

INQAAHE Conference – April 2013

Sub theme three: Impact of QA and the effects of external and internal QA: regional perspectives to a shared issue

Topic: Reporting on information showing anticipated and unanticipated effects of the introduction of quality assurance processes on different dimensions of HEIs; Perceptions of the changes that QA has promoted in the higher education institutions they are associated.

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Audio-visual requirements: data projector with laptop

Title: *Using Quality Assurance Mechanisms to Enhance Change and Organizational Learning*

Abstract

The study presents how the national quality assurance system was used in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to lead change and organizational learning in Saudi Arabia. It investigates the stakeholders' perceptions and patterns related to the levels of implementation and change caused by QA procedures used to close the loop at all levels. In addition, it elaborates on assessment and reflection methods used within the system to encourage continuous improvements and institutional learning and how they interacted with the organizational cultures.

Background

World class universities seem to have attained successes through their organizational skills in using quality mechanisms, and cascading and aligning them at the different levels so they can be very powerful tools for creating collective learning, change, and improvement. However, newly established universities, like those of Saudi Arabia, may not have the required experience using these skills.

In order to elevate the HEIs to the level of world class universities, Saudi NCAAA Quality Assurance System addresses spiral quality assessment and improvement cycles at all levels involving people in implementation, making reviews, improvements, and planning, sharing exploring and reflections that make collective learning through “Loops”. Institutions used Quality Assurance (QA) exercises through documentation and strategic plans put in place by institutional quality assurance leaders, and the level of their impact on change and learning is still to be discovered.

Purpose of the study

This paper argues that QA systems is a critical enabler for organizational learning and change and that QA mechanisms needs to be used in a learning organization as continuous improvement tools (Garvin, 1993).

The questions addressed in this study are:

-How Saudi Universities used QA mechanisms to lead change and facilitate organizational learning? What is the effect of organizational culture on these processes?

Theoretical Framework

The "learning organization" is defined in this study as "*the one which focuses on organizational change and “engaging employees' hearts and minds in a continuous, harmonious, productive change, designed to achieve required results that the stakeholders want” with “the capacity to shift away from views inherent in a traditional hierarchical organization, toward the ability of all employees to challenge prevailing thinking and gain a balanced perspective”.*

Characteristics of a learning organization are: systems thinking, building shared vision, team learning, mental models, and personal mastery (Senge, 1990; Chris Argyris, 1997). This concept can be implemented by NCAAA system through the processes of Quality Assurance that address quality cycle and involving people at all levels in implementation, making reviews, improvements, and planning, and sharing exploring and reflections that make collective learning. (figure 1)

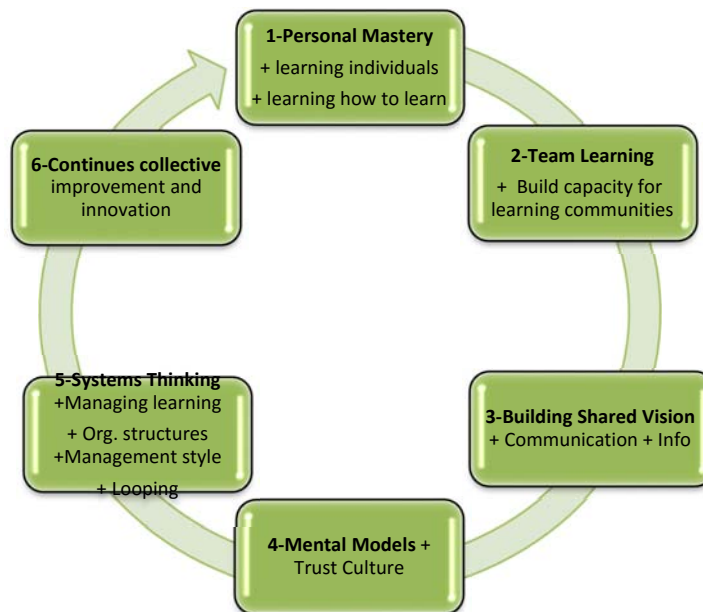


Figure 1: Model of LO and Change

The concepts of organizational learning and change did not emerge until the 1980s, but their background and principles can be traced back into many perspectives of management (Cook & Yanow, 2007). Garvin (1993) defines learning organization as an organization “skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insight”.

Some of the organization learning and change elements are embedded within QA and QM framework. (Chen, 2007; Scott, 2011; Hubber, 1991). They were reflected in Deming and Juran’s quality control system using quality circles, SPC (statistical process control) and PDSA (plan-do-study-action). A few studies investigated the popularity of the concepts, such as Argyris and Schon’s (1978) double-loop learning notion, Senge’s (1990) the ‘Fifth Discipline’ and Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell (1991) learning company model.

Argyris and Schön (1978) distinguish between three levels of learning – single-loop learning: questioning how things are done; double-loop learning: questioning underlying purposes and why things are done; and triple-loop learning: questioning essential principles on which the organization is based, and challenging its mission, vision, market position and culture. Double-loop and Deutero learning are concerned with the why and how to change the organization while single-loop learning is concerned with accepting change without questioning underlying assumptions and core beliefs.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach and is emergent by nature, where themes become evident as the report unfolds. It used a case study approach with naturalistic inquiry of stakeholders, where Saudi Arabia is the focus of the study, and the HEIs are the elements of the case. The interpretation of the researcher was integral to the study. Exemplary incidences of changes as experienced by the stakeholders portrayed a holistic picture of the transition. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that those who conduct qualitative or naturalistic inquiry prefer the case reporting model as opposed to a technical or scientific report. Open-ended question surveys and snowball sample interviews were used. Participants were purposefully selected who could add to the depth of understanding about organizational learning and change during the time of implementing. The first respondents suggested additional participants and guided me to information that added depth and value to the study. In addition, extensive review of documents, observations, interviews and physical evidence provided data for the study. Gaining access to information involved gatekeepers and gaining their confidence that information was handled appropriately. Numerous communication pieces were available as primary data sources to following implementing Saudi QA system including news releases, magazine articles, internal newsletters, and web pages. These and other archival records served as collateral for this case study. Data are being analyzed at present.

Results and conclusions

The HEIs were classified based on patterns, and success factors were identified. Full results and conclusions will be displayed .

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