FACTORS INFLUENCING QUALITY ASSURANCE IMPLEMENTATION IN SAUDI UNIVERSITIES

SAUD ALBAQAMI

Ministry Of Education, Saudi Arabia, Phd Candidate At Unsw
E-Mail: Saudsaad5@ Gmial.Com

Abstract-The study aims to develop a normative model for internal quality assurance (QA) for universities. The research question to be addressed is what are the factors that enhance or hinder the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system in Saudi Arabian HEIs? Multiple case studies involving two different universities (KAU and PSU) were used to examine these questions. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with both administrative and academic staffs, as well as document analysis and observation. A grounded theory approach based on that advocated by Strauss and Corbin will be taken to the development of the normative model for quality assurance which is the focus of the study. The results revealed factors that enhance the quality implementation are Support & commitment of management/leadership, Awareness & orientation, motivated faculty and Quality culture while the Employee and faculty resistance, fear of change and Infrastructure limitations were revealed as factors that inhibit implementation of QA.

Keywords- Prince Sultan University (PSU), king Abdul-Aziz University (KAU), Accreditation, Quality Assurance, Government Policy.

I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

According to the American Society for Quality (2011), Quality assurance is "the planned and systematic activities implemented in a quality system so that quality requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled" Basically, quality assurance is the collection of activities that an organisation performs to make sure that their outputs pass existing standards held by their customers or other important regulating and accrediting institutions.

The concept and practices of quality assurance has been in existence since the industrial age, in which the mass production of different goods required that there be some mechanisms in place for checking that the each of the goods produced was fit for public consumption (Dill, 2010). However, it was only during the latter half of the 20th century that this concept and its practice found its way to the operation of higher education institutions (Dill, 2010; Barnabas, 2007). As explained by Barnabas (2007), while the early higher education institutions did have different standards of quality established and did maintain some practices focused on securing such standards, quality assurance in higher education as it is known today began with the establishment of governmental and non-governmental agencies that sought to develop and examine different dimensions of quality in higher education institutions and provide corresponding accreditation based on the levels of quality found. Quality assurance in higher education remains to be one of the most prominent fields of research at the present. Even a brief review of literature shows that there are great depth of studies conducted that investigated different quality assurance dimensions (Huet et al., 2011) and analysed quality assurance in different higher education settings (Hidalgo et al., 2011; Watson et al., 2005). In the Saudi Arabian higher education sector, quality assurance is a relatively new concept. The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment had previously developed a set of Standards for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (NCAAA, 2009). These standards are to be applied to all higher educational programmes in Saudi Arabia, both public and private, including those that are accountable to the Ministry of Higher Education and other agencies (NCAAA, 2009, p. 1). The NCAAA requires that every institution has to create its own quality assurance model. Yet inspite of these new developments, some higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia have yet to develop formal quality assurance systems. Two examples of these institutions are King Abdulaziz University (KAU) and Prince Sultan Univeristy (PSU), a public and a private institution respectively. While these two institutions have been attempting to utilise quality assurance practices to improve their operations and outcomes, neither of them has been able to consolidate their efforts into building an institution-wide system. Furthermore, it was found that at present, there are still no studies conducted on the overall state of higher education quality assurance in the Saudi Arabian setting. The reason behind this gap in literature may be that there are still too few case studies that have been conducted to assess quality assurance practices and exploring factors that influence the implementation in Saudi Arabian higher education institutions. That is, what remain unexplored are the quality assurance experiences of specific universities in Saudi Arabia, which may later on be systematically reviewed to infer the status of quality assurance in the Saudi Arabian higher education system. These considerations bring about the problem that is proposed to be undertaken in this study.

II. THE OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

This proposed study intends to address the problem that is presently being faced by King Abdulaziz University and Prince Sultan University. By conducting case studies on each of these institutions, this study intends to develop an understanding about the present state of quality assurance in each of them and formulate recommendations towards building their respective quality assurance systems.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research design were selected for this study. As explained by Merriam (1997, p. 5), qualitative research follows an interpretive paradigm, in which the interest is not to test a theory or measure different variables, but to understand a certain phenomenon based on the perspective of the people who experience it. Qualitative research encompasses a number of methodologies that all seek to derive experienced meaning out of existing social phenomenon without disturbing the natural setting in which it occurs (Merriam, 1997, p. 5). This is consistent with the work of Creswell (1997), which identified five traditions of qualitative inquiry that researchers can choose from. These traditions are biographical study, phenomenological study, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell, 1997).

Among these five traditions, that which was found to be best suited for this proposed research is the case study. Merriam (1998, p. 9) simply defined the case study as inquiry that was focused on a specific phenomenon, which may be an event, a process, or an organisation. A more specific definition of the case study, which is what is adapted for this research, is that it is a systematic investigation of a "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Laws & MacLeod, 2004). This definition implies that a case study is only focused on phenomena that exist in the present, and examines these using multiple and diverse sources of evidence that are all focused on the case.

Laws and MacLeod (2004) examined this tradition of qualitative research in detail. According to Laws and MacLeod (2004) the focus of case studies is on the process rather than the outcomes. Case studies are used when the researcher is interested in discovering the phenomenon using a "full variety of evidence" that relate to it, including documents, interviews, observations, and artifacts (Laws & MacLeod, 2004). Through a case study, researchers may be able to understand the nature of the case itself, how the case came to be, the physical, economic, political, and legal contexts in which the case is situated and how each of these aspects affect the case, the distinct qualities of the case, and the people who are involved in the case (Laws & MacLeod, 2004).

Yin (2003, p. 5) provided two ways to classify case studies. Firstly, Yin (2003, p. 5) classified case studies as being exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory. Case studies are exploratory when they are used to determine the present state of the phenomenon of interest in the context of the case or cases identified for the purpose of developing further research questions and hypotheses for subsequent study (Yin, 2003, p. 5). Descriptive case studies aim to "present a complete description of a phenomenon" within the context of the case (Yin, 2003, p. 5). According to Tellis (1997), descriptive case studies need to develop strong theoretical frameworks on which to base its descriptions on. That is, these case studies use existing theories to make sense of new observations, from which models that are related to the base theories can be drawn out of. Explanatory case studies seek to establish causal relationships in the phenomenon of interest, such as how the phenomenon actually occurs (Yin, 2003, p. 5).

The second classification of case studies provided in Yin (2003, p. 5) is according to the number of cases examined. A case study can examine a single case, or multiple cases. As explained by Tellis (1997), this difference is not in reference to any sample sizes used in the study. Rather, it refers to the number of actual cases, such as institutions, or settings, that were included for investigation.

For this study, a descriptive multiple case study was ultimately selected as the most appropriate research design. The rationale of this selection is explored in the subsequent section.

IV. DATA COLLECTION

As explained by Creswell (1997), Tellis (1997), and Laws and MacLeod (2004), one of the main strengths of case studies as a research methodology is its expansive approach to gathering data. In this study, there are three sources of data that would be explored. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the faculty and with members of the administrative staff. The interviews with administrative staff would have numerous purposes that are in line with the research questions.The next sources of data which was tapped for this study are documents. Documents are important in case studies because they are able to reflect the actual occurrences that transpire within the setting between relevant stakeholders. The documents of interest to this study include formal communications of administrative staff to faculty members, such as memos, and full directives, which are related to the issue of quality assurance. Other documents that were of interest are faculty members' correspondence with the administration and other documents such as faculty members' public online journal entries which may be related to quality assurance concerns in the institution. The last sources of data for this study are observations within the institutions. Independent

observations can be conducted in order to draw out relevant occurrences from actual experiences. Independent observations were conducted within the faculty office, and within the administrative office and within the quality assurance centers. Observations were recorded in a journal as they are made.

V. RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research design will be selected for this study. As explained by Merriam (1997, p. 5), qualitative research follows an interpretive paradigm, in which the interest is not to test a theory or measure different variables, but to understand a certain phenomenon based on the perspective of the people who experience it.

Qualitative research encompasses a number of methodologies that all seek to derive experienced meaning out of existing social phenomenon without disturbing the natural setting in which it occurs (Merriam, 1997, p. 5). This is consistent with the work of Creswell (1997), which identified five traditions of qualitative inquiry that researchers can choose from. These traditions are biographical study, phenomenological study, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell, 1997).

Among these five traditions, that which was found to be best suited for this proposed research is the case study. Merriam (1998, p. 9) simply defined the case study as inquiry that was focused on a specific phenomenon, which may be an event, a process, or an organisation. A more specific definition of the case study, which is what is adapted for this research, is that it is a systematic investigation of a "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Laws & MacLeod, 2004). This definition implies that a case study is only focused on phenomena that exist in the present, and examines these using multiple and diverse sources of evidence that are all focused on the case.

Laws and MacLeod (2004) examined this tradition of qualitative research in detail. According to Laws and MacLeod (2004) the focus of case studies is on the process rather than the outcomes. Case studies are used when the researcher is interested in discovering the phenomenon using a "full variety of evidence" that relate to it, including documents, interviews, observations, and artifacts (Laws & MacLeod, 2004). Through a case study, researchers may be able to understand the nature of the case itself, how the case came to be, the physical, economic, political, and legal contexts in which the case is situated and how each of these aspects affect the case, the distinct qualities of the case, and the people who are involved in the case (Laws & MacLeod, 2004).

Yin (2003, p. 5) provided two ways to classify case studies. Firstly, Yin (2003, p. 5) classified case studies as being exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory. Case studies are exploratory when they are used to determine the present state of the phenomenon of interest in the context of the case or cases identified for the purpose of developing further research questions and hypotheses for subsequent study (Yin, 2003, p. 5). Descriptive case studies aim to "present a complete description of a phenomenon" within the context of the case (Yin, 2003, p. 5). According to Tellis (1997), descriptive case studies need to develop strong theoretical frameworks on which to base its descriptions on. That is, these case studies use existing theories to make sense of new observations, from which models that are related to the base theories can be drawn out of. Explanatory case studies seek to establish causal relationships in the phenomenon of interest, such as how the phenomenon actually occurs (Yin, 2003, p. 5).

The second classification of case studies provided in Yin (2003, p. 5) is according to the number of cases examined. A case study can examine a single case, or multiple cases. As explained by Tellis (1997), this difference is not in reference to any sample sizes used in the study. Rather, it refers to the number of actual cases, such as institutions, or settings, that were included for investigation.

For this study, a descriptive multiple case study was ultimately selected as the most appropriate research design. The rationale of this selection is explored in the subsequent section.

VI. DATA COLLECTION

As explained by Creswell (1997), Tellis (1997), and Laws and MacLeod (2004), one of the main strengths of case studies as a research methodology is its expansive approach to gathering data. In this study, there are three sources of data that would be explored. First, semi-structured interviews would be conducted with members of the faculty and with members of the administrative staff. The interviews with administrative staff would have numerous purposes that are in line with the research questions. Firstly, it has the purpose of determining how administrative staff conceptualise quality assurance with respect to the two dimensions included in this study. Secondly, it seeks to determine what attempts administrative staff members have made in order to establish some measures of quality assurance in their institution. Thirdly, this interview seeks to discover how these measures have been implemented, and understand how administrative perceive faculty's responses are to these measures. Finally, these interviews are intended to draw out what administrative staff perceive are factors that enhance or hinder the implementation of quality assurance in their institution. The interviews for faculty members will have similar purposes; it would also inquire about what quality assurance is to them, but would focus on how they experience the measures that are imposed by administrative staff upon them and what they believe are the strong and weak points of these

impositions.The next sources of data which will be tapped for this study are documents. Documents are important in case studies because they are able to reflect the actual occurrences that transpire within the setting between relevant stakeholders. The last sources of data for this study are observations within the institutions. Independent observations were conducted within the faculty office, and within the administrative office and within the quality assurance centers. Observations cana be recorded in a journal as they are made.

Data analysis

The approach was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and consisted of four stages, which are coding, conceptualising, categorising, and theorising. Since its development, the approach has branched out into two perspectives from its founders, which are known as the Glasserian and the Straussian approaches respectively. Between these two approaches, the Straussian approach is the one that is more suitable for use in a completely qualitative research design, as the one that is utilised in this study (Roode et al., 2009). This is because the Glasserian approach reaches wider into the phenomenon, considering all data, quantitative and qualitative, as important in understanding it, while the Straussian approach prescribes a definite set of steps that focus on analysing qualitative data from interviews, observations, and documents, which are precisely the data that are to be gathered for this study.

The approach for the study was adapted from Strauss and Corbin (1998). The first stage of the analysis is open coding, in the texts that were gathered for analysis, interview transcripts, documents, and journal records of observations, are read and re-read in order to identify portions of the text that are somehow relevant to the study in some way. These texts are labelled based on their relevance to the study. A label is a brief description of what is being referenced by the code in relation to the study. The next stage is axial coding, in which the initial codes are related to one another. Codes that belong to the same category or have related properties are connected to one another. Following this is the stage of drawing out themes from the codes, which is also referred to as selective coding. This is done by finding the connections that exist among the different categories of codes that were drawn from axial coding. In reviewing the codes, the researcher writes memos that theorise on the interconnectivities that exist. By reviewing and building these memos, the researcher is able to draw out more themes which eventually come together to form the grounded theory.

5.2 Findings

Through the process of the data analysis, common relevant occurrences (responses, statements, or expressed perceptions or thoughts) of the focus group participants were coded and documented for frequency determination. These occurrences were then categorized into related thematic categories. The thematic category are presented and include factors affecting quality assurance. The thematic category contained sub-categories and key themes revealed from the analysis. Table 2 provides a schematic summary of the results in terms of thematic category, sub-categories, and themes revealed.

Table 1 Thematic Results of the Data Analysis

Thematic Category	Thematic Sub-Category	Key Themes
Factors Affecting Quality Assurance	Factors that support implementation and enhance QA	1. commitment of management/leadership 2. Awareness & orientation 3. Motivated faculty 4. Quality culture
	Factors that inhibit implementation and hinder QA	1. Employee/faculty resistance / fear of change 2. Infrastructure limitations
	Suggestions to support successful QA processes	1. Persistence 2. Positive reinforcement 3. Patience 4. Leadership stability, continuity, commitment, and support 5. Educate all stakeholders 6. Involve all stakeholders to promote QA as a team process.

In this paper, the initial result that was obtained from the first case PSU was discussed. Results specific to each thematic category will be presented individually for discussions in the second phase.

Acknowledgements; this paper is part of the author PhD thesis .

REFERENCES

[1] American Society for Quality. (2011). Quality Assurance and Quality Control. Retrieved March 15, 2012 from: http://asq.org/learn-about-quality/quality-assurance-quality-control/overview/overview.html

[2] Dill, D. (2010). Quality Assurance in Higher Education – Practices and Issues. International Encyclopedia of Education, 377-383.

[3] Huet, I., Figueiredo, C., Abreu, O., Oliveira, J., Costa, N., Rafael, J., and Vieira, C. (2011). Linking a Research Dimension to an Internal Quality Assurance System to Enhance Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 13, 947-956.

[4] Hidalgo, E., Villoria, J., and Romero-Cerezo, C. (2011). The necessity and challenge of setting up a quality assurance system in the higher education system in Andalusia (Spain). Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 15, 2972-2976.

[5] Watson, R., Hogston, R., Norman, I., Stimpson, A., Sanderson, D., O'Reilly, J., Baulcomb, S. (2005). Quality assurance in UK nursing education: public protection in the era of streamlined assessment. Nurse Education Today, 25(1): 49-55.

[10] Barnabas, C. (2007). The Evolution of Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Retrieved

[11] Glaser, B., and Strauss, A. (1967). The Discovery of Grounded Theory:

[12] Laws, K., and McLeod, R. (2006). Case study and grounded theory. Retrieved May 9, 2012 from: http://www.systemdynamics.org/conferences/2004/SDS_2004/PAPERS/220MCLEO.pdf

[13] Roode, J. (2009). Glaserian and Straussian grounded theory: similar or completely different? Proceedings of the 2009 Annual Research Conference of the South African Institute of Computer Scientists and Information Technologists, Retrieved May 9, 2012 from: https://dl.acm.org/purchase.cfm?id=1632163&CFID=82133999&CFTOKEN=32925158

[14] Strauss, A., and Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of

[15] Qualitative Research:Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory. SAGE.

[16]Tellis, W. (1997). Introduction to Case Study. The Qualitative Report, Retrieved May 9, 2012 from: http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-2/tellis1.html

[17] Yin, R. (2003). Case study research, design and methods. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

★★★