Quality in Higher Education: United Arab Emirates Perspective

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Abstract

Quality in higher education is the major concern among researchers. Managing quality in higher education in a multicultural population with different approaches is not only challenging but an uphill task. This paper will focus on quality concern in higher education keeping in view, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) perspectives. A model to maintain the quality in higher education and current higher education quality practices in UAE will be explored along with its challenges.

Keywords: quality, higher education, UAE perspective

1. Introduction

The term "quality" is a Latin word and it means "What Kind of". Quality is a relative term meaning different things to different people. Some researchers believe that "quality is fitness for use or purpose" and other believe that "conformance to standard", but in general it should satisfy customers needs, and continuously keeps on performing it's functions as required by customers as per agreed upon standards (Murad & Rajesh, 2010). The term Total Quality Management (TQM) is a management philosophy, which puts systems and processes in place to meet and exceed the expectations of customers (Rana, 2009). Managing the quality in Higher Education (HE) is very important and challenging and it is not like Industrial products that, once they are finish, take them or leave them; like them or dislike them; accept them or reject them. Higher education is not a product in industraial sense rather it is a "service". Graduates here are not a finish product but unfortunately understood as a finish product. Higher education is a service-oriented and goal-oriented and no doubt seen relatively from different cultural point of views (Becket & Brookes, 2008) (Pour & Yeshodhara, 2009).

Higher education is meant relatively different for different stakeholders, for example, internal and external stakeholders (Becket & Brookes, 2008) (Rana, 2009). These stakeholders in past were concerned about the nature of programs and other factors, such as, fees and location of the higher educational institutions. The current concern of the stakeholders is on changes in the programs and curricula (Rana, 2009) and also they are looking for facility, faculty and locality. By the facility here we mean both physical facility and non-physical facility. Physical facility means state-of-the-art buildings, quality labs, quality equipments and other physical quality services, whereas non-physical facility means locally and/or internationally recognized accreditation of the programs, curriculum and other non-physical services. By the faculty here we mean wide-range of qualified, diverse, multi-talented, multi-cultural faculties. By the locality here we mean location of the higher educational institute, which should answer questions, such as, is this institute facilitating nearby populations? Or is this institute easily reachable? And so on.

This paper is written keeping in view of the quality in higher education in United Arab Emirates (UAE) perspectives. This paper will discuss the issues of managing quality in higher education in its second section; and will explore current practices in UAE perspectives in its third section; the quality challenges in higher education in UAE perspectives will be explored in the fourth section and the final section will discuss and conclude this paper.

2. Managing Quality in Higher Education

Higher education is an important factor not only in overall development of the economy of a country, but also, in the development of expertise, excellence, knowledge and skills of their people. All over the world higher education is playing an important role by introducing sound quality strategies to achieve both of the above

mentioned goals. Higher education is a kind of system, which produces future leaders of the countries by properly managing its Institutions. In the past – researchers meant that quality in higher education can be (and is) understood and considered in a number of different ways and there is no worldwide agreement on how to deal with quality in higher education. A variety of quality management models have been introduced in different higher education Institutions, in all of these models all researchers are agreed that managing quality in higher education is a challenging task and, there are two main reasons for that. Firstly – quality has different meaning for different people in different cultures as a result of which it is not only difficult in defining the quality, but measuring and managing quality is rather more difficult. Secondly – it is more difficult because of complicated nature of the educational product.

Educational system is a collection of several interdependent sub-systems that interact with each other to accomplish the goals of the systems. This system, as a whole, like other systems also comprises of- Input → Process → Output (Arjomandi *et al.*, 2009) (Chua, 2004). By the input we mean human (prospect students), physical resources and non-physical resources (entry requirement for students, selection process etc.) including financial resources. By the process we mean teaching – according to quality norms; learning – according to defined learning outcomes, which may be different in different cultures; research – according to capabilities of the higher education institutes; administration – according to the culture; and knowledge transformation – again according to quality norms, capability of the institution and culture. No doubt, here teaching is at the Centre of all these systems and all institutes and cultures are on agreement with it. Finally by the output we mean tangible and intangible and/or some value added output, for example, examination results, employment, earning and satisfaction etc. All researchers are again agreed here that there is no product produced at the end as an output as it is produced in other Industrial processes. Researchers also argue that quality in higher education is divided into five possible dimensions as bellow (Becket & Brookes, 2008) (Murad & Rajesh, 2010):

- Quality as exceptional (e.g. higher standards)

- Quality as consistency (e.g. zero defects)

- Quality as fitness for purpose (e.g. fitting customer specifications)

- Quality as value for money (e.g. efficiency and effectiveness), and

- Quality as transformative (e.g. ongoing process to take action and enhancement of customer satisfaction, which include empowerment)

According to researchers quality management in higher education can be dealt in several ways; such as through traditional way; problem-solving way; and by using total quality management way. In TQM model trainees can be treated as teachers (faculty members). These faculty members can further be treated as operational and middle level administrators. On the other hand the Dean and/or President and/or Vice Chancellors and/or Rectors can be treated as top level administrators. The role of faculty members (teachers) is to educate the customers as facilitators; the middle level faculty members are the administrators, for example, Chairpersons and/or Head of Department are supposed to formalized plans for facilitators; the top level management on the other hand is supposed to produce long term planning (Rana, 2009).

Other researchers believe that human resource plays an important role in quality management, especially in higher education. Quality control mechanism, education policy makers, top level administrators, middle level administrators and operational level administrators (teachers) also play an important role in managing quality in higher education (Afzal *et al.*, 2010). According to (Jabbarifar T., 2009) culture also plays an important role in managing quality in higher education as faculty members are willing to contribute to their best, but there are some unavoidable circumstances that prevent them to do so.

3. Current Practices in UAE

United Arab Emirates (UAE) came into existence in 1971 as a result of the unification of seven self-governing sheikh-ruled emirates: Abu Dhabi; Ajman; Dubai; Fujairah; Ras al-Khaimah; Sharjah; and Umm Al-Qaiwain. This Middle Eastern country is situated in south east of the Arabian Peninsula in Southwest Asia on the Persian Gulf. Although 90% of UAE is desert land, it is an oil rich country. Peoples from different nationalities e.g. Indian, Pakistanis, Arabs, Chinese, Bangladeshis, and European etc. are living in United Arab Emirates along with Emirates (Soomro and Asfandyar, 2010). Improving and maintaining quality in Higher Education is the main focus of all private and Government Universities in UAE. In UAE there are basically two types of accredited Universities, one accredited by Ministry of Higher Education & Scientific Research, under the umbrella of Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA – www.caa.ae) and other types of Universities are actually foreign Universities (accredited in their own countries) located in free zoon areas of Dubai Emirate,

under the umbrella of Knowledge & Human Development Authority (KHDA – www.khda.gov.ae).

Universities under KHDA's supervision are called free-zone Universities, which are branch campuses of the International Universities; their academic systems are the same as their main campuses (e.g. American; British; Indian & Pakistani etc.) in their own countries. The KHDA is providing academic authorization and supporting quality assurance to all those free zone Universities. The KHDA has established the University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB), which is a full member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) to assure the quality of these branch campuses Universities in free zone. UQAIB's role is to use a validation model to make sure that academic programs delivered in these free-zone Universities (in Dubai) are the same accredited programs that are taught at their own countries (KHDA, 2012). CAA, on the other hand, is established to promote educational excellence across and among higher educational institutes in UAE. It is a Federal Government Level quality assurance agency. Its goal includes ensuring quality and academic standards; diversifying services; ensuring an effective operation; and international profile (CAA, 2012). It is the only agency in UAE, which provide licensure to higher education Institutes. In Abu Dhabi Emirate, there is additional agency, other than CAA, called Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC – www.adec.ac.ae). The role of ADEC is to raise the quality of education (including higher education), in Abu Dhabi Emirate, to the highest international level of standards. ADEC oversees, regulates and drives development initiatives in all education sectors, including higher education (ADEC, 2012). All these agencies mentioned above are only to facilitate higher education Institutions and ensure that all Institutes in UAE follow the higher education stated standards in terms of quality.

Higher education Institutes in UAE are exercising mainly three functions, namely "teaching"; "research"; and "community services" and the role of above mentioned agencies is to monitor these Institute's performances in these three types of functions. Teaching here is the core of all types of education and serving to transfer knowledge and skills from teacher to students. Research here is to explore new knowledge and skills in respective fields of the faculty members and community service here implies using the respective expertise to develop applications of newly acquired knowledge and using their respective expertise to help, guide and interact with the society to address the societies untouched issues (Murad & Rajesh, 2010). Teaching and research here serve society indirectly whereas community service serves society directly and the main focus of all higher educational Institutes is to do all these in accordance with the qualities as agreed upon.

4. Quality Challenges in Higher Education

Higher education Institutes, especially in developing countries are struggling to meet growing challenges of quality assurance. According to the UNESCO's World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE), which was held in 2009 in Paris, there are eight new challenges in higher education and they are as following (Commonwealth of Learning, 2011):

• Rising demand and mystification

• Diversification of providers and methods

• Private provisions

• Distance education

• Cross-border higher education

• Quality assurance

• Teacher education

• Academic profession

According to (Bunoti S., 2011) challenges in higher education influenced by several factors including, economic factors, political factors, quality of students & faculty, administrative factors and academic factors etc. According to (Al-Atiqi and Deshpande, 2009) higher education institutes are facing challenges in several fronts, for example, low rate graduations, apprehension among students, rising questions of relevance of college education for public good, etc.

In UAE all Universities under the umbrella of CAA are applying the following overlapping mapping to achieve highest quality of standards for teaching, as shown in figure 1. Figure 1 shows (from bottom to top) that course level goals and objectives (outcomes) can be achieved in class, which are mapped with the program level goals and objective and program level goals and objectives are mapped with college or departmental level goals and objectives and college or departmental level goals and objectives are mapped with University or Institute level goals and objectives. The role of CAA / ADEC / KHDA is to ensure that these mapping are properly adopted and

implemented as per the highest standards of quality or not. These agencies are cooperating and facilitating higher educational Institutes in UAE to achieve these goals.

Figure 1. Overlapping Mapping

So far as research and community services are concerned, these agencies are monitoring the higher educational institutes according to the mission and vision of that particular individual higher educational Institute. There are lots of challenges in these areas, which need properly to be considered and earnestly addressed. Since there is no "hard and fast", guideline for research and community services; that's why research in UAE's higher educational Institutes are of diverse nature as compared to the other countries. It is also the case that not all Institutes in UAE are offering Master and/or Ph.D. level programs. Non-availability of funds from external sources is also an issue. Most of the higher education Institutes in UAE are promoting research according to their own available resources and funds. Only few agencies such as, "National Research Foundation" and "Emirates Foundation" are providing funds to the higher educational Institutes in UAE, which is not enough for all the Institutes in UAE, especially private Institutes. In the absence of external funds most of the higher educational Institutes have to rely on their own generated funds, which do not suffice the requirement of all the researchers' in these Institutes, as a result of which the quality and quantity of the research, that are produced, is not appreciable. Community services or community engagement is also defined and practiced differently by different Institutes. Some Institutes are considering within campus activities as community services other are not.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

Quality in higher education is the main concern of researchers of all countries since years. Different models had been developed mostly based on TQM. Several countries for example, US, UK, Japan, China, India and Pakistan etc. successfully implemented the philosophy of TQM. Different people from different cultural point of view, see the quality in higher education with different canvas. This paper has presented the quality issues in higher education Institutions in UAE perspectives. Issues related to managing and maintaining the quality in higher education was explored. Role of quality controlling agencies in UAE was briefly discussed. Challenges in higher education in general and challenges in higher education in UAE in particular were discussed as challenges in teaching, in research and in community services.

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