Theme: New Approaches To Quality Assurance In The Changing World Of Higher Education

Title: Towards a New Higher Education Quality Assurance System for Lebanon

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Abstract:

Higher education is central to economic and political development, and vital to competitiveness in an increasingly globalizing knowledge society. In the case of Lebanon, higher education institutions are challenged to adjust their program structures, curricula, teaching and learning modes & methods to preserve their leading role in the Arab region. In recognition of this challenge, greater attention is being focused on quality assurance as a critical factor to ensuring higher education relevance . This paper outlines and describes the current situation, the Tempus project " Quality Assurance for Higher Education in Lebanon (QAHEL"), and the future plans for quality assurance in Lebanon.

Key Words: Quality – Higher Education (HE) – Tempus - Quality Assurance (QA) – QAHEL Project.

Introduction

Higher education has a role as the change agent to prepare informed, responsible citizens able to work effectively in a global multicultural context. In the time of conflict, conversions through education is the optimal platform aiming to attract students from all faiths, nationalities and cultures. Although Lebanon lacks natural resources, it is blessed with human capital that has now become the backbone of any modern economy that is knowledge based and technology intensive [1].

The social demand for higher education in Lebanon has been growing over the past fifteen years. The higher education system is therefore expanding and students enrolment increased from 115000 in 1995 to 173000 in 2008 [2].
This was actually one of the reasons which led to tremendous growth in the private provision of higher education in Lebanon over the last fifteen years. During the 1996-2000 period 23 institutions (currently referred to as new universities) were established to accommodate for this growing demand for higher education in Lebanon. Currently, Higher education in Lebanon is provided by 41 colleges and universities. Only one of them is a public institution: The Lebanese University [2].

The Lebanese higher education system is also increasingly affected by globalization. Recent advances in regional integration processes and trade agreements, as well as

ICT, have led to growing potential for the international movement of goods, capital and persons [3]. This has led to a significant effect on the structure, content and delivery of the Lebanese higher education system and a pressure on the system to make sure that its qualifications are internationally comparable and recognized by the international labor market [4].

The rise in initiatives aimed at promoting the globalization of higher education, in particular the rapid development of crossborder higher education have underlined an increasingly urgent need to establish robust frameworks for quality assurance and the recognition of qualifications [5].

Concerns over Lebanon's ability to keep its regional reputation in higher education and maintain the quality of its higher education system are mounting. Demand for accountability and trust is thus raised on governmental agendas, along with politicians, market sector and citizens requiring more assurance that the Lebanese higher education institutions (HEIs) offer an adequate provision of services to society and the public at large [6].

In this environment, it is necessary to put the Lebanese higher education system on its journey to performance and quality excellence in a highly competitive world.

For these reasons, the need to improve the quality in the Lebanese HE sector and the reform of the Lebanese HE system is now on the top of the Ministry's agenda [7]. This is actually consistent with what was included in the EU country strategy paper (Lebanon 2007-2013) [8] that the reform of the Lebanese HE system is a priority area, with the World Bank Report *"The Road not Traveled"* which recommended more emphasis on quality assurance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as the corner stone for the reform processes [9] and with the recommendations of the conference of Arab ministers of HE in Dubai 2007.

This paper presents an overview about the existing situation in Lebanon, the QAHEL Tempus project, and the future requirements that will help Lebanon demonstrate its firm commitment to promote a better understanding of quality excellence and to develop a "world-class" higher education system that is consistent with international quality standards.

Current Situation

Currently, the Lebanese higher education system comprises two key higher education committees namely the Technical Committee and the Equivalency Committee. These committees are in charge of the quality in higher education in respect to licensing, auditing, and institutions/programs validation. The work of these committees is based on some laws and bylaws that go back to the 1960s and early 1990s.

The technical committee developed a list of detailed indicators based on these laws that it uses for licensing and auditing purposes of HEIs and higher education programs. The list covers areas such as the legal entity, the constitution and regulations (responsibility, composition…) of councils (Board of Trustees, university council, departmental council, scientific council…), teaching staff regulations (classification, evaluation, promotion…), teaching system and regulations (annual, semester credits, ECTS…), students system and regulations (admission, evaluation…), structure (faculties, departments…), curricula, programs, scientific

equipments, laboratories, libraries, geographical locations, buildings, greenery areas, parking areas and playgrounds.

The equivalence Committee, created in 1955, is responsible for recognizing the degrees of private HEIs inside Lebanon through an evaluation process of the corresponding programs and giving equivalence to HE degrees from outside Lebanon. The committee takes into consideration the accreditation decisions from internationally recognized accreditation agencies outside Lebanon.

There is a need to integrate the efforts of these committees and making them compatible with the required standards on the regional and international levels. This is actually needed because it will help in developing the Lebanese criteria and in overcoming some of the existing problems such as "non-periodic evaluation". The Lebanese system should initiate the periodic institutional/program audit through a Lebanese agency for quality assurance that will be able to perform the duties of both committees discussed above. This integration will assist as well in catering to the diversity of higher education systems applied in Lebanon (Arab, European, Canadian, American…).

QAHEL TEMPUS Project

The Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies (Tempus) aim is to create an area of co-operation and support the modernisation of higher education in countries surrounding the European Union in contribution to the globalisation challenge facing higher education institutions [10].

The idea of QAHEL TEMPUS project is to benefit from the European experience in the field of quality assurance and to illustrate to the Lebanese higher education institutions the advantages and challenges linked to the development of quality management in higher education.

Many kinds of models have been used in Europe, from participative models to more centralised approaches, depending on the history, economical and social circumstances of a country. For countries outside Europe, this multiplicity represents an opportunity to check and decide what approach could be the most appropriate if they want to adopt a national/institutional quality system of their own.

The general objective of this project is to make the Lebanese higher education institutions aware of the European higher education quality models and to allow them to benefit from the European experiences in the field of quality assurance. The specific objectives were set to assist Lebanese HEI meet the quality challenges discussed above. These objectives include:

- Design and Develop three guides in quality assurance for higher education.
- Train Lebanese academics in the field.
- Encourage and help higher education institutions to establish their own institutional quality centres.

- Benefit from this programme as a base for institutional self-improvement in the field.

The project consortium Members are:

- University of Sunderland – UK – Grantholder.
- CERAM Sophia Antipolis European School of Business – France.
- External Expert : Dr. Andris Barblan.
- Directorate General of Higher Education – Lebanon.
- Modern University for Business and Science (Formerly MECAT) – Lebanon – Project Coordinator.
- Beirut Arab University – Lebanon.
- American University of Beirut – Lebanon.
- Hariri Canadian University – Lebanon.

The diversity of university systems in Lebanon (American, British, Canadian, Egyptian and French) was taken into consideration when selecting the consortium members to accommodate for the different affiliated educational systems. During the first meeting the Minister of Education & Higher Education expressed his interest to extend the implementation to cover all operating Universities in Lebanon.

To achieve the project objectives, a steering committee was formed from the representatives of the Universities and the ministry. The steering committee agreed to:

- Evaluate Quality in Lebanon now (How do you see yourself?)
- Set a target of where do they want to be (How do you see others and others see you)
- Manage the change (design a strategy with training Guides)

QAHEL Main Outcomes

To evaluate "quality in Lebanon now", the Lebanese steering committee developed a questionnaire which includes closed-ended questions covering the most important areas adopted by international quality assurance agencies. These quality assurance areas are: mission statements, goals, program planning, student admission, academic appointments, academic staff appraisal, support services, research, self and external evaluation, benchmarking, governance, non-academic quality issues (attractiveness of campus, positive attitude of staff…).

The questionnaire included as well a couple of open-ended questions with two main objectives. The first is to identify other (not included in the questionnaire) important QA mechanisms and procedures that respondents think are important for the Lebanese HE sector, the second is to identify the problems and gaps facing the Lebanese HEIs in the field of quality assurance.

The questionnaire was distributed by the Lebanese Directorate General of Higher Education to the 41 HEIs in Lebanon.

The findings showed important problems and gaps in the system. The lack of laws, national agency, national standards and guidelines for quality assurance process and lack of accreditation procedures were mentioned by 62.5% of responding universities. These were the mostly mentioned problems or gaps. Other problems included:

- Lack of understanding of the quality assurance system
- The political and sectarian interference
- Lack of faculty and staff development
- Lack of adequate library facilities
- Lack of cooperation and coordination
- Delays in posting new decrees on the Ministry's website

The findings are consistent with the identified problems associated to the current quality system in Lebanon, as mentioned when the two committees were discussed above.

The QAHEL project outcomes included the development and dissemination of three quality assurance guides which suggest QA standards and performance indicators for the Lebanese higher education institutions. The guides cover the areas of: introduction to quality management, self evaluation, quality audits and accreditation for Higher Education institutions. The main purposes of the three guides are to:

- Safeguard and promote public confidence in the quality of higher education in Lebanon.
- Assist institutions in enhancing the quality of their provision.
- Ensure that there is clarity and transparency in quality assurance processes and outcomes.
- Provide a measure of accountability.

Guide I "Introduction to Quality Management in Higher Education" [11]
Guide I specific objective is to provide basic knowledge about quality management as applied to higher education and to encourage a culture of quality improvement in higher education institutions.

This guide reviews current approaches to quality management in higher education. The development team explores why there is a concern for quality, what is meant by quality and how quality can be assured; the team draws on the arrangements for dealing with quality in higher education in a variety of countries and refers to some key publications [12]. The team discussed as well the application of total quality management (TQM) and ISO 9000 to a higher education institution, the main international quality awards, and quality tools applicable to higher education [13]. The guide includes a valuable and comprehensive glossary offering some definitions and explanations of some of the terminology in the literature.

Guide II "Self-Evaluation in Higher Education Institutions" [14]
Guide II specific objective is to suggest performance indicators and standards for quality assurance for the Lebanese higher education institutions.

This guide defines the self-evaluation process in higher education institutions, its purpose, benefits, guidelines, and recommended areas for evaluation (management of the institution, partnerships and cooperation, research, graduate programs, programs

and curricula, faculty and staff, students and student infrastructure, services and facilities). Guide II describes a range of self-evaluation forms as part of a process of exchange of good practice, in order to enable colleagues in higher education institutions worldwide to learn from each others' experiences and to develop appropriate customized practices for their own institutions. In addition, Guide II focuses on means by which self-evaluation can concentrate on process as well as practice, leading to continuous improvement across the board.

Guide III "Quality Audits and Accreditation" [15]
Guide III specific objective is to enhance the knowledge of Lebanese academics about higher education audit/accreditation processes and methodologies as applied in the regional and international context.
This guide is divided into two main parts: Quality audits and accreditation. The first part serves as a guide to learning and applying the basics of quality auditing in higher education institutions, and expands on the basic auditing principles by showing how the quality audit can be used to improve the higher education institution overall performance. It includes a background and history of quality auditing in higher education institutions, a general model for auditing any higher education institution quality management system, auditor competencies and qualifications, and an explanation of audit reports and the role of the auditor after the report. Part II of the guide defines accreditation, discusses what ends it serves, its different types, its success factors, international and Lebanese accreditation experiences in this field.

Future Plans

As we have seen, there is an urgent need to enhance the quality of the Lebanese higher education system and to establish a Lebanese National Quality Assurance Agency which is expected to play a key role in influencing higher education in Lebanon to move in quality to performance excellence by addressing different functions including:

- Setting criteria for HE standards based on the QAHEL outcomes.
- Promoting and disseminating good practice of quality assurance in higher education in Lebanon by determining the range, scope and general orientation of the quality assurance schemes and processes to be applied which will include accreditation, validation, approval, monitoring and review.
- Assessments related to the initial opening of programs and institutions (in a variety of delivery modes).
- Supervision of the current functioning (institutions/programs).
- Granting accreditation.
- The dissemination of information on the recognition and accreditation status of both institutions and programs.
- Integrating the efforts of both the technical and the equivalence committees in Lebanon.

To achieve this overall objective of establishing a national agency for quality assurance in Lebanon, the Lebanese ministry of Education & Higher Education along

with higher education stakeholders (higher education institutions, students, teachers, researchers, professional bodies, employers…) should collaborate, partner and agree on the establishment, functions, resources, organization structure, autonomy and accountability of this agency.

Conclusion

Both the QAHEL project and the proposed national quality agency are merely a starting point for enhancing quality assurance policy and practice in Lebanon. In fact, they emphasize a generic approach that has relevance to all higher education institutions regardless of the level of development and size. The three guides and the proposed agency promote a total approach to quality by providing standards and indicators for the Lebanese HE sector which are helpful in identifying improvement opportunities and in improving transparency and accountability of higher education institutions and practices in Lebanon. Accordingly, they should be regarded as an agreed point of reference for continuous enhancement and for aspiring towards international best practice.

Finally, they are meant to provide as well a strategic direction on the dimensions of quality by helping to align the quality processes and activities throughout the Lebanese HE institutions with international codes of best practice in higher education quality assurance, and serving to focus attention on the means of achieving better Lebanese HE institutional performance.

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