient space in this paper to provide a complete and a comprehensive record of the quality endeavor in the UAE University. Therefore, our evaluation of implementation will concentrate on the major aspects of implementation which

include the leadership commitment, quality assurance and benchmarking.

The UAEU top leadership commitment to quality

All models and gurus of quality, whether in private or public organizations, emphasize the centrality of top leadership commitment to quality to the establishment of quality systems (Tenner, 1992). The top leadership of UAEU has shown considerable resolve to find a place for UAEU among the top universities in the world. The United Arab Emirates University leadership "aims for top of the table" (The National, 2008).

The University Chancellor, HH Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, was "very clear" that he wanted UAEU to secure US accreditation and to secure a place among the top universities in the world. Dr Rory Hume, the new provost of UAE University (UAEU) has pledged to make it one of the top 100 institutions in the world and the best of its kind in the Middle East (The National, 2008). This leadership commitment helped to nourish quality values and encourage quality culture in the university.

Quality assurance and accreditation of academic programs

One of the most important tools established by the University, to realize the quality objectives of strategic planning, is the Institutional Effectiveness and Planning Support Unit (IEPSU). The IEPSU reflects the UAEU comprehensive approach to quality because it is responsible for enhancing performance excellence not only in academic programs but also administrative ones. For this purpose, it has

established a quality assurance process that is designed to assist the university stakeholders in their multiple assessment activities with regard to program and service quality, planning and student learning outcomes (IEPSU, 2009).

The Unit adopts a continuous quality improvement approach and takes care of all quality-related activities in the University. These activities range from institutional research, planning support to quality assurance at all University levels. University customers or stakeholders are brought into focus by concentrating on key customers' interests: student learning outcomes, student- and stakeholder-focused outcomes, budgetary, financial and market outcomes, workforce-focused outcomes and process effectiveness outcomes (IEPSU, 2009). However, this quality assurance processes and activities are waiting to be fully realized. The IEPSU has not succeeded so far to forge strong ties with external stakeholders but there are active efforts in this direction. External stakeholders are not represented so far, for example, in college councils or other planning bodies in the University. Whatever links exist now with external stakeholders are *ad hoc* and lack proper institutionalization.

Despite these remarks, the IEPSU succeeded to assist many academic programs and academic-related services to obtain accreditation from internationally recognized professional organization. The IEPSU also assisted many programs to obtain accreditation by helping them conducting their self-study for accreditation and re-accreditation purposes. It also helps in coordinating the University efforts for the purpose of institutional accreditation.

The outcome of IEPSU efforts in quality assurance is that many academic professional, non-professional programs and services have been successfully accredited by recognized international American and British professional organizations. Almost all academic programs in the College of Education were accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) which was founded in 1954 to accredit teacher certification programs at U.S. colleges and universities and is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as an accrediting institution (IEPSU, 2009).

Moreover, all the programs of the College of Business and Economics were accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) which was founded in 1916 to accredit schools of business worldwide; and finally, all programs in the College of Information Technology and College of Engineering were accredited by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) which is the recognized U.S. accreditor of college and university programs in applied sciences, computing, engineering, and technology and has been recognized by the USA Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) since 1997 (IEPSU, 2009). Moreover, non-professional academic programs are subjected to periodic assessment by international experts to ensure conformity with international standards (UAE Yearbook, 2006).

With regard to services and academic programs that have no international accrediting organizations, the IEPSU developed a university quality model. The

model is based on a continuous improvement cycle similar to Deming Cycle. It is meant to guarantee successful implementation of planned activities. The cycle starts by requiring each unit to develop and define key performance indicators (KPI) that reflect the unit objectives in the light of the University Strategic Plan. Each KPI should provide specific processes for executing related activities and measures. The planned program activities developed in the planning process are measured against the KPIs after being implemented and executed. The progress of each unit is continuously monitored to provide feedback information to be used in revising the plans and policies, thus leading to yearly improvement in key measures and key performance indicators (IEPSU, 2009).

One of the academic-oriented services that were accredited is the Central Laboratories Unit (CLU). Committed to its policy to provide quality service to meet its customers' expectations, CLU was accredited by the International Standard ISO/IEC 17025:2005 (general requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories) by United Kingdom Accreditation Service. This accreditation attests to the technical competence of the CLU and the quality of its management system. At the local level, the CLU is also accredited by the Abu Dhabi Environment Agency (CLU, 2009).

Benchmarking and program design

Benchmarking is the search for the best practices among superior competitors or non-competitors that cause their excellent performance. With regard to academic programs, it requires identifying other high performance programs and tries to

incorporate their best practices into the local program. Such benchmarking is a very specific form of environmental scanning. Thus, the idea is to improve program quality by analyzing and incorporating the methods, procedures and work styles of the leaders in the field.

Benchmarking is a central pillar in the UAE University's drive towards achieving quality education. All programs and services are required to benchmark their performance and programs against internationally recognized higher education institutions. This requirement includes academic as well administrative services. Academic programs should seek benchmarking against the best in the field. The outcomes of academic programs' benchmarking efforts are seen in faculty recruitment policies, curricula design and modern methods of teachings. The latter increasingly integrates modern IT and internet technologies to the classroom. The new curricula design attacks academic tribalism by emphasizing interdisciplinary approaches in teaching and by reducing the required credit hours for majors from 60 to 36 credit hours following practices in internationally recognized universities.

Conclusion

The paper has discussed quality assurance in UAE higher education in two sections. The first section establishes the conceptual foundation by defining quality in higher education, the nature of education as a service qualified for the introduction of quality concepts and the resistance to quality associated with traditional views of education. The paper also discusses in this section, the main approaches to quality in higher education institutions: the institutional

audit and quality assurance and reviews briefly the orientation of both approaches.

In the second section, the paper relates the UAE University drive towards quality to the national context which has witnessed increased commitment to quality in all sectors of the economy. The shift from traditional approaches to quality education in UAE University was marked by the adoption of comprehensive strategic planning emphasizing the centrality of the student as both an end product and a customer. However, the University needs to institutionalize this centrality by creating permanent channels to help students voice their requirements, needs and expectations.

The implementation of quality in the University is strengthened and supported by top management which provided committed leadership to transform the University into a high quality university that will occupy a top rank among world class universities. To that end, the university adopts a comprehensive approach to quality that espouses institutional audit and quality assurance approaches. It employs many techniques such as benchmarking and performance indicators. Both the tools introduced substantial changes in academic and administrative processes. The University efforts succeeded to secure international accreditation for its business, education and engineering programs as well as to other academically oriented services.

Reference

- ADEC, Abu Dhabi Education Council “What is ADEC” at <http://www.adec.ac.ae/en/about-us-en/what-is-adec.html>, 10/12/2008.
- Al-Dossari, I. (2005) “Higher Education in the GCC States: Current Conditions, Problems and Solutions”, in *Gulf Year Book*, Dubai, Gulf Research Centre.
- AME Info (2009) “Giant step towards assuring quality in higher education” at , <http://www.ameinfo.com/174077.html>, 10/12/2008, 4:45 pm.
- Analytic Quality Glossary (2009) <http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/externalinaudit.htm>.
- Araa, Gulf Research Centre, no. 20, August 2006, 48-50.
- Barnett, R. (1992) *Improving Higher Education: Total Quality Care*, Open University Press, Buckingham Bristol.
- Boyle, Patrick and Bowden, John A. (1997) “Educational Quality Assurance in Universities: an Enhanced Model”, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 22 (2), 111- 121.
- Campbell, C. & Rozsnyai, C. (2002) “Quality Assurance and the Development of Course Programmes” *Papers on Higher Education Regional University Network on Governance and Management of Higher Education in South East Europe*, Bucharest: UNESCO
- CHEA At a Glance (1998) “Recognition of Accreditation Organizations: A Comparison of Policy & Practice of Voluntary Accreditation and The United States Department of Education” at http://www.chea.org/pdf/RecognitionWellman_Jan1998.pdf.
- CHEA, January (1998) “ Council for Higher Accreditation” at http://www.chea.org/pdf/chea_glance_2006.pdf
- CLU, UAEU, “Central Laboratories Unit” (2009), at http://www.uaeu.ac.ae/clu/quality_assurance.shtml/.
- Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) “Standards for Licensure and Accreditation 2005, 2007” at <http://www.caa.ae/caaweb/images/standards2007.pdf>.
- Council on Higher Education, Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) (2004), “Criteria for Institutional Audits” at <http://quality.up.ac.za/docs/index.html>.
- Crosby, P (1979). *Quality is Free*, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Deming, Edwards, W. (1986) *Out of the Crisis*, Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Engineering Study, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- DUBAICity (2008) “Dubai sets a new gold standard for higher education” at <http://www.dubaicity.com/news/Dubai-sets-a-new-gold-standard-for-higher-education-17-03-08.htm>.
- Duff, T., Hegarty, J. and Hussey, M. (2000) *Academic Quality Assurance in Irish Higher Education: Elements of a Handbook*, Blackhall, Dublin.
- Drucker, Peter (1985). *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, Harper & Row, New York.

Ealey, Lance A. (1988) *Quality by Design: Taguchi Methods and U.S. Industry*, Irwin Professional Publishing, New York.

Fraser, M., 1994, "Quality in higher education: an international perspective" in Green, D. (ed.), *What is Quality in Higher Education?*, Open University press and Society for Research into Higher Education, Buckingham, 101–111.

Higher Education Quality Assurance Principles for the Asia Pacific Region (HEQAPAPR) at <http://www.brisbanecommunique.deewr.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/F7C48BD9-DA8D-4CFD-8C6A-914E001E2E39/23073/FinalQAPrinciples.pdf>, 2009.

IEPSU (2009), "The Institutional Effectiveness and Planning Support Unit" <http://www.uaeu.ac.ae/irpsu/docs/Functions.shtml>.

Kano, Noriaki (1984). "Attractive Quality and Must-be Quality", *The Journal of the Japanese Society for Quality Control*, 39-48.

Khalifa Award for Education at http://www.khaward.ae/2008_2009/8_index_en.html.

Kisuniene, G.(2004) "Quality Assurance: Priority of the Education Reform" at <http://www.phare.lt/previous/97/EN/en04a.htm>.

Kock, Alice, FutureGov, "Dubai to Assure Quality in Higher Education" at <http://www.futuregov.net/articles/2008/nov/07/dubai-assure-quality-higher-education>.

Kristoffersen, D. (2003) "Denmark" in *Educational Evaluation around the*

World: An International Anthology, the Danish Evaluation Institute, Copenhagen.

Mansour, A. M. (2008) "Quality, Competition and Public Sector Performance: A Theoretical Perspective", *Proceedings of the 2nd Annual Congress Middle East on Creating Architecture of Quality and Excellence*, Dubai, 6-9 April.

Melia, T. (1994) "Inspecting Quality in the Classroom: An HMI Perspective" in Green, D. (ed.), *What is Quality in Higher Education?*, Open University Press and Society for Research into Higher Education, Buckingham, 38–45.

Morgan, C. and Murgatroyd S. (1995) *Total Quality Management in the Public Sector*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

Sharp, A. M, Register, Charles A, & Grimes, P.W. (2008) *Economics of Social Issues*, McGraw-Hill, Boston.

Sriraman, V, A. (2008) "Primer on the Taguchi System of Quality Engineering" at <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JOTS/Summer-Fall-1996/PDF/9-2-Sriraman-article.pdf>.

Tempus, (2001) "Glossary of the terms related to quality assurance Development of Quality Assurance System in Higher Education" (*QUASYS*), Tempus Joint European Project, UM JEP-16015-2001 at <http://www.unizg.hr/tempusprojects/glossary.htm>.

Tenner, A. R. (1992) *Total Quality Management: Three Steps to Continuous Improvement*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Massachusetts.

The National “UAEU Aims for the Top” at <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20080922/NATIONAL/113738061/1010>.

Szanto, T.R., (2003) “Hungary – Higher Education’ in Educational Evaluation around the World: An International Anthology”, The Danish Evaluation Institute, Copenhagen, also at <http://www.eva.dk/>.

UAE University Yearbook, (2006), Abu Dhabi.

UAE University (2009) “the 2008-2012 United Arab Emirates University Strategic Plan”, at http://www.uaeu.ac.ae/about/pdf/2008_2012_strategic_plan.pdf, 25/1/2005, 1:50 pm.

Umemiya, Naoki, (2008), “Regional Quality Assurance Activity in Higher Education in Southeast Asia: Its Characteristics and Driving Forces”, *Quality in Higher Education*, Nov2008, 14 (3) 277-290.

University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST), (2001), “Annex 1: Glossary UM/DG/005” at http://www2.umist.ac.uk/staff/talsc/TaLSC/quality/dg005%20_glossary.pdf, posted 30/08/01.

Van Damme, Dirk (2002) “Trends and Models in International Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Relation to Trade in Education”, *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 14 (3) 93-136.

Vlasceanu, L., Grünberg, L., and Parlea, D. (2004), “Quality Assurance and Accreditation: A Glossary of Basic Terms and Definitions”, at <http://www.cepes.ro/publications/Default.htm>.

Voss, Roediger, Thorsten Gruberand & Isabelle Szmigin (2007) “Service Quality

in Higher Education: The Role of Student Expectations”, *Journal of Business Research*, 949-959.

Walton, Mary (1988) *The Deming Management Method*, Perigee.

Weimer, D., and Vining A. (1999) *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*. Prentice Hall, New Jersey.

Woodhouse, D. (1999) “Quality and Quality Assurance’ in Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)” Quality and Internationalisation in Higher Education, Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE)”, OECD, Paris, 29–44.