

# **Facilitating Tertiary Educational Change in the Middle East: from defining cultures to a culture of quality**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, few areas of the world have seen such rapid growth in the tertiary educational sector as the Middle East. This growth is fueled by the Middle East's new economic reality, particularly within those Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). New wealth has led to changes in national self-esteem that have raised educational and career aspirations among multiple stakeholders. Governments of the GCC have responded with the expansion of existing tertiary educational institutions, the creation of new ones, and the establishment of branch campuses of international colleges and universities (Krieger, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). There are also concurrent initiatives to assure quality; for example, the UAE's Ministry of Higher Education is currently encouraging federal institutions to demonstrate international standards. With growth has come an awareness of the need to create a quality culture to ensure tertiary institutions are addressing the needs of all stakeholders. There are innate conflicts in this process as it can be argued that the quality movement has its roots in Western culture and the problematic nature of the transferability of the movement is well documented (*cf* Hofstede, 1981). If left without the careful direction of those responsible for ensuring quality, these groups begin to develop a series of ideas and attitudes that cumulatively form a culture; perceptions of tertiary education tend to color both stakeholder attitudes and involvement.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) experienced rapid growth in the tertiary education sector. These GCC countries include the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Sultanate of Oman. While the GCC has a common geography in the Arabian Peninsula, they also share vast the oil resources of the Arabian Peninsula. For example, the UAE has ten per cent of the world's oil reserves.

Oil revenues have allowed individual countries to dramatically change the standard of living of their citizens. In addition, GCC countries fund other Islamic countries and countries with

significant Muslim populations. For example, since the late 1990s a dozen new Islamic universities emerged in sub-Saharan Africa (Lindow, 2008). These institutions foster Islamic values but simultaneously promote secular approaches to learning (Lindow, 2008).

The explosive growth in tertiary education, fuelled by petro-dollars, enabled GCC member countries to become less dependent on foreign expertise and foster an educated citizenship that could develop and manage the oil industry. In turn, graduates with the financial acumen necessary to manage the oil industry and the profits generated by the industry emerged as an important social group. With the rise of an educated middle class trained in management and technology, the educational aspirations of communities across the GCC have extended naturally from the necessities of business to include esoteric interests.

Current expectations among GCC countries include the need to educate a greater proportion of their citizens in a wider range of disciplines. There are several reasons for this push. For example, in the context of Saudi Arabia, Krieger (2007) suggests that oil exports sustained a continual rise in the standard of living with associated demographic increases. However, the country's higher-education system lags behind, unable to meet demand. For Krieger (2007), segments of the population without tertiary education equates with high levels of unemployment. Without the Saudification of the professional and technical workforce, the reliance on expatriate labour remains high and may well increase. While increasing physical infrastructure will help, Krieger (2007) suggests that the rulers of Saudi Arabia understand that continued growth requires diversification into fields such as petrochemicals and nanotechnology. They know that the country's economy cannot be sustained solely on the selling of oil.

Concurrently, new wealth and initial educational opportunities within the GCC have both engendered positive changes in national self-esteem, which have raised the educational and career aspirations of both students and their parents. Women in particular are beneficiaries of this new worldview. Nevertheless, Asquith (2008) observes that in the case of Qatar, parents prefer that their daughters study at home in local and preferably gender-segregated institutions. The same attitudes sometimes extend to male children who traditionally live at home until marriage. Such values and attitudes reinforce the axial principles of Islam within the region.

Governments of the GCC have responded to the new environment by expanding tertiary education and allowing foreign institutions to establish branch campuses of their colleges or universities (Krieger, 2008a, 2008b). Saudi Arabia, for example, has invested particularly heavily in tertiary education. However, although the Ministry of Higher Education emerged in 1975 with clear goals to educate the population, by 2003 only eight public universities served a population of 22 million people. In 2004, the Kingdom embarked on an effort to expand and reform higher education, increasing the ministry's budget threefold by 2007, opening more than 100 new colleges and universities. Krieger (2007) noted that King Abdullah provided \$10 billion of his personal wealth to establish a graduate-level science and technology university. This bequest instantly made the institution one of the wealthiest universities in the world.

The establishment of branch campuses of universities has had mixed success. Some are little more than storefronts, with minimal numbers of students and limited degree offerings while others are fully-fledged and well-funded universities with high standards. While many

universities have met with success, a concern exists about whether supply now outstrips demand. George Mason University (GMU) of Virginia in the United States of America, for example, recently closed its doors. According to the press release accompanying the announcement, GMU was unable to reach an agreement with its partner on a budget and administrative structure that, in (GMU's) judgment would have assured GMU's "ability to provide an education that meets Mason standards" (Zacharias & Bardsley, 2009).

The remainder of this paper articulates the development and importance of the quality movement and highlights the role of a quality body in the UAE. Aspects of the quality processes in relation to local and foreign institutions are canvassed. While it can be argued that in this environment, quality processes are neutral because policies and regulations per se define and standardize quality practices and improvement in higher education, the introduction of people into the process brings a cultural dimension to decision-making. The final part of the paper examines the cultural architecture of quality process in cross-cultural education settings generally.

### **A Concern for Quality**

An awareness that a quality culture ensures that tertiary institutions are addressing the needs of all stakeholders has accompanied economic growth. The works of leading thinkers like Edwards Deming, Joseph Juran and Kaoru Ishikawa helped shaped attitudes toward quality and quality management to the extent quality management today is in its post-theory phase. In the export field, the application of quality management principles to industry improved industrial in Japan and the US. In the areas of industry and economics, bodies like the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (1987) have become commonplace benchmarks for determining quality. In the

field of education, the growth of agencies that belong to INQAAHE highlight the fact that individual nations also embrace the quality movement in the education sector.

### **Ensuring Quality through Processes**

While quality assurance standards are well-known to people in the field, an example of the generic role of a quality assurance body in the UAE is provided below. Initiatives to assure quality are now commonplace across the GCC. For example, the UAE's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) is currently encouraging federal institutions to demonstrate international standards within their operations. This body is responsible for leading and coordinating higher education and academic planning for the UAE higher education sector.

Through program reviews, data acquisition, policy development and strategic planning, MHESR seeks to advance higher education and promote institutional cooperation and collaboration.

The CAA mission includes helping to ensure that the three components of the system, the United Arab Emirates University, Zayed University (ZU) and the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) deliver programs that align to the needs of the nation. Planning for the future of higher education and fostering inter-institutional cooperation and collaboration is also a goal of MHESR.

The three federal institutions all come under MHESR's umbrella and all are subject to a quality assurance process of the Higher Education Coordination Council, which is a body in the UAE representative of the three institutions. In addition to the Coordinating Council, all three institutions are accredited by a number of external accreditation bodies for their programs. A US regional accrediting body also accredits ZU and the other two Institutions are actively seeking accreditation through US agencies. The federal institutions are encouraged to seek international

accreditation for their programs. HCT currently has accreditation for programs in five out of six of its academic divisions and is seeking accreditation for all its Higher Diploma and Bachelor level programs. HCT is also in the process of institutional improvement to be in a position to gain international accreditation for the Institution.

The Ministry is also responsible for the National Admissions and Placement Office (NAPO), established in 1996. NAPO's role is to improve students' transition from secondary to higher education and to coordinate on a system-wide basis, a new, decentralized admission process for the UAE higher education system ([www.mohe.gov.ae/napo/](http://www.mohe.gov.ae/napo/)). Today, NAPO works closely with the newly formed Higher Education Coordination Council.

### **Accreditation of Private Institutions**

The Commission on Academic Accreditation (CAA) is part of the Ministry and responsible for ensuring that private institutions operating in the UAE meet quality standards. The mission of CAA "is to promote educational excellence across diverse institutions of higher learning in the UAE. Through licensure of colleges and universities and the accreditation of individual programs, the CAA strives to maintain high quality education "consistent with international standards" ([www.caa.gov.ae/caa](http://www.caa.gov.ae/caa)).

There has been a rapid expansion in the UAE of private tertiary education providers, particularly from overseas. The CAA has licensed 57 Institutions since 2000 and accredited 346 programs. Several others are in the pipeline. CAA bases its standards and criteria on a US model, adapted for implementation in the UAE where the licensure applies to the entire institution and all its

activities. To be licensed, institutions must meet ten standards and their criteria covering all major institutional activities. The licensure requirements and the standards specify a number of documents for institutions to develop and keep current for various audiences.

### **Licensure**

Only after being granted licensure may an institution apply for accreditation for an academic program, which must be obtained before the institution can advertise programs, recruit and enroll students. A criterion for each of the ten standards determines whether the institution fulfils that standard. Each criterion must be met to achieve licensure.

Licensure signifies that the institution has a mission appropriate to higher education and possesses the governance structure, by-laws, regulations, policies, procedures and physical and financial resources to accomplish its mission. It also signifies that academic programs, faculty, other personnel and quality assurance measures are sufficient to achieve the institution's mission. Licensure is initially granted for up to five years, after which time the institution applies to renew its license. This renewal then occurs every five years thereafter. A licensed institution is required to identify its status as licensed by the Ministry in all documents and advertising and to comply with the CAA's requirement for reporting data annually.

### **Program approval**

To assure prospective students, their families and the public that the academic programs offered by institutions licensed in the UAE meet international standards, each program must be individually accredited. The *Standards for Licensure and Accreditation* and the institution's

program proposal or program self-study that address these standards in terms of the program, provide the basis for review by CAA staff and a committee of international experts who assess each program both through paper documentation and a campus visit.

After the review, the visiting committee and the CAA recommend an action concerning accreditation to MHESR, which decides whether accreditation is to be granted. Licensed and independent institutions in the UAE must receive program accreditation for each academic program they plan to offer before recruiting students or enrolling them. All programs offered by the institution must continue to be accredited.

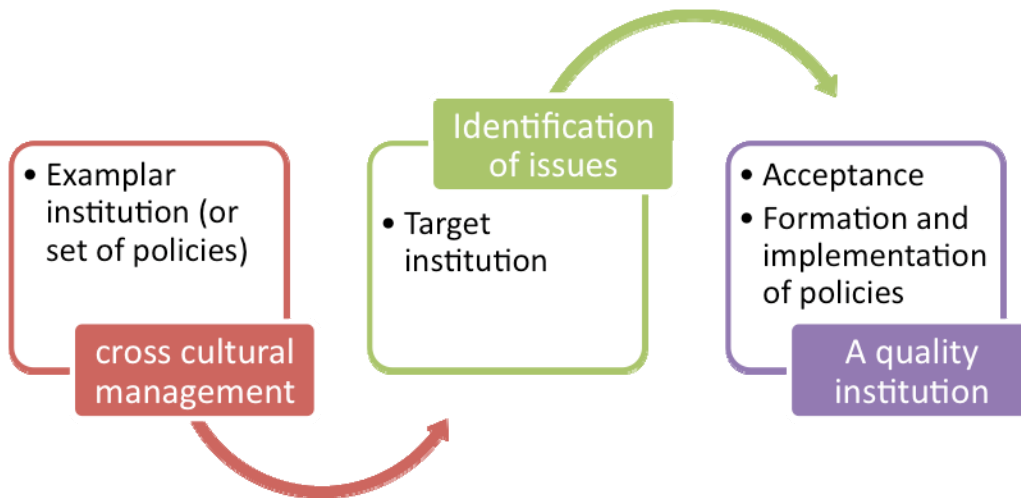
### **Diverse Stakeholders in UAE Education**

While the mechanics of quality and accreditation processes described above may be relatively easy to negotiate, stakeholder groups in tertiary education in the UAE often hold diverse expectations concerning the roles and functions of quality processes in a tertiary institution. The greatest conflicts are likely to come from clashes between foreign and local cultures. For example, Wright, Berrell and Gloet (2008), discuss the role of national culture in China, which is a high context society (*cf.* Adler, 2002; Hall, 1976). In high-context societies and cultures, the desire to deal with the specifics of a situation, a predisposition for long-term relationships and the comfort found in dealing with family and insiders is evident (p. 798). A similar observation might be made of the high-context Arab culture in general. It is essential, when dealing with quality issues in institutions where cultural diversity is the norm, that stakeholders take the time to understand the differences between the national cultures of their institutions and constantly



seek advice about how to move quality forward. The figure below sketches a holistic approach to managing quality in diverse cultural settings.

**Figure 1. Managing Quality across Cultures**



However, for such a model to work there needs to be effective management within the institution or organization that assesses effectively and deals expediently with problems created by a clash of national cultures. Berrell, Gloet and Wright (2002) suggest that the process of learning is fundamental to maintain equilibrium in diverse cultural settings. They also suggest “effective organizational learning and effective management practices are inextricably linked. National culture drives management behaviour, to the extent that different styles of management learning and management decision making are the result of a culture’s pervasive influence” ( p. 97).

Moreover, there are innate conflicts in the quality movement because the quality movement has its roots in Western culture. The problematic nature of the transferability of the principles of the movement across cultures is implicit in the work of Hofstede (1981). Hofstede (1994, 2009)

suggests that there are distinct national and regional cultural groups. The behavior of these groups in social and organizational settings is consistent over time. Hofstede provides one framework among many available by which to interpret the influences of the independent dimensions of a national culture. Hofstede (2009) identifies and describes the function of five dimensions. First, *power distance* involves the degree to which people accept the unequal distribution of power. The *individualism vs. collectivism* dimension sees that some societies are more loosely bound compared to other societies where family and social bonds are much stronger. The dimension of *masculinity vs. femininity* identifies cultures where greater emphasis is placed on a balance between gender roles. For Hofstede (1994), the dimension of *uncertainty avoidance* sees that some national cultures have a greater tolerance for ambiguity as opposed to others that prefer more structure and certainty. A *long-term vs. short-term orientation* is a measure of the extent to which a culture programs its members to accept delayed gratification of their various needs. The complexity of these dimensions suggests that cross-cultural environments are problematic for the managers of quality processes.

Without the careful direction of those responsible for ensuring quality in cross-cultural educational institutions, groups may begin to develop a series of ideas and attitudes that cumulatively coalesce into an opposition sub-culture. Perceptions about the purpose, structure and nature of tertiary education tend to color both the attitudes and involvement of stakeholder.

In considering the development of a tertiary institution's quality culture, it is necessary to examine the implicit and explicit cultural dimensions of both the target institution and the individuals and organizations engaged in the implementation process. For example, implicit

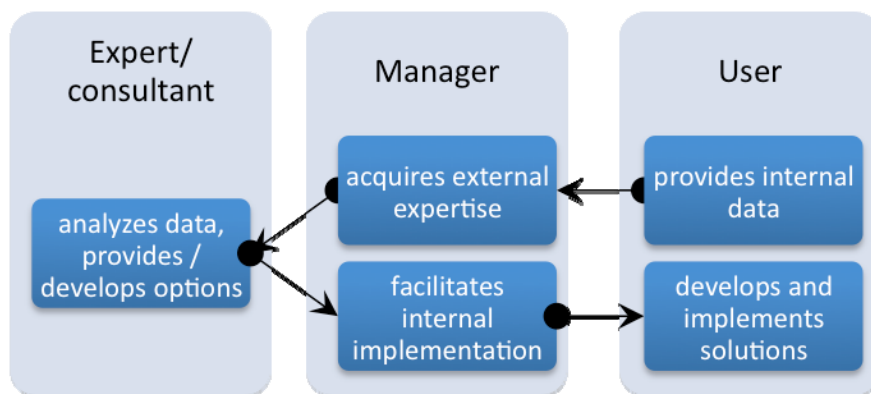
culture includes those aspects of a culture that are internalized and not necessarily discussed or displayed in an open way. In the Middle East, *wasta*, often translated as relationships, may be more accurately described as influence or clout. In the tertiary academic setting, *wasta* might influence the awarding of contracts, the appointment of faculty or managers and the weighting of opinion. Explicit culture includes those aspects that are externalized and more accessible—although not necessarily fully comprehensible at the same level to a person outside of a particular culture. An example of explicit culture in the Middle East might be the separation of men and women in Arabic society that, as a general principle is clear but manifested in varying degrees. For example, most Arabic women in the UAE wear traditional apparel while others choose an alternative code of dress.

The dimensions described above can be found operating subtly across respective national, academic, organizational and management cultures (*cf.* Arnove and Torres 2007; Nathan, 2008). They exist deeply embedded within the stakeholders of the target institution and those advocating change for that institution. For example, Middle Eastern and Western attitudes toward co-educational settings and relations with stakeholders have a significant influence on stakeholders when educational outcomes are considered. Differences driven by national culture can form the basis for conflicts between a tertiary institution and its stakeholders. This is especially the case when all stakeholders fail to recognize, address, and accommodate their cultural differences.

A way to address these differences in decision-making in an educational institution is to use an approach that encourages the convergence of expert opinion (*cf.* Saaty, 1980). The opportunity

for convergence ensures the facilitation of effective and lasting change necessary for a sustainable quality culture. Derived from Saaty's approach, we advocate a flow of information that examines and identifies differences while simultaneously looking for commonalities. In the Middle Eastern tertiary education model, the expert/consultant is often the expatriate while the manager is the local decision-maker. Information flows from the user through the manager to the expert or consultant and back down through the manager and user again to achieve implementation.

**Figure 2. A Convergence Model for Quality Decision-making**



## Conclusion

The processes of the exploration of the cultural dimensions of quality assurance, particularly in the context of a tertiary educational institution in rapid flux, highlight the critical role of the expatriate expert and the local manager. The success of the quality movement in such institutions is likely to depend on the abilities and willingness of both parties to identify the implicit and explicit issues that drive their relationships. An awareness of cultural difference is a first step to avoiding the costly mistakes of trying to import an expatriate tertiary education culture wholesale into a host environment, without due consideration of local beliefs and attitudes. We suggest the

use of the approach described above in Figures 1 and 2 will improve the quality process in cross-cultural educational environments like the Middle East.

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