

The Role of Heads of Department in Achieving Quality: A Case Study of a High-Ranking University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (0036)

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Paper

Universities in many countries are currently being asked to do more with less. In order to maintain a competitive advantage in the global knowledge economy, countries want their universities to expand, but, in an age of austerity, the increase in student numbers is not often matched by a corresponding increase in government funding. University administrators and academics, alike, want to know how to achieve quality and how to maintain it during a period of rapid growth. This is as much a concern in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) as it is in the UK (Onsman, 2011).

Saudi higher education has developed rapidly in the last decade and her universities are expected to achieve both national and international benchmarks. In 2004, the National Commission of Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) was established in order to monitor quality in the HE sector and help Saudi universities become more globally competitive. To this end, the Commission has adapted international practices and standards; however, critics contend that these are not necessarily applicable to the Saudi context and are not equally pertinent to all programmes. The challenges of implementing national accreditation standards make it difficult to achieve accreditation at a national level through NCAAA. As opposed to this, international accreditation is much more accessible and easier to acquire for Saudi universities. Therefore, an analysis of the national quality assurance process and the current criteria is an important first-step in bringing Saudi HE quality assurance more in line with international academic expectations and standards.

Whilst there is a growing body of research about the role of heads of department (Floyd, 2012; Floyd & Dimmock, 2011; Gibbs et al., 2007; Knight & Trowler, 2001; Meek et al., 2010; Mercer & Pogolian, 2013; Sotirakou, 2004), not many studies look specifically at quality assurance (QA) and almost none of them emanate from the KSA. The case study being reported here attempts to fill this gap by addressing the following research questions:

- 1) How, if at all, do HoDs at an elite Saudi University assure quality within their departments?
- 2) What factors are said to help and/or hinder HoDs trying to achieve departmental quality?
- 3) How can the selection and development of HoDs be improved so that they can better ensure the desired quality?

Adopting a case study approach, the research explores the role of HoDs in achieving quality in a high-ranking university in Saudi Arabia. It identifies the factors that

facilitate and hinder the quality assurance process, concentrating on those over which HoDs have some control; it also considers whether changing the way HoDs are selected is likely to result in better quality teaching and/or research. 300 questionnaires were distributed, 120 to HoDs and 180 to other-level/rank staff, including deputy HoDs and Deans. Out of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 80 were returned (55 from Heads of Department, 10 from Deans and 15 from other senior managers). Follow-up interviews were conducted with a total of 36 people. Out of these, 15 interviews were taken from HoDs while the remaining with other stakeholders, such as Deans of College, Heads of Quality Units and Heads of Departmental Quality Committees.

The study is genuinely ground-breaking because both male and female Saudi academics were interviewed face-to-face, which is not the norm in a conservative society affected by gender segregation.

The study contributes to both theory and practice in the areas of HE leadership and quality achievement. Theoretically, the research provides an insight into how quality is understood by key stakeholders in the Saudi Higher Education context. Moreover, in practical terms, the findings are informing the development of a set of criteria for HoDs' appointment and training material.

The findings indicate that HoDs play an important role in the process of achieving quality and that most embrace their QA role despite some significant challenges. These include a lack of financial and administrative autonomy (despite relatively high levels of government spending), a lack of QA training and alleged resistance from colleagues. Moreover, there is lack of direct involvement of the HoDs in the quality implementation process. This may explain the disparity between expectations and obtained results. HoDs are usually appointed by senior management and serve for only two years. This makes it harder for them to exercise long-term leadership and achieve consistent quality. Another issue is a reported lack of systematic criteria for the selection of HoDs. This contributes to an overall lack of consistency regarding both academic quality and departmental leadership. Finally, the teaching and research workload that HoDs are expected to bear and the amount of time spent on administration seriously impedes quality achievement in Saudi HE.

The research also collected data from senior management in the selected university. Participants stated that their role in quality at the department level is that of facilitative, and not authoritative. It is interesting to note that challenges in assuring quality identified by the participants from this category are to some extent similar to those mentioned by HoDs. They include a lack of financial and administrative autonomy and a lack of continuation in implementing quality system because of the rotation system of role. Moreover, a closed culture where people do not feel comfortable in talking about quality openly and learning from poor experiences also results in underperformance in quality achievement. A non-committal attitude of HoDs to quality; and bureaucratic hurdles; are identified as important challenges. The senior management suggested providing HoDs with more financial and administrative autonomy; and building their capacities as factors important for quality achievement.

The presentation provides a useful contribution to the conference theme of "Converging Concepts in Global Higher Education Research: Local, National and

International Perspectives”. Although the KSA is governed by an absolute monarchy with a relatively short history of Higher Education, the need for quality in educational leadership is just as pressing as in the developed world since the problems faced by university HoDs are surprisingly similar to those found elsewhere.

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