

Ensuring Compliance and Diversity in MENA Higher Education

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MENAPAR
Ifrane, Morocco, October 28th – 31st, 2019

Public Administration Research and South-South Cooperation for the achievement
of the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab Region

Keywords

Higher Education, MENA region, Internal Improvement, Diversity, Compliance

Abstract

This paper reviews the impact of quality assurance agencies on higher education and the extent to which these agencies can improve the quality of higher education in the MENA region, in particular. The main part of this paper is conceptual and based on higher education literature, reviews and reports. The methodology is qualitative, and the research tool is document analysis. The paper reviews key longitudinal studies on the impact of external monitoring bodies in the MENA region to understand experiences and quality standards compliance. This helps to identify opportunities to develop quality practices in that are more appropriate to the context of the MENA region. It is concluded that a collaborative approach among all parties in the higher education system is critical to develop diversity among higher education institutions while achieving compliance requirements and internal improvement.

Introduction

Higher education has a long history in Arab countries. Al-Qarwiyyin University in Morocco founded by Fatima Alfihri in 859 is recognised as the first university in the world. In Europe the University of Bologna was established 229 years later, in 1088, and Oxford University eight years after that. During these times universities operated autonomously. Their reputations were determined by the qualities of their graduates and the social rankings of their patrons. However, in the late twentieth century westernised models of quality assurance in higher education became dominant due to economic pressure. The quest for effectiveness, efficiency and productivity became paramount.

Currently the majority of MENA countries have established quality assurance and accreditation agencies and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have established the Arabian Gulf Network for Quality and Accreditation. The last 15 years in the Arab world has seen an increased concern in higher education for outcomes in the face of international competition and globalization. Pressure mounted on Arab governments to improve graduate employability skills and lower high youth unemployment rates (El Hassan, 2013). Currently, there is great interest by Arab world governments in reforming higher education by establishing quality assurance agencies.

In spite of these initiatives quality issues are still challenging higher education institutions in the MENA region. This is reflected in the fact that MENA region higher education institutions continue to have poor international reputation worldwide and achieve low status in universities rankings (Ahmed et al, 2013).

Quality in Higher Education

Harvey and Williams (2010a) point out a key issue for countries more recently introducing quality systems, especially less developed countries, is the transferability of systems established elsewhere in the world. As a result, in the Arab World, there are questions to be answered about the transferability of concepts of quality from other parts of the world, the appropriateness of styles of organisational management, and the flexibility of methods of teaching and learning (Hasan, 2015).

There has been a proliferation of higher education institutions and in MENA countries in recent years. Concurrently, there has been the emergence of quality assurance agencies charged with ensuring quality standards in these institutions. Quality management systems and applications have gained general acceptance worldwide. This acceptance has evolved from industrial origins to service organisations, public and non-profit organisations, and educational institutions (Paunescu & Fok, 2004).

In relation to the emergence of quality in business and industry, the literature demonstrates that the concept of quality is widely accepted yet problematic. There are many definitions, a multiplicity of quality systems, and often conflict over the needs for compliance versus improvement. The literature indicates that research on quality is plentiful but, as stated by the American Society for Quality (2013), still lacking:

We found a gap in the current research for the quality discipline; there is no comprehensive view of the current state and thus the future opportunities regarding the use of quality tools and techniques, as well as continuous improvement systems, within and across regions around the globe. (p. 7)

Essentially, the quality concept was introduced to ensure consistency in products. There was wastage in manufacturing due to a multiplicity of defects and this was particularly highlighted in World War II, where engineers sought to increase not only productivity but effectiveness through consistent quality.

An attraction of the quality concept in education has been that it can be used to prove to society that education delivery is both effective and productive. This leads to what the literature refers to as the quality revolution (Newton, 2012). In certain contexts, researchers have found that quality assurance systems provide powerful tools to ensure that students are given an education that prepares them for work and allows them to make meaningful contributions to society as citizens.

However, many educational theorists and practitioners have been less than keen to buy into the original quality concepts. Brookes and Becket (2007) indicate that much attention has been given

to quality management models developed for business and industry, and that there is a concern that such models may add little to the improvement of teaching and learning, although they might have advantages for improving accountability. Houston (2008) explains:

The language and tools of industry-born quality models are an imperfect fit to higher education. Authentic quality improvement is more likely to result from approaches to systemic intervention that encourages exploration of questions of purpose and of the meaning of improvement in context than from the imposition of definitions and methodologies from elsewhere. (p. 61)

Harvey also critiqued the quality approach and argued that it failed to address fundamental issues of educational quality (Harvey, 1995). Harvey and Williams (2010b, p. 3). In reaffirming this view following a comprehensive meta-analysis of contributions to the journal *Quality in Higher Education*, he states “an issue is the use of industrial models and TQM in particular, which contributors, on the whole, regarded as of little use in the higher education setting”.

Hornblow et al (2019) surveyed Bahraini practitioners on the ways in which the application of the compliance requirements created challenges. The responses included: “tension between compliance and creativity for the facilitator”, “an increase in administrative paperwork”, “a need for reconceptualization of assessment”, “the added demands of planning and implementing effective strategies for diversity among learners”, “the need for development of a wider range of teaching and learning strategies”, and “some misunderstanding of NQF processes and requirements”. These responses indicate that a compliance focus can bring about some improvement in core processes of higher education such as dealing with diversity among learners and developing more effective teaching and learning strategies.

Meeting the Challenges

An effective higher education system requires diversity among their higher education institutions. This diversity is seen in the unique identities of the institutions as expressed in their vision and mission statements. A focus on compliance only runs the risk of making all institutions become similar. This suggests that the focus on compliance must be balanced with a focus on internal

improvement. To achieve this balance a collaborative approach between all parties is critical. An institution needs to understand and interpret the expectations of the external quality agency in a way that maintains its identify (AlBuainain et al, 2018). In turn, the external agency needs to design and apply its quality standards and processes in a flexible manner that allows institutions to adopt a diversity of approaches to higher education. Hornblow et al (2019) also argue that quality management, compliance and improvement should be both contextually appropriate in terms that can be understood and owned, as appropriate, by all parties.

Albuainain (2012) developed a communication framework that includes four components: the higher education authority (A); the higher education institutions (U); employers and their newly hired graduates (E). This communication is critical to ensure a collaborative approach between the components so that both the compliance requirements are met, and the unique identities of the institutions are maintained. The resulting component (D) represents the diversity of approaches among their higher education institutions.

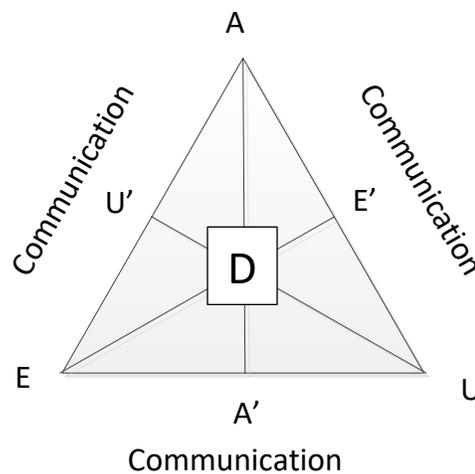


Figure 1: Communications Triangle for Maintaining Diversity Approaches (Adopted from Albuainain, 2012)

Harvey and Stensaker (2008) also stress the important of communication between parties and identify four types of culture that may develop. The ‘responsive type’ is characterised by a strong

degree of group control as well as a strong intensity of external rules. The ‘reactive type’ has a weak degree of group control but a strong intensity of external rules. The ‘regenerative type’ has strong degree of group control but a weak intensity of external rules. The ‘reproductive type’ has a weak degree of group control as well as a weak intensity of external rules.

Table 1: Types of System Culture in Higher Education

	Strong Degree of Group Control	Weak Degree of Group Control
Strong Intensity of External Rules	<p>Responsive Led by external demands (such as government imperatives or agency expectations). Positive in taking opportunities offered or forced on the institution. May voluntarily undertake self-review and audit. Has an improvement agenda with single loop but not double loop aspects. Acutely aware of accountability issues and compliance requirements. Learns from and adopts good practice models; but limited evidence of holistic appreciation. Sees quality culture as created by others: Who are we being asked to be? Lacks a genuine feeling of ownership or control. Sees quality culture as unconnected to everyday life. May harbour counter cultures.</p>	<p>Reactive Reacts to external demands (such as government imperatives or agency expectations). Reluctant to take opportunities unless linked to obvious rewards. Unlikely to undertake self-review and audit. Doesn't have an improvement agenda; not proactive. Driven by compliance and, reluctantly, by accountability. Tends to deal with one thing at a time in a disjointed manner; little or no evidence of holistic appreciation. Sees quality culture as created and imposed by others and the responsibility of a centralised unit: Quality is a beast to be fed. What are we obliged to do? Has little or no sense of ownership or control. Sees quality culture as unconnected to everyday life. Likely to harbour counter cultures.</p>
Weak Intensity of External Rules	<p>Regenerative Focused on internal developments but aware of the external context and expectations. Incorporates external opportunities, if seen appropriate, into its self-generated plan. Undertakes self-review and audit as appropriate activities. Has an improvement agenda with single loop and double loop aspects. May redefine quality in own terms. Sees its improvement plan as an indication of accountability. Takes and believes in a holistic, systems-based approach. Sees quality culture as attuned to the aspirations of the team and something,</p>	<p>Reproductive Attempts to minimise the impact of external demands (such as government imperatives or agency expectations). Concentrates, looking inwards, on what it does best and is rewarded for. Undertakes self-review and audit only on request. Doesn't have a coordinated improvement agenda. Meets minimum requirements of compliance and accountability. Sticks to established norms; little or no evidence of holistic appreciation. Sees quality culture as created, imposed and required by others – internally and externally.</p>

	Strong Degree of Group Control	Weak Degree of Group Control
	unquestioningly, to be sustained: Quality is opportunity. The group as a pocket of enthusiasm. Has a feeling of ownership and control. Accepts quality culture as indistinguishable from everyday life. Who are we? Who might we become? Likely to harbour counter cultures if external requirements are seen as silly or unnecessary.	What is the deadline? Will minimal changes to the last report be OK? Lacks a feeling of ownership or control. Quality is a deadline to be met. The quality culture reflects only the expertise and aspirations of individual members. Likely to harbour counter cultures if the better performers of the group are threatened.

A key point is that the Regenerative Type should not be seen as weak in terms of intensity of external rules (being adherence to external rules) but only as relatively weak in relation to degree of group control. Overall, this type demonstrates strength on both axes. In many respects, the Regenerative Type can be seen as the ideal as it allows for both meeting compliance requirements and maintaining unique institutional identity – preferable even to the well-balanced Responsive Type.

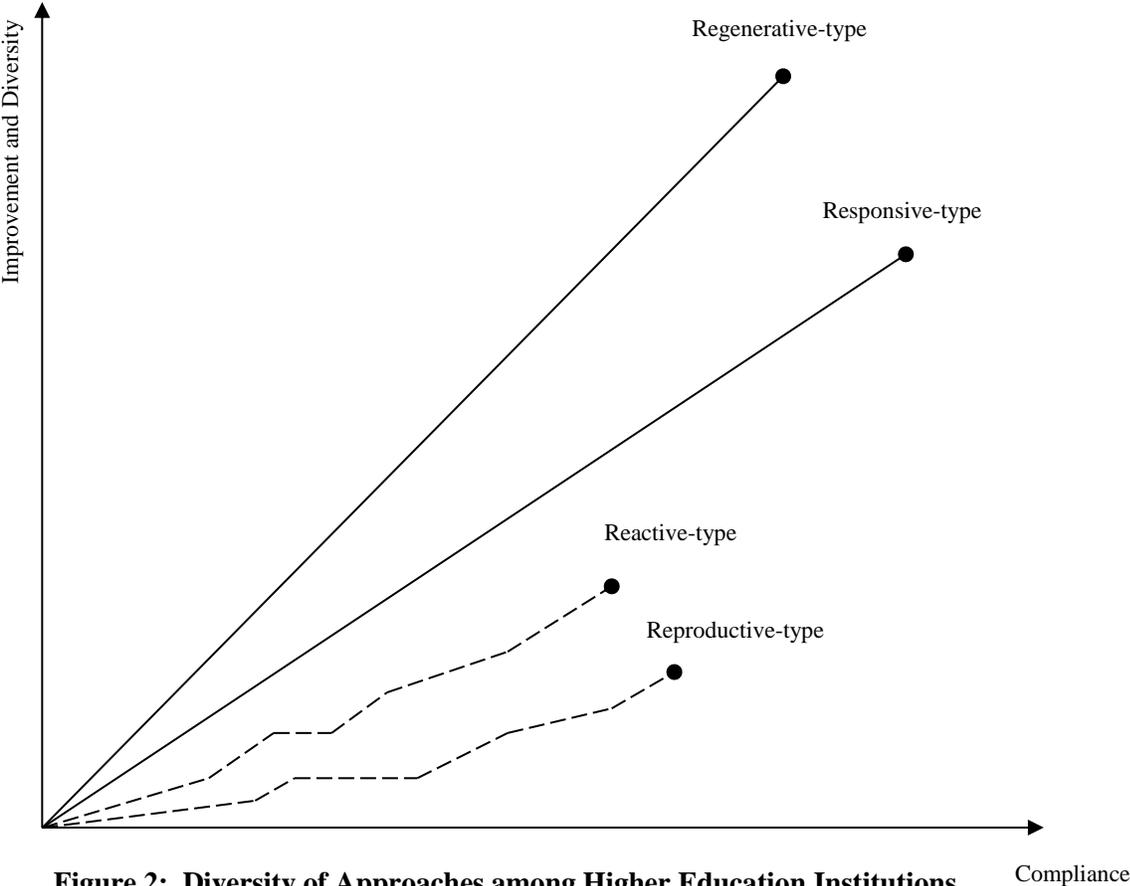


Figure 2: Diversity of Approaches among Higher Education Institutions (Adopted from Hasan, 2015)

This typography indicates that there is a need for both innovative and analytical, step-by-step approaches to quality assurance in higher education. Creativity leads to improvement while analytical activities are necessary for compliance requirements. With a creative component, it is surmised, quality can be exciting, satisfying and sustaining. This fits with regenerative and responsive situational approaches to quality management.

Conclusion

Quality issues remain challenging for higher education institutions in the MENA region. One of the main challenges relates to the ability to maintain a distinct institutional identity while meeting the compliance requirements of quality assurance agencies. It is argued that a collaborative approach among involved parties is critical to meet this challenge. A regenerative type of culture in the higher education system is recommended. This approach is characterised by a focus on internal developments with an awareness and understanding of the external context and expectations. This ensures that both the quality agencies and the institutions maintain ownership and control of their activities while ensuring compliance with standards and diversity among the institutions in MENA Higher Education.

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