

**Title: The effect of external quality assurance on
students' learning experience**
Theme: Track 4- Effectiveness of quality assurance

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ABSTRACT - This paper reports on research into the experience of students in an Omani higher education institution. The goal is to explore how successful candidates experience external quality assurance, and particularly to discuss a question that interests all stakeholders in higher education: How is the student affected by external quality assurance?

The focus is on students' perception- specifically whether students view their experience with external quality assurance as negative or positive. By analyzing the data from the responses of a random sample of successful BA candidates in a higher education institution, the paper reveals the significance of students' perception of external quality assurance and its relationship with their perception of quality of education in the same institution.

The study highlights the different implications of students' responses. This will help with identifying opportunities to develop the design and implementation of quality assurance measures in the context of Omani higher education. This in turn will help the continuous efforts to improve the quality of the student's learning experience.

Keywords: external quality assurance process, students' views, effectiveness of quality assurance.

Introduction

This paper addresses the main theme of the conference: quality, assurance and diversity. The effectiveness of quality assurance on student's learning experience in the context of the Sultanate of Oman is examined. To this day, all private higher education institutions in Oman have their standards of quality set by an external university. For this reason, there is a need to study the views of students, as the main stakeholders in higher education, on the effectiveness of the external quality assurance process.

The importance of this study stems from the fact that since 1995, all private higher education institutions are required by the Ministry of Higher Education's quality procedures to be academically affiliated to a "reputable international university." For this reason it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of procedure, and make recommendation based on the evaluation.

To put the issue of effectiveness of quality assurance in an international perspective, it's important to remember that manufacturing as well as service sectors is moving around the world and regional free markets are witnessing movement of capital, labour, goods and services. This calls for the need to make sure that graduates are competent and skilled. John Randall, former director of the quality of Assurance in the United Kingdom suggested that by focusing on mutual recognition of qualifications and focus on out-come based approaches, Oman has set the right foundation education by adopting a well defined strategy in the international context. (Randall, 2005)

General view of Higher Education scene in the Sultanate of Oman

Table 1. Higher education governance 2005

Institution	Governing and regulatory body
All institutions of higher education	Council of Higher Education
College of Financial and Banking Studies	Central Bank of Oman
Health institutes	Ministry of Health
Colleges of Education and private colleges	Ministry of Higher Education
Technical colleges	Ministry of Manpower
Sultan Qaboos University	Sultan Qaboos University

Source (Al Lamki, 2002)

The National Forum and Education Strategy in the Sultanate has extensively discussed the area of education governance. It recommended to the Omani Council of Ministers forming the "Education Council" that will represent all entities mentioned above. The

forums proposal also suggested the Ministry of Higher Education should be the government body responsible for supervision all higher education institutions.

Table 3. Requirement s f or Oman’ System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ROSQUALITY ASSURANCE): Standards Categories

The requirement for Oman’s System for Quality Assurance for Higher Education (ROSQA) and the National Qualifications Framework are intended to provide guidance to higher education institutions in quality assurance activities, including planning, self review, and quality improvement, as well as to assist external panels in carrying out independent reviews of institutional performance.

The document states that the proposed performance indicators are given in broad terms and are meant to be illustrative only. It calls for institutions to identify specific indicators that are appropriate for their particular mission and objectives.

1. Mission, Goals and Objectives
2. Governance and Administration
3. Learning and Teaching
4. Student Administrative and Support Services
5. Learning Resources
6. Facilities and Equipment
7. Financial Planning and Management
8. Staffing and Employment Procedures
9. Research

Table 3. Student enrolments in private universities and colleges in the Sultanate of Oman

No.	University/ College	No. of Male students	No. of Female students	Non Omani M.	Non Omani F.
1	Sohar University	420	640	2	-
2	Nizwa University	261	958	-	1
3	Dhofar University	846	505	1	2
4	<i>Majan College</i>	<i>1007</i>	<i>517</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>11</i>
5	Modern College of Business and Science	252	281	23	17
6	Caledonian College of Engineering	973	154	46	11
7	Oman Medical	32	293	15	19

	College				
8	Sur University College	248	282	-	-
9	Waljat College of Applied Science	226	235	90	67
10	Middle East College of Information Technology	625	543	9	3
11	Al Buraimi College	97	176	19	10
12	Scientific College for Design	12	58	1	2
13	Oman College of Administration and Technology	130	83	1	1
14	Al Zahra College	-	1008	-	-
15	Mazoon College	74	987	-	4
16	Gulf College	174	77	1	4
17	Muscat College	208	159	10	2
18	Fire & Safety Engineering College	429	9	127	-
19	Omani Tourism & Hospitality Academy	63	134	1	1
	Total	13,176			

Rationale

The paper seeks to provide evidence about the effectiveness of external quality assurance measures and procedures on the students' perception of the quality of education.

Aims & Objectives

To assess the effectiveness of quality assurance, the research will attempt to answer 3 questions:

- 1) How do students view external quality assurance in their particular institution?
- 2) How do students view the quality of education in their particular institution?
- 3) What is the relationship between the students view on, external quality assurance, and the quality of education?

The Importance of Students' Feedback

A key element of Quality Management is that in any quality programme is that involving all stakeholders in continuous improvement process is the key to success, (Deming, 1993). This means that In the case of higher education students\ views and feedback could play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of education. Analysis of the literature on student feedback, particularly their opinion about the quality of education and quality assurance reveals that the issue has been continually debated.

Emery, Kramer & Tian argue “ Student evaluation of teaching effectiveness is often the most influential information in promotion and tenure decision at colleges and universities focused on teaching” (Emery, Kramer & Tian, 2003). However, Rowley notes that “Despite a long and established tradition of use, practice in this area remains diverse, and research generates debate.” She also adds that there are 3 elements that influence student feedback; objectives of the evaluation process, purposes, data collection, analyses and uses (Rowley, 2003). In addition, Olds & Crumbley argue that student evaluation of the quality of instructors and courses is positively related to their grades (Olds & Crumbley, 2003). Moreover, some authors argue against the validity of student evaluation of teaching. Crumbley, Henry & Kratchman say that, “the use of student evaluations of teaching for personnel decisions is not appropriate” (Crumbley, Henry & Kratchman, 2003).

There a number of local studies that were carried out in Oman has made valuable recommendations concerning improving the quality of education. (Al Jahwari, 1998, Al lamki, 2002, Al Barwani 2005, Al Jardani, 2005) However, there is no evidence that these studies surveyed the rapidly growing students population to analyse their views on quality of higher education. Furthermore, it appears that all the studies above summarised and analysed responses and information from government officials responsible for higher education only.

For this reason this paper explored whether students\ views on quality will be consistent with the international, regional and local studies.

Survey Results and Presentation

I. Methods:

The study used quantitative and qualitative methods in answering the 3-research questions. Due to the fact that private higher education started in Oman in 1995, the research needed responses and experiences Omani students who studied in an Omani Higher education institution. The participants have obtained their degree from a higher education institution that has been implementing some kind of external quality assurance system since 1995. After reviewing the profile of higher education institution in Oman it was found that 13,176 students are enrolled in private higher education institutions.

However, a random sample of 300 graduates from different institutions was selected. Out of the 300 students, 54 students answered a questionnaire, focusing on matters such quality of education, quality of teaching, impact of affiliation to an international university and perceived advantages and disadvantages. Students randomly, this represents 30% of the total number of graduates on the concerned institutions of the year 2003.

A survey of three sections was used to obtain feedback from the students. "With questionnaires the researcher can be sure of obtaining nearly the same information across the various questionnaire respondents as the same set of questions is being asked," (Patton, 1987). In Sections 1 and 2 students were asked to answer open-ended questions about their opinion, either positive or negative, on quality of education and quality assurance. Whereas, in section 3 students were asked to answer multiple choice questions to identify key points related to their view on the effect of external quality assurance on quality of education. The questionnaire was collected with the help of the institutions' admissions and records since it was the most convenient way to contact students.

Analysis of survey results showed that the response rate was 18% (Sample size 300; respondents 54). Students who participated in the survey welcomed the opportunity of giving their opinion about the quality of education in their institution. More than 40% expressed that the quality of their learning experience was satisfactory. Also, About third of the students said that the quality of teaching was satisfactory. In addition, almost half of the participants commented that the overall quality of education was satisfactory.

On the more positive side More than 50 % of the Respondents indicated that there are more advantages than disadvantages to the current external collaboration. However, 20% indicated that external collaboration was seen ineffective.

As far as degrees are concerned, more than half also perceived that having a degree from an international university has a direct impact on their chances for employment. They mentioned that that it gives them a competitive advantage in job market.

Over 60 % of the students emphasized the need for continuous improvement in the quality of facilities and educational technologies used in the institutions.

Table 3. Survey Results

Issue	Response	Excellent	Satisfactory	Poor	Need significant improvement
Quality of learning experience		16%	43%	25%	16%
Quality of teaching		12%	49%	27%	12%
Overall quality of education		12%	59%	18%	11%
Affiliation		40%	7%	13%	40%
Impact of external QUALITY ASSURANCE		35%	18%	9%	38%
Facilities		7%	26%	30%	37%

II. Data Analysis

After obtaining the responses, the answers were summarised and analysed to find out the effectiveness of quality assurance measures, which is the purpose of this study. Additional information from local, regional, international studies documents on higher education o provide evidence on comparability of the study. In addition, the questionnaire results were supplemented with a brief explanation that will draw constructive conclusions.

III. Limitations

As it is the case with all research that involved questionnaires, there were a number of challenges related to the students, questionnaire design, college, and the research. First, analyzing open-ended questions required considerable time and effort. Also, devising a questionnaire that is user friendly and easy to understand needs a lot of work. Second, in relation to the student, some candidates were not serious about answering or returning the questionnaires to the registry even though they have issues related to their registration regularly. Another challenge was that there are colleges that started implementing quality assurance recently, so the concept of external quality assurance was not very clear to students,. Finally, there were very few comparative studies and literature review done in the field students' perception of private higher education, particularly in Oman.

Comparative Studies

Conclusions from a number of studies that the quality of higher education in the Sultanate of Oman in the last few years revealed more similarities than differences. The studies agreed that enhancing the quality of education is not a choice any more; it's a necessity (Al Sarmi, 20005) Similar to this study, local studies confirmed the fact that there the challenges facing the quality of education which include but are not limited to the inability of current higher education system to enhance student creativity and critical thinking skills. The study adds that the challenges that face the higher education system have negative effects on the national economy because of its implications for the competency of the national human resources and their share of the job market.

The joint committee on Private Education has published a study human resources and private higher education in the Sultanate. It encouraged institutions to provide more practical training to students. (JCPE, 2005)

Another study by Al Barwani's focused on Building Quality noted that applying the highest standards of quality should be the main strategic goal for quality building strategy. It also noted that more attention needs to be paid to teaching and learning. In addition, it added that the higher education system should move more towards "Learner-center teaching method."

Al Lamki's study focused the challenge of access, equity and privatization. I came to conclusion that to enhance the quality of higher education strong partnerships need to be established between higher education institutes and the business community in the areas of teaching, research, consultancy, technology transfer, specialized courses, training and development, skill and competency training, apprenticeship, etc.

Other studies also stated that international challenges facing education must be reflected in the strategy. Al Hamami argues, "Educational reforms must on increasing the efficiency of citizens. (Al Hamami, 2005)

Al Mukhaini also confirmed the need to improve the quality of learning and teaching, in addition to upgrading the facilities in all Omani higher education institutions.

As the above studies and the survey suggest, the quality assurance in Omani higher education needs significant improvement in two main areas; Teaching & Learning and educational facilities.

Implications

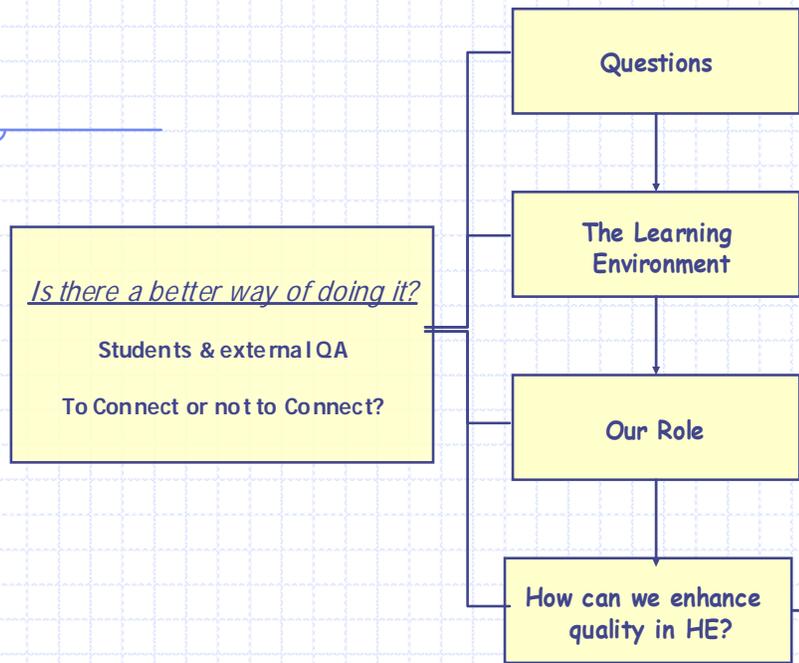
- The first proposition that the study explored was the students' viewed external quality assurance process favorably. The evidence from the survey, supported by local studies revealed a positive disposition towards the external quality assurance. Particularly, the majority of students' survey indicated that affiliation to

an international university is related to quality of education. However, the survey also indicated that there is a need for improvement in terms of adapting external quality assurance to fit in with cultural context. It can be suggested that Sultan Qaboos University could serve in the future the candidate for fulfilling the need for center for higher education excellence.

- The Second proposition that the study sought to discuss was whether students had specific views with regards to quality in higher education institutions. In consistence with quality management literature the students as the main stakeholders in higher education proved to possess strong view with regards over all quality of education, and particularly quality of teaching.
- The recommendations of local, regional and international studies support the conclusion that there is an increasing positive correlation between obtaining an internationally recognized degree and employability.
- Studies done by the authorities on the education strategy also came consistent with students' views. This means that national and international experts as well as students agree that there is an urgent need for improvement in the areas teaching and learning and facilities in Omani higher education institutions.
- Third, based on the survey a direct positive influence of external quality assurance process on students' views on quality of education could not be established. Respondents called for keeping current ties with renowned international universities but focusing on improving the quality of teaching and facilities.

Recommendations

- 1) Identify QA issues, the learning environment, responsibilities, QA enhancement (Figure 1, 2)



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Figure 2

Reengineering HE

Value	Goal	Activity
<i>Teaching & Learning is the main responsibility of HE inst it.</i>	<i>Providing competent human resources</i>	<i>Incorporating creativity</i>
<i>Projects and teamwork mean success</i>	<i>Interact with the private sector & the labour market</i>	<i>Workshops, Research & publications</i>
<i>Educational Technology enhances effective communication</i>	<i>Use the best way to get ideas across</i>	<i>Eliminating the digital divide</i>
<i>QA & best practices is a necessity not an option</i>	<i>Ensure proper delegation & accountability</i>	<i>Doing it right the 1st time</i>

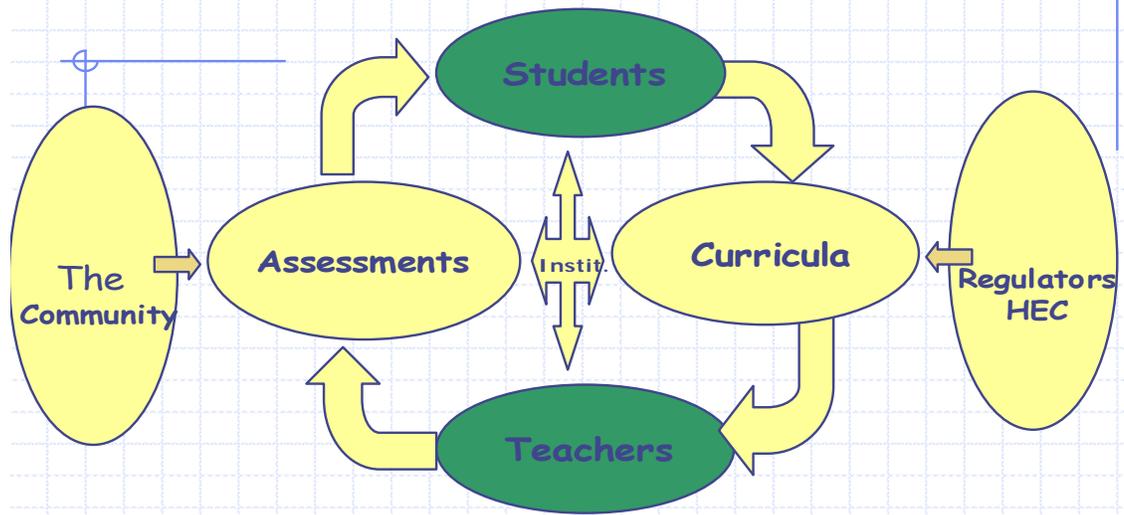
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- 2) Assess Redefine the learning environment to raise awareness of QA (Figure 3)

The Learning Environment

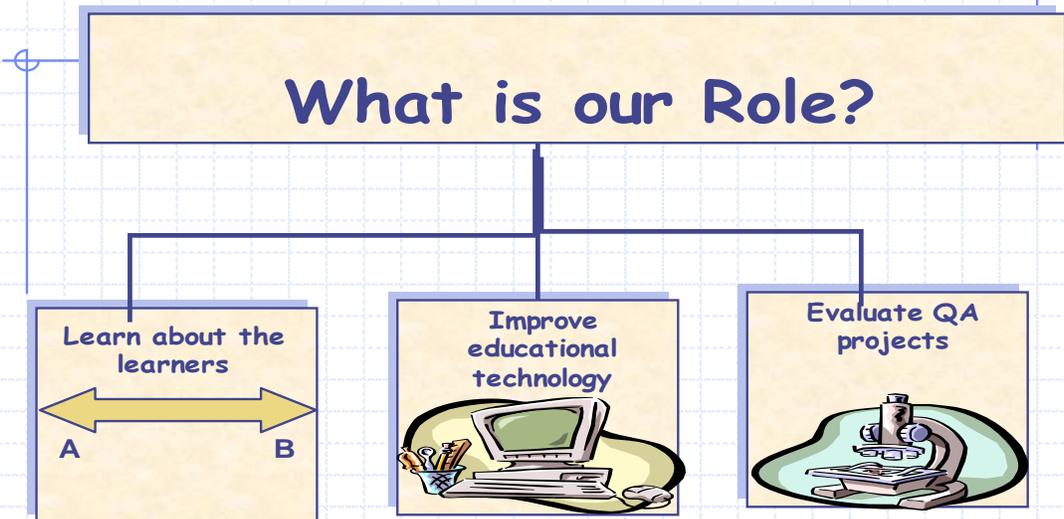


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- 3) Refocus roles & responsibilities to accommodate QA (Figure 4).

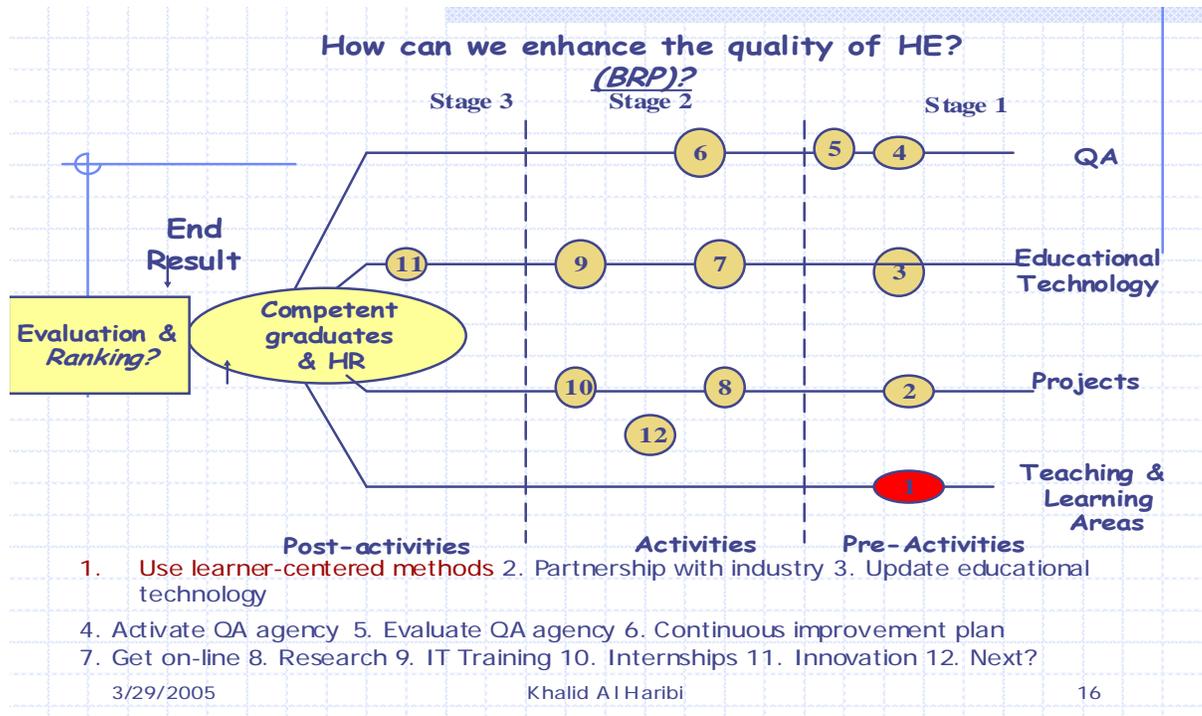


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- 4) Recognise process reengineering opportunities (Figure 5)



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