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Original Paper

Accreditation Challenges in Saudi Universities

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Abstract

Quality assurance in higher education remains to be one of the most prominent fields of research at the present. In the Saudi Arabian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), quality assurance is a relatively new concept and Saudi universities seem not to effectively implement quality assurance caused by the certain obstacles. As such, there are two objectives to be addressed; first, to explore the challenging of accreditation. A case studies involving Prince Sultan University and King Abdul-Aziz University was used to examine these questions. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with both meso and micro levels, as well as document analysis and observation. A thematic analysis approach was taken to analysis the data. The findings of this study support the perceived use of many different standards based evaluative processes, which provide feedback from the various stakeholder perspectives. The findings also demonstrate perceived supportive factors of the commitment/support of leadership and management, awareness and orientation of employees/faculty. In addition, the findings also report that/faculty resistance and infrastructure limitations focused on financial and human capital constraints were perceived as inhibitive factors to QA.

Keywords

NCAAA, PSU, quality assurance mechanism, factors influencing, the quality assurance implementation

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Quality assurance strategies and standards have long been employed—at least since the dawn of the industrial age, which introduced mass operations and mass production to meet the needs of consumers. In any workplace, plans and strategies are systematically devised and guidelines are implemented in order to ensure the conformity of operations and systems to government or privately established and recognized standards. The high expectations applied to the educational sector cause particularly great demand for standardized quality assurance strategies. This has led to the establishment of accreditation institutions—external organizations that have developed and promulgated standards for quality and have evaluated colleges and universities according to these standards (ESIB, 2006; NAPCIS, 2012).

In Saudi Arabia, the quality assurance directives of NCAAA require educational institutions to establish dedicated quality assurance models. The present study was intended to assess the current challenging of accreditation implementation at Saudi Arabian higher education institutions and develop a normative quality assurance model based upon the inferences obtained, to be used as a guideline for future quality assurance systems in Saudi higher education institutions. For this purpose, qualitative research was conducted using two case studies—KAU and PSU—and was cross-analyzed and presented in the previous chapter.

As such, this study intends to determine the extent to which challenging that PSU and KAU are facing to identify the different factors that influence quality assurance effectiveness in the Saudi Arabian context. Therefore, the research questions of this study are:

1) What are the factors influencing the quality assurance implementation?

1.2 Literature Review

As noted above, the NCAAA was part of the initiative to improve and standardize the quality of higher education in Saudi Arabia. It is governed by a board comprised of members from the Ministry of Education and associations of public and private institutions, and is chaired by the Minister for Higher Education (NCAAA, 2009a). According to the NCAAA (2010a), its mission is "to encourage, support and evaluate the quality of post-secondary institutions and the programs they offer." Specifically, this means that the commission is involved in the fulfillment of three major objectives: ensuring the quality of students' learning outcomes, monitoring the efficiency of management and support services provided by higher education institutions, and evaluating the quality and impact of research and community development contributions made by higher education institutions (NCAAA, 2009a). These objectives are carried out in cooperation with higher education institutions and in consultation with various external stakeholders, such as community agencies, business companies in various industries, and government (NCAAA, 2009a).

The NCAAA defines the term *quality* as "the value, worth, or standard of an institution or program in relation to generally accepted standards for an institution or program of its type" (NCAAA, 2009a,

p. 37). A distinct but related concept, "fitness for purpose" is also used by the NCAAA to take into account the fitness or suitability of an institution's mission and also the environment in which the institution operates (NCAAA, 2009a). Among the tasks for which the NCAAA is responsible are the establishment and updating of the National Qualifications Framework, the establishment of quality assurance standards in Saudi Arabian higher education that are consistent with international benchmarks and relevant to Saudi Arabian national interests; the integration of internationally recognized best practices in quality assurance protocols for higher education institutions; the provision of guidance on quality assurance to higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia and of support to these institutions to develop their own quality assurance systems; and the development of a database of best practices and relevant quality indicators for higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia (NCAAA, 2009a).

2. National Qualifications Framework

The National Qualifications Framework established by the NCAAA is an essential part of the Saudi higher education system. The NCAAA (2009b, p. 37) says the "Qualifications Framework is a document which defines the nature, amount, and degrees of standards of learning required to achieve technical or academic awards." The key objective is to make sure that student learning outcome standards are well aligned in the country and are equivalent to the standards of international higher education institutions (NCAAA, 2009b). To this end, the NCAAA standardizes allocation of course learning credits, levels, and "Domains of Learning Outcomes" (NCAAA, 2009b).

2.1 Previous Case Studies on the Quality of Saudi Higher Education

Quality assurance case studies conducted in Saudi Arabian higher education settings are scarce. Sohail and Shaikh (2004) conducted a study that focused on student impressions of the quality of service that they received while studying at a university (Sohail & Shaikh, 2004). However, it was not related to the dimensions of teaching and learning, upon which this study is focused.

In another study, Alkhazim (2003, p. 479) noted that one challenge evident for Saudi higher education institutions was "the lack of sufficient quality measures aligned with global standards." Al-Ajmi (2003) conducted a study on the quality of Saudi curricula and the employability of graduates, utilizing surveys and interviews administered to the students, graduates, faculty members, and administrative staff of King Saud University. The study found that across all these groups, "quality" was perceived mainly to mean "the level of ability achieved" by the student, that is, the extent to which the institution was able to effectively teach the student for the student to become a highly qualified and employable professional. There was disagreement on this definition between students and graduates on the one hand and faculty members and staff on the other, however (Al-Ajmi, 2003). According to the latter, quality is not just about employability, but about

facilitating students' knowledge and moral preparation (Al-Ajmi, 2003), that is, on their learning and development.

In another article, Yeo (2008) focused on service quality in a Saudi Arabian university, which again falls outside the scope of this study. Darandari et al. (2009) discussed how the rapid growth of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia generated increased need for quality assurance, prompting the development of the NCAAA. The study focused on different aspects of the three-stage quality assurance and accreditation system constructed by the commission, which according to Darandari et al. (2009) has greatly benefited Saudi Arabian higher education institutions by helping them develop international expertise while still maintaining their local cultural identity.

Two case studies on quality have been conducted at KAU, one on dental health service quality in the Faculty of Dentistry and the other on effectiveness of quality assurance protocols in the College of Engineering (Hassan, Amer, & Maghrabi, 2005; Zahed, Bafail, & Bashir, 2007). The former study found the services to be high quality and the latter, mixed, with quality assurance efforts suffering from deficiencies in knowledge of advanced tools in the field, but neither study was able to generalize to the whole institution. Indeed, no studies have so far been conducted on the overall state of higher education quality assurance in the Saudi Arabian setting, likely partly because of a lack of case studies on the basis of which to do so. This situation provided the rationale for this study.

2.2 Institutional Theory

This theory is focused on particular aspects of social structures that are inherent in organisations and communities. Specifically, institutional theory delves deeper into the social structure. According to the theory, conformity to the rules. Norms and values of the institutional environment is compulsory for the sake of legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Covaleski et al., 2003). Organisations enhance the chances of their survival and for the by designing formal structure in accordance with the institutional environment that constitute their behaviour (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Oliver, 1997).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) consolidated inputs on institutional theory from several of its proponents and found that institutions in making a transition between one condition and another consist of three possible mechanisms of isomorphism. Firstly, there is the coercive isomorphism in which the organisation is led to adopt new structures through compulsion such as from the mandate of a law. Secondly, there is mimetic isomorphism in which the organisation follows the lead of another organisation with the purpose of reducing uncertainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the third mechanism is normative isomorphism in which the pressure of seeking the professionalization norm. The organisation adopts the new condition based on the recommendations of experts within the organisation.

Applying the theory, higher education institutions seeking to establish a quality assurance system may do so under one or more those mechanisms. The theory also explains that when an organisation

that has been accustomed to operating in one context is suddenly thrust into another, it experiences pressures that exert critical influences on the management of its resources and the conduct of its operations.

From institutional theory, the theory was utilised by studies such as those of Rosa et al. (2006) and Modell (2003) to explain how institutions deal with the development of quality assurance implementation. As discussed by Modell (2003), which is appropriate to this study, investigated the development of quality control measures among Swedish universities, quality assurance is an endeavour that normally challenges the members of institutions into providing evidence that they have been fulfilling their roles and responsibilities properly. It is resisted because it challenges the norms and cultures that people within the institution have been accustomed to, and generates the fear of change affecting both professional and personal lives (Modell, 2003).

Rosa et al. (2006), on the other hand, conducted a study to explore the perception of rectors and academic on quality assessment system at Portuguese universities and their consequence at the institutional level. The authors found that the staff rectors held positive views in implementing quality assurance. Furthermore, they argued that new universities in Portugal were more adaptable in implementing quality assurance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study draws upon the principles of multiple-case-study qualitative research and analyzes responses from university administrative staff and faculty at both KAU and PSU. The main aims of the study were to consolidating the facilitating and hindering factors for quality assurance in the Saudi Arabian context as a prerequisite to proposing quality assurance models that are culturally appropriate and feasible for implementation in Saudi Arabian higher education institutions.

Towards achieving these aims, relevant research questions were formulated, institutional theory was utilized to collect and analyze data using three sources—(i) document analysis, (ii) independent observations within academic and administrative offices and quality assurance centers, and (iii) semi- structured interviews. The research question was—What are the factors that enhance and/or hinder the effectiveness of internal quality assurance systems in Saudi Arabian higher education institutions?

In the document analysis, relevant documents, including government policy documents, were collected and analyzed in order to address the first research question at the macro level. At the meso level, documents relating to quality assurance arrangements at PSU and KAU were also collected, including documents from quality centers, strategic plans, rules and regulations, and university bulletins, which provided empirical evidence. Semi-structured interviews with faculty members and administrative staff at both institutions were used as a second source of data, applicable to research questions.

The qualitative analysis of transcribed interview data identified themes among participants' responses to interview questions. Coding in qualitative research is used to classify textual statements (or responses) made by participants in order to support the process of linking data to themes (Bazeley, 2007). As such, common responses are used to generate themes that represent the perceptions of each stakeholder group (at meso and micro levels). According to Neuman (2001), in coding, the researcher attempts by assigning codes to condense data into groups consisting of similar ideas and then to characterize those groups by theme. The content analysis method is an inductive grouping and coding system that examines and explains a data set in terms of another data set, thus allowing the researcher to consider the data before offering a hypothesis, minimizing the possibility of researcher bias (Merriam, 1998). After grouping into thematic categories based on elements or topics mentioned in the interviews, verbatim examples from the interview transcripts are found to highlight and clarify the key concepts (themes) revealed. NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software was used to assist in the coding and the development of themes and patterns by sorting data and tracking frequency of occurrence of different thematic content. The themes developed represent the perceptions of stakeholders at each level and are presented separately for each case study, in relation to the associated research questions. Data analysis at each level discusses each theme separately, followed by sequence compressions analysis through two approaches of comparison, vertical (within cases, across levels, to compare emergent themes) and horizontal (within levels, across cases, to develop deep understanding of the phenomenon in different contexts) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data analysis is supported with evidence from examples, and direct quotations from interviews.

4. Results

The following three subsections present a discussion of the data in the relevant subcategories: supportive factors, hindering factors, and suggestions to assist QA implementation. A summary of the key themes identified in each category appears in Table 1.

Table 1. Factors Influencing QA Implementation at PSU and KAU

Thematic category	Subcategory	Key themes at PSU		Key themes at KAU	
		meso level	micro level	meso level	micro level
Factors that influence quality assurance implementation	Supporting/enhancing factors	Support and commitment of management and leadership QA knowledge among faculty Adaption of quality as part of institutional culture	Supportive management and leadership QA knowledge among faculty Adaption of quality as part of institutional culture/ Quality awareness supportive management and leadership	Support and commitment of management and leadership QA knowledge among faculty	Support and commitment of management and leadership QA knowledge among faculty
	Hindering/inhibiting factors	Employee/ faculty resistance; Infrastructure limitations Adaption of quality as institutional culture	Limited resources Adaption of quality as institutional culture/ Quality awareness	Employee/ faculty resistance Lack of sustainable facilities and manpower Lack of stable institutional leadership	Employees' resistance to change Limited competence of QA actors Limited resources Student admission criteria
	Suggestions for improvement	Adoption of positive attitude Development of QA culture	Reinforcement and incentives Development of QA culture Adoption of positive attitude	Implementation of systematic approach Integration of technology	Development of QA culture

4.1 Factors Supporting QA Implementation

The PSU participants at both meso and micro levels perceived support and commitment from management and leadership to enhancing QA implementation. At the meso level, the level of commitment was seen as very high, as highlighted by QM1 PSU:

> *This is essential to us what I really like in my position is it's well supported by the administration, especially—I report directly to the president or the university rector. And uh whatever problem or uh whatever items in quality assurance that need to be addressed, uh we discuss it on a weekly basis. And he provides support for these uh—for whatever is needed in a certain department.*

Among the micro-level participants, AC1 PSU made the following positive comments regarding support from leadership:

> *It's like university management is also involved in part of it. Because of like management commitment in quality assurance, we say that quality comes with management commitment. If management is not committed, there is no need for quality, Right? So for first of all, we get like the signal or light from the top management that they are looking into that.*

Another factor perceived to support the implementation and further development of QA at PSU, among both levels of respondents, was QA knowledge among faculty. For example, HS2 PSU emphasized its importance, and mentioned ways in which this type of knowledge is supportive:

> *I would say the only main thing is faculty. That's the most important thing in the implementation of quality assurance—the faculty. They are familiar with quality assurance. They know about quality assurance. [When] they understand its importance, then you have no problem. Then what you need to do, you provide some support to them. So every type of support, for instance, resources, et cetera. Not only over here, but [at] almost all universities that have people that come from other universities, um then they are motivated about this. They understand this thing. And uh that's the main thing that currently works to quality assurance.*

A final common factor cited by PSU participants as enhancing QA was the importance of a "quality culture" within the organization. At the micro level, AC2 PSU offered a detailed explanation:

> *One major thing is a quality culture. A quality culture means everyone should have a feeling in them or a majority—there will be always exceptions, but a majority should have a feeling that it's—what we want to achieve is something better than what we are—what we have achieved. You know, this kind of a spirit. For example, we put certain targets for publication. Some faculty members didn't achieve, but [the] majority have achieved [them]. And when they achieved, we went for a little higher target, and people are achieving that as well… Similarly, students … we stretch them to work a little harder. Most of them do it. I told you, exceptions are*

> *there. You know, it's not a 100% perfect case, but it is definitely at least like 70, 80% of people coming up with a sense of quality—yes, I want to improve the quality. That kind of a quality culture is there… For example, my individual culture, if I'm in a higher position, would affect the lower levels—you know, the ones below me would get influenced. I have noticed here, you know, when quality-conscious deans who are here—for example, there was one dean who was more on—he [wanted] his graduates to be of excellent quality no matter how—how small is their number.*

The KAU participants at both levels also regarded the support and commitment of management and leadership to be an important factor in enhancing QA implementation. QM1 KAU highlighted its importance, explaining that:

> *We need real support from the higher administration, guaranteed commitment is very important. That is the first thing, not just saying that they want to do it if they do not have the real commitment for it. If they do not want to provide resources or do not want to change the culture, then quality will not be delivered.*

As the above comment implies, at present, the commitment of KAU leadership to QA is perceived as rather low. With regard to leadership selection, that in public higher education in Saudi Arabia, university presidents are nominated by the Minister of Higher Education, with the King as the final authority in their appointment; and deans and managers similarly approved by the Minister of Higher Education on the basis of university presidents' nominations. Even though an attempt at systemic reform toward a new model of leadership nomination has been made at KAU, the selection process is still affected by top management, a model that was described as unproductive by QM2 KAU and VD1 KAU (respectively):

> *I will be honest with you. That one cannot choose the position, if it deanship nor deputy. The job is offered then dean tells you do you want it. In my case, I was offered by the dean and I sat down with him and he explained and I found that I can present some things which I can add but, honestly I didn't look for it or that because you know the work system here in the kingdom of Saudi, there is no person who elicits himself to occupy a position but [if] you were offered [it] then you chose to agree or not, that means, there is a special meaning may be known here. It is not working by this [method]. The high administration put the person they want [in the position].*
>
> *When I am talking about nomination for managerial positions, there must be a correct mechanism instead of the chaos that exists now in many places, when standards and professionalism are absent nothing goes well so changing the systems and insisting on it is essential.*

Faculty knowledge of QA emerged from the KAU data as well as the PSU data as supporting the implementation of QA. At the meso level, QM4 KAU explained the absence of QA knowledge among

faculty, indirectly revealing the most critical finding of this study: that when there is uncertainty about how to respond to a given pressure, there may be mere symbolic compliance instead of a genuine, substantive response.

> *When I had self-study in some faculty a while ago, so people just fill it up fast, some do not even have previous knowledge about it and give it to whoever they find to fill it, so there must be a central region responsible to guild and impose these policies, make people more aware of it. (QM4 KAU)*

Thus, the analysis yielded two factors enhancing QA that were mentioned by participants at both universities, namely leadership commitment and faculty QA knowledge. However, the data also demonstrated a significant difference between PSU and KAU in this regard: the commitment of management and leadership at PSU was reportedly very high, whereas it was poor at KAU, despite participants' recognition of its importance in QA implementation. In terms of faculty knowledge of QA, the interview data revealed that PSU participants at both levels reported their staff to be quite familiar with quality concepts, and that this meaningfully supported QA. An orientation program run each semester to raise awareness of QA matters was also mentioned. In contrast, such knowledge seemed largely absent at KAU, with no such orientation, and faculty's lack of knowledge remains a hindrance to QA implementation there.

4.2 Factors Hindering QA Implementation

The key inhibiting factor identified at meso level at PSU was employee resistance. However, the data also showed that QA actors were playing a crucial role there in overcoming faculty resistance. QM1 PSU elaborated on this issue:

> *Some of the challenge that—challenges that we of course encounter would be the element of change. Some faculty members, although we have established a culture of uh quality assurance, of course some faculty members need to understand that—the process of change. Change will have to be gradual. It doesn't have to be drastic. The process of change will take more time, but uh we are in that direction.*

At the micro level at PSU, perceived infrastructure limitations, such as resource limitations, financial constraints, and human constraints, were seen as key factors inhibiting QA implementation. However, the data also revealed that despite the widespread perception that the micro-level culture is a reflection of the meso-level culture, the micro level can act independently to influence senior leadership. HS1 PSU explained how they convinced their top management to provide financial support:

> *For example, we were the first to use [a] smart board. We were probably the first to use [it] in Saudi Arabia. See how we did that was uh a guy came and made the presentation here. A couple of us attended it, and we found it was fascinating. It was interesting. You know, we are giving a sense of technology also to the—blending it properly with the mode of teaching. So we wanted it. We decided to buy. Then the management had a reservation at that time, particularly one of the*

> *vice-rectors had a feeling that will it be a waste of money. So what we did is uh we went [laughs]—went to some of our employers and asked them, you know, would you like to sponsor? And Saudi Bank has sponsored three smart boards. And we introduced it here. When the rector saw that, he said now you can have it for every—every class.*

In contrast, at KAU, both meso- and micro-level participants mentioned infrastructure limitations as a factor inhibiting QA implementation. At the meso level, this factor was said to be related to financial support, increasing student numbers, and an intensified workload. QM4 KAU indicated the absence of financial support for QA implementation as a particular concern:

> *Often there is not much support, and there are those who participate and have extra work even without the financial support. Then there are those who complain about the absence of financial support.*

In the same vein, the micro-level KAU participants mentioned factors including faculty-to-student ratio, heavy workloads, and poor working conditions. HS1 KAU also brought up the expansion of the student body, as follows:

> *The number of the students is one of the criteria that affect the quality. The increase in student numbers has implications on teaching, research and community service. As far as I know, faculty members abroad are being assigned 6 to 9 hours teaching, but in our country the faculty members serve 15, 16, or 18 hours in teaching and this is at the expense of scientific research and community service. Therefore, the faculty members will not be able to achieve the desired goals and cannot perform teaching duties in the correct manner.*

Additionally, KAU participants commonly reported that student quality would be a primary factor affecting QA implementation. Even though KAU students are required to complete a preparatory year, the specific requirements were criticized as inadequate by participants. Furthermore, the KAU participants noted the importance of leadership stability within the organization for QA, both directly and in terms of the motivation of personnel. As HS KAU stated:

> *The problem is the fact that in public universities with the appointment of a new manager the plan and the work of the previous manager are in a high potential situation to be changed drastically.*

Employee resistance emerged from the data as another hindrance, at both meso and micro levels. At the micro level, tension between management and faculty was reported by AC3 KAU, as follows:

> *It is true that, as I said, people are resistant to change which they do not want, and they say "Why do you evaluate us?"*

Differences in professional background and faculty expectations were mentioned as potential reasons for such conflict. HS1 KAU described the latter issue as follows:

> *The professor enjoys a prestigious social status and it is often difficult for him to accept criticism easily. Actually, there is a split in terms of ideas, because some faculty members consider teaching operations their own prerogative, and point out that they have been in this field for twenty or thirty years, and if they were given a curriculum that is signed by the university's council, they would ignore it and teach at their discretion. They claim no one can object to this.*

An additional critical factor hindering QA at KAU was said to be the lack of competence of those in charge of quality, which was thought to lead to poor communication and challenges persuading faculty of the importance of QA.

4.3 Suggestions for Assisting Quality Assurance Implementation

With regard to suggestions for effective QA, respondents of both levels at PSU shared several common themes emerged from the interview data. One was the adoption of a patient and persistent attitude toward QA. For example, HS1 PSU suggested patience, persistence, and the need to spend resources:

> *The only thing that I would say is that of course it's something that takes time. And um—which means that you should be prepared or—to wait for years. Uh it is possible that it might take many years so that's one thing. Second thing, you must be willing to spend resources. You must have a big heart. You must understand that I mean we are going through something, and there's a cost for doing that thing.*

Consistent with the above, the importance of the development of an organizational QA culture was frequently suggested by participants at both levels. For example, QM2 PSU discussed the impact of leadership on the organisational culture:

> *Another thing is that not just change in leadership, but also—the top lead—management leadership, but also the middle—middle management, like chairs, directors who seem to be unsupported by top management in trying to realize the goals of quality assurance. So if you are not very much supportive—or supported and management does not believe in quality assurance as some universities would think, then uh you get demotivated. And the only thing to do is to leave. So what happens is there is now a change—again change in leadership. So there's no continuity. That's a big problem.*

Similarly, the related obligations of top management was regarded as key in supporting a quality culture and fostering continuous improvement. In addition, at the micro level, PSU participants noted that positive and negative reinforcement and incentives were useful to stimulate employee motivation.

A number of suggestions were also made by the meso-level participants at KAU. They felt that QA work could be more efficiently carried out given appropriate integration of technology and the declaration of explicit institutional quality standards, to be maintained by staff. Traditional paperwork was mentioned as a problem. The meso-level KAU participants believed that a systematic approach is a

key factor in supporting the QA process. QM4 KAU articulated the lack of such an approach as follows:

> *Well the first thing is to adhere to standard procedure in all universities, not just do something today and stop doing it tomorrow ... real standards ... it should be systematic ... is it dependent on other things? Is there no classification? No ... the process should be systematic, done in a periodic way.*

At the micro level, the key suggestions were the need to foster strong motivation and to encourage faculty acceptance of the importance of quality assessment. AC4 KAU provided the following suggestions regarding motivation:

> *Any effort requires motivation for work which may be intangible and private, or tangible and public. Private motivation means that we move to achieve a good thing. There must be a tangible or intangible reaction. With intangible motivation you hear a good word, encouragement and so on, and with tangible motivation you receive a return.*

Thus, the analysis of participants' interview responses revealed several suggestions for supporting QA. Broadly, the adaptation of the organizational culture was frequently suggested by people at both institutions, while at PSU, positive reinforcement and incentives for QA implementation, the adoption of a positive QA attitude and persistence and patience in pursuing QA, leadership commitment and support, and the involvement and training of multiple stakeholders as a team were suggested to enhance QA at PSU.

5. Discussion

The findings also demonstrate several factors perceived to be supportive of the commitment/support of leadership and management, which has been shown to play a crucial role in implementing quality assurance. These findings correspond with those of Csizmadia, Enders, and Westerheijden (2007). Leadership selection is one such important element in the management system. While private Saudi universities have partial autonomy in appointing leadership, public institutions experience issues in this regard. The Minister of Higher Education nominates these universities' presidents, who are formally appointed by the King. In the same vein, the Minister of Higher Education formally appoints people to deanships and other higher management positions and deans on the basis of university presidents' nominations. Although there was an attempt to launch systemic reform toward a new model of leadership nomination at KAU, there is evidence that the new model has the same problems with transparency and ineffectiveness as the old one, as top management still affects candidate selection and nomination, with a resulting impact on implementing QA particularly at the micro level.

Raising awareness among and developing orientation procedures for employees/faculty were also found to be important factors supporting motivation and high-quality organizational culture. As

such, as the analysis makes clear, a lack of knowledge has caused serious problems with implementing quality assurance.

The analysis also revealed certain factors limiting QA implementation across both PSU and at KAU. These included employee resistance, as also mentioned by Modell (2003), Rosa et al. (2006), Csizmadia (2006), and Papadimitriou (2011). At PSU, QA actors reportedly played a crucial role in overcoming this issue and convincing all staff to implement QA. These attempts were supported by the culture of university teaching staff and the competence of those in charge of QA, who were able to communicate successfully about the process with faculty.

In contrast, at KAU, a lack of competence and communication led to an inability of QA actors to convince staff of its merits, and the data indicated tension between the two levels and a lack of motivation caused by this lack of institutional stability. In relation to competence, lack of qualifications among staff in charge of quality assurance means the university will struggle with micro-level resistance, and effective implementation of QA cannot be anticipated. Thus, due attention must be given to quality management, by trained, professional staff who understand quality principles.

The findings of this study illustrated that effective communication between meso and micro levels is also necessary. In agreement with Newton (2002), this study highlights that inadequate communication accompanying efforts to change established values and beliefs, certain kinds of monitoring or limiting of faculty autonomy, has brought about such costs as faculty resistance. This can lead to increased internal conflict, and also to practices that are decoupled from needs as seen from the institutional perspective and responses that are merely symbolic and not genuine or substantive.

In addition, QA implementation requires strong leadership commitment, which seems to be a challenge in Saudi Arabian public institutions not only at mid-level, as seen at KAU, but also at the executive and especially presidential level. According to *Sapq* (29 July, 2015), as of 2015 there were 10 Saudi universities that had been managed by interim presidents for more than one year, including KAU. As such, this scenario may threaten the stability of leadership. In such circumstance, decisions may be made extemporaneously and driven by mere courtesy rather than long term commitment due to the belief that the position will be for an interim period.

Furthermore, the data also revealed that participants at both levels at both universities perceived infrastructural limitations to QA implementation. While financial support was reported in the case of PSU, the issues of workload and poor working conditions remained problematic for participants at KAU. In addition, the data suggested that at KAU not only staff but also program quality (cf., Almstada, 2014), student quality cf. Al Dawood (2007) and Alnassar and Dow (2013) on the very low capabilities of first-year Saudi university students), and increasing student enrollment were considered to be key factors hindering QA implementation.

Another notable difference in KAU participants' responses as compared to PSU, was the suggestion that a systemic approach and the integration of technology could enhance QA implementation. Here, as overall, the comparison between the two cases confirmed that quality assurance implementation remains a cultural matter (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008) and that culture change in institutions is needed to achieve good QA.

Finally, the study found that the type of the university, public or private, may play a significant role in the implementation of quality assurance as a result of seeking legitimacy supported by institutional theory. The age of the university was also found to be crucial, as PSU is considered relatively new and KAU is not; this is consistent with the argument that new universities have a more positive view of the self-evaluation process and consequently are more adaptable in compliance with external demands in this regard (Rosa et al., 2006). The study results support the findings of other studies that demographic variables of participants impact on perceptions of quality (Papadimitriou et al., 2008; Rosa et al., 2006; Stensaker et al., 2011).

These factors seem to be largely interrelated, requiring collaborative and integrated action from all stakeholders. For instance, faculty resistance and infrastructure development may be addressed more effectively when management and leadership are committed to providing the necessary funding and professional training in support of QA implementation.

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