

Title: Perspectives on the Notion of Quality, its Management, and its Assurance

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Abstract:

This talk's attendees will be walked through how Quality has become a house-hold name. It will feature different perspectives on Quality from various parts of the world and, more importantly, what it means to the Arab World. Driven by the two notions of Accountability and Continuous Improvement, Quality and its management and assurance have gotten everyone busy and in particular those involved in the Higher Education sector. Quality and quality management models have existed for a long time in diverse fields and sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing and in the food industry and it has been proven that Quality has the potential for transforming organizations into more effective and efficient ones. With an open field of diverse higher education systems across the globe, with the infusion of ICT into our lives, and the weight of globalization, Quality has occupied a center-stage in the Higher Education arena. As a result, Quality and its measurement have been used for institutional performance and effectiveness. The talk will conclude with some recommendations on the need for embracing and adopting the notion of Quality as institutions can not afford not being engaged.

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Good Afternoon,

I would like to thank AROQA for asking me to say a few words on Quality in Higher Education. I am quite honored to be here today. Quality Management is a rather vague concept! Its vagueness stems from the different definitions of “Quality”, and from the broadness of the term “Management”. Quality investigators have toyed with quality for quite a while. Quality measurement and Quality management models have existed for a long time in diverse fields and sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing and in the food industry and it has been proven that Quality has the potential for transforming organizations into more effective and efficient ones. As a result, Quality maybe viewed as any one of a number of things: “Quality as Excellence, as Transformation, as Fitness for Purpose, or as Value for Money” (Harvey and Green-1993). The drive to attain quality gave emphasis to other buzz words like “transparency”, “accountability”, “evidence”, “effectiveness”, and “Continuous Process Improvement - CPI”; integral attributes and features of Quality, its management, and its assurance.

Reading into the literature, the literature calls for four Absolutes of Quality Management:

1. Quality has to be defined as conformance to requirements, not as goodness.
2. The system for causing quality is prevention, not appraisal.
3. The performance standard must be zero defects, not "that's close enough."
4. The measurement of quality is the process of nonconformance, not indices.

Although the above is applicable to a manufacturing environment, one does not want to consider graduates from Higher education Institutions as products having zero defects.

With an open field of diverse higher education systems across the globe, with the infusion of ICT into our lives, and the weight of globalization, Quality has occupied center-stage in the Higher Education arena. As a result, Quality and its measurement have been used for institutional performance and effectiveness. Quality Management procedures in H.E. have involved both quality assurance and quality enhancement. While “Quality Assurance” involves ensuring fitness for purpose” (West-Burham and Davies, 1994), “Quality Enhancement” is more transformative and it requires a deliberate change process that is concerned with adding value” (Jackson 2002). Nonetheless, the basic question remains: Can we “improve quality” and simultaneously “assure it”?

So, for Higher Education, where did the notion Quality Assurance (QA) all start?

QA is a notion which was promoted heavily and worked on immensely by the British until it became bureaucratic and overwhelming. It became so to the British themselves, to the rest of the world where QA found fertile land, and in particular, to the Arab countries who sought the British as advisors for their Higher Education systems. The Arab countries found in Quality a measuring stick and a notion built on accountability and systemization. Higher Education systems adopted the notion of “Quality” to drive continuous improvement initiatives for Quality Control. Yet, Quality meant different things to different people. An example of the rising importance of quality is how quality made its way to Lebanon’s Higher Education sector. For Lebanon, the strongest push for embedding quality into its higher education system is **European-funded projects**. The Lebanese got engaged and adopted some of the notions of QA based on funded projects by the European Union and with partners from the European landscape and most notably from Britain. In fact, many universities and in partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education

were dancing to the tunes of QA without full knowledge of what it takes to commit to quality and assure quality. In other words, although creative and fast-adapting creatures, the Lebanese did not generate Quality from within. However and to their benefit, the ultimate product of all these projects was a draft law which calls for the creation of National QA Agency, not in effect yet. When such agency is approved, it will call for the creation of a QA Unit within each Lebanese Higher Education Institution and will set deadlines for institutions to obtain accreditation.

Due to the presence of a multitude of QA systems in the world and to the different contexts and reasons where a QA system is put in place, institutions are left wondering on how to deal with the notions of **Quality assurance, Accreditation, and Institutional Effectiveness and Performance**. According to the US Department of Education, the purpose of Accreditation is to evaluate educational institutions and programs using peer evaluators. Accreditation is a process an institution undertakes to evaluate its educational activities, and seeks independent judgment to confirm that it achieves its objectives. (Young et al., 1983). Others view Accreditation as a means to establish educational quality assurance and integrity, yet preserving educational effectiveness and academic freedom. (Trash, 1979). Accreditation has also been viewed as a mechanism to halt or prevent proliferation of unneeded or inferior quality institutions. (Searse, 1989)

How did Accreditation come to be what it is?

As QA is looked at as a British/European commodity, Accreditation is an American notion. In fact there is **no such thing as QA in the USA** and QA is not a prevalent term. In the US, Accreditation is the mechanism to assure quality and that is in response to growing pressures from the US government and from taxpayers. The

Arab countries, idealizing the Americans and British Higher Education Systems, found themselves setting up systems mostly on the basis of AQA (i.e. British) and eyeing the glamor of the accreditation labels (i.e. American). This is accentuated by the need to go for different types of accreditation as institutions wrestle with the requirements of institutional and programmatic options.

For a long time and even for those who created it, Accreditation was a ritual – something to go through to say they are “legitimate” or listed on the “peer list” of accredited institutions. A large volume of articles can be found on QA and Accreditation. Between 2002 and 2004, more than 1300 journal articles were published about accreditation. (Baker et al., 2006). Accreditation is the mechanism for QA in the United States. It was conceived to ensure a basic level of educational quality. YET, the Ministry of H.E./Government exercises a “hands-off” approach. The U.S. has relied on a voluntary system of self-regulation or what is called peer-regulation through accreditation. Accreditation via peer-regulation places a value on “Quality” by not being a “rubber-stamp” operation. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) “accredits the accrediting agencies”.

Perhaps more importantly is the realization that accreditation is evolving and changing. Even at the places where accreditation was conceived and invented. Prior to 2000, whether we speak of QA or Accreditation, the “evaluation exercise” amounted to checking boxes and placing ticks on entries indicating existence. Then came the real deal, Outcomes-Based Assessment. With pressures of accountability and credibility or legitimacy, the future seems to be moving towards giving the government more role in assuring quality.

The main challenge for accreditation is maintaining balance between the independence of the accreditation process and accountability towards constituents (one of them maybe the government). This is happening in a globalized world.

What impact then does globalization have on QA and on Accreditation?

Globalization is driving convergence of H.E. QA systems and policies. New tools, such as Qualifications Frameworks and Ranking Systems, will have an impact on the future of Accreditation and on the make up of any QA system. The emphasis will remain however on accountability, verifiable outcomes, and transparency.

One should recognize the complexity associated with the notion of “Quality” as it relates to Globalization since it is tied directly to:

- Internationalization
- Mobility of graduates, staff, and faculty
- Compatibility of programs and qualifications
- Standards selection
- Internal/external QA system/policies
- Jurisdiction of QA/accreditation agency
- Institutional specifics and region-level contexts
- Reciprocity and mutual recognition
- Reputation of H.E. locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally
- Emergence of non-traditional institutions
- Quality Assurance in Transnational Education.

Conferences, meetings, forums, colloquia, and other forms of gathering were being held in practically each and every spot on earth. One would obtain a busy map of QA activities if a trace is carried out. This is all taking place at a time more

guidelines on assuring internal and external quality and more documents were generated. More noticeably, QA agencies and networks were sprouting everywhere. Some are legitimate and some are not. Some are noble in their thinking and in their actions and some are commercial entities and businesses. We normally talk about the presence of some institutions issuing fake degrees as degree mills; now we run into accreditation and QA mills. The classification (or even the perception) of external/international agencies as “businesses” is quite dangerous to the core value of continuous improvement and to the basic premises of Quality Assurance.

Now let’s shift our attention to a QA-related notion and that is **Institutional Effectiveness (IE)**. IE functions address the quality of the institution through measures for its performance. Much like accreditation, IE is an American creation. The term Effectiveness came as a justification to a fundamental term in the accreditation world and that is “Continuous Improvement” or what has become commonly referred to as “Closing the Loop”. IE is used mainly as “a monitor of institutional goals” requesting institutions to disclose performance data showing that they are effective and transparent, providing the public a snapshot of how each institution is performing, and at the same time showing the government that the work of the accreditation agency is legitimate. In fact, IE deliverables provide answers to many of the requests which are normally made by QA and accreditation agencies and as such IE’s work involve goals’ setting and planning as much as monitoring, tracing, and reporting performance. Thus, efficient and smart institutions have realized that an **integrated approach**, which relies on a synthesis of all of these notions, is needed. In a broad sense, all these notions are brought together into a platform of “institutional governance and benchmarking”, that is founded on self-assessment and evaluation.

Where does it all begin?

It begins with the creation of a Quality culture and there are many challenges there. As human beings, we are comfortable in our comfort zone and we are used to what we normally do. Change is all around us, yet we, faculty members and administrators, seem to be inefficient in dealing with change. Even those who teach “change and managing change” are guilty of not adapting and coping with change. In essence, we don’t practice what we preach and we don’t walk the talk. We like to tell people what to do and we don’t take criticism well, constructive or otherwise. We hold the “measuring stick” of quality, how dare someone else attempt to question our judgment? We ask for reform (sometimes we champion reform) but are not ready for it, not ready for the change.

Additionally, for those who get involved and champion the notion of quality, they are not rewarded as they should be. The lack of recognition/rewards for faculty members who engage in the process is certainly a deterrent to the advancement of the Quality notion.

Additional challenges related to the Culture Creation are:

1. Need for extensive documentation and hard evidence.
2. It is very difficult to see physical “stuff” demonstrating Quality.
3. There is a need to rely on the “professionalism” of evaluators (peers).
4. With changes in standards and guidelines, a “satisfaction mentality” to do the minimum is developed. This works against the aspired goal of driving continuous improvement.

Now let's address the adaptability of QA processes and related challenges:

Institutions have to go through the transformation from the old way (a check list of inputs and resources) for evaluating the quality of academic institutions to the new way (existence of processes, outcomes, and evidence).

In the West, Universities receive funding from the government and thus the latter has a say on the spending of the tax-payers money. Federal Aid (Governmental aid for H.E.)/ loans are also wired into whether the institution is accredited or not. It thus makes sense for the government's desire to interfere in order to assure the public that the ROI is worth the money. This is pretty much the dynamics that exists between higher education institutions and the government. There are places however in our world, for example in Lebanon and in a number of Arab countries, where students in private institutions finance their own education with support from family or private sources. This brings forward the question: Who are the constituents and whom should we be accountable towards?

What is needed for a Quality Assurance & Management system?

The need for a comprehensive and well-balanced system (responding to the needs of all constituents) is urgent. There needs to be consistent and coherent assessment processes, systems and indicators. A well balanced QA structure would have:

- Internal QA Systems
- External QA Systems Leading to Accreditation
- Subject/Program Reviews,
- Audits,
- Assessment & Data Collection,

- Time and Resources Allocation,
- Policies & Procedures, and
- Documentation.

What kind of quality management and quality assurance models should we go for?

There are a number of Quality Management Tools across the globe, to name a few:

- Total Quality Management
- European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM)
- Investors in People (IiP)
- ISO 9000
- Six Sigma
- QA models proposed and promoted by various agencies.

What we need is a “matching” QA model and related tools. One that takes our context into account, yet compatible internationally.

What kind of quality assurance agency or a network should we go for?

The sprouting of agencies and networks makes it difficult and introduces the question, who do we join and for what? An example, bridging various models of QA, is the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE): An international association of organizations engaged in academic quality assurance with over fifty countries. It runs using three basic approaches of Quality Assurance: Accreditation, Assessment, and Academic Audit.

Two notable regional QA organizations are **AROQA** our host today, the **Arab Organization for Quality Assurance in Education** and ANQAHE, the **Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education**. It is certainly of value to belong to such networks as they offer opportunities to network and remain engaged and informed about the latest trends and approaches to quality assurance.

Since all of these agencies are working for the common cause of spreading the culture of quality assurance and since their primary goal is to help institutions become more accountable towards their constituents by having systems and processes in place to assure quality, we must consolidate our efforts and synergize to become internationally recognized. It is imperative then that the Arab World create a CHEA-like entity, a “Commission” which “accredits” the accreditors (and the QA agencies) and validates their legitimacy. It maybe wishful thinking but we have got to do it. We must take the lead to create an institutional and programmatic accreditation agency that is internationally recognized, whose decisions are mutually accepted regionally and around the world. We must equip ourselves with processes, systems, and procedures which ensure objectivity and remove any tendency of being subjective. We must stop being on the receiving end of QA expertise as we are well equipped to design processes, institute quality measures, and hold ourselves accountable. This agency, a member of an international network, would:

- Support institutions in securing accreditation from an external agency if desired.
- Support institutions’ efforts in planting the seeds of QA in their operations and in planning and conducting Quality Audits as well as Assessment of Teaching and Learning.
- Address the issue of “accountability” and live the notion of Quality Audits.
- Share and disseminate “best practices” on QA and Accreditation.

- Develop a data bank of field-tested tools and related evidence.
- Encourage collaborative efforts amongst institutions on QA/Accreditation.
- Serve as a training platform on QA/Accreditation concepts and activities.

We are in a desperate need of a “game changer”. We must take hold of our own destiny, our QA destiny. However, for that to happen, we must:

1. Earn and secure the respect of Ministries of Education and Higher Education in the Arab World, making obtaining accreditation from the regional agency equivalent to that obtained from a foreign agency.
2. Secure the stamp of endorsement of the Association of the Arab Universities.
3. Secure an equivalence for accreditation decisions on the international level. That is we must secure “reciprocity” in accreditation decisions and must obtain a “mutual recognition” status.

I would like to conclude with the following statements:

1. A “blueprint” or a “template” for Quality Management does not exist.
2. Create a “Quality-centered” culture in your own institution: A culture transformation indeed. To embed a quality culture, it all starts with emphasis on Teaching and Learning and on internal assessment processes.
3. For QA to work, it needs to take into account the contexts of the University and its culture, that is the QA model needs to be “Contextualized”.
4. Ease and embrace globalization by seeking partnerships with international QA agencies and ultimately obtain “mutual recognition”.
5. “Mutual recognition” necessitates similar educational systems, similar assessment and evaluation processes, similar qualifications and similar QA and accreditation standards and systems.
6. Let Continuous Improvement be the driving force and design for it.

7. Universities bear the responsibility of providing assurance of quality. Therefore, keep the institutions in charge of “Quality” and keep the government away from controlling QA & Accreditation activities.
8. The reputation of HEI’s is linked directly to quality. Quality is the only protector of the institution’s reputation.
9. Quality is the essential ingredient for the sustainability of Higher Education Institutions!
10. Institutions can not afford making any compromise on quality.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share with you these perspectives on Quality, its management, and its assurance. For our world to be competitive, quality in education and in higher education is the only answer.