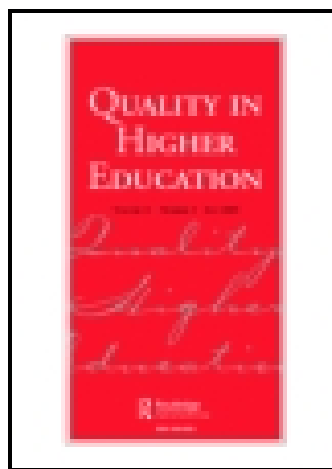


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Nabeel Kaghed ^a & Ahmed Dezaye ^b

^a University of Babylon , Iraq

^b Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research , Kurdistan
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Quality Assurance Strategies of Higher Education in Iraq and Kurdistan: A Case Study

NABEEL KAGHED^{a*} & AHMED DEZAYE^b

^aUniversity of Babylon, Iraq; ^bMinistry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Kurdistan

ABSTRACT *This paper reports on two different strategies that have been implemented in Iraq to improve quality assurance in the higher education sector in Iraq. One strategy has been developed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Baghdad. It involved conducting a pilot study at the University of Babylon. This pilot included establishing a quality development process that focused on training senior academic staff and quality reviewers who represented all the colleges of the University of Babylon. The University's goal is to become a pioneer in quality assurance in Iraq. Another strategy was implemented in the Kurdistan Region Governorate, where a team of reviewers from Exeter University, United Kingdom conducted an initial evaluation of quality practices in Kurdistan Region Governorate universities. In addition, following this review, selected staff members, representing the different ministries' specialisations, were then sent to the United Kingdom to be trained as quality reviewers and they will ultimately lead the programme from their ministries in the Kurdistan Region Governorate.*

Keywords: Kurdistan; Iraq; higher education; quality assurance training; external consultancy

Introduction

The higher education system in Iraq, including Kurdistan universities, is hailed as the best of its kind in the Middle East and Gulf region. Most of the Gulf countries' university professors have studied and attained their degrees in Iraq. However, higher education in Iraq has suffered from a prolonged period of relative isolation due to two sets of sanctions: one by the United Nations and the other by the regime of Saddam Hussein. The effect has been felt across all areas of Iraq and these sanctions have also had an impact on vital educational resources, which were already outdated by the time the sanctions were imposed.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR-I) is responsible for more than 39 universities and institutions and 77 research centres. In 2007, the number of students that attended various classes, public and private, exceeded 400,000.

*Corresponding author. President Office, University of Babylon, Babylon, Hilla, PO Box 4, Iraq.

Building quality assurance systems in Iraq

Quality systems for higher education have been in existence in Iraq prior to the quality assurance 'revolution' elsewhere in the world (Yonezawa, 2002). Ahead of the most recent developments discussed in this article, quality has been assured in Iraqi higher education via a range of recognised approaches. For example, standardised criteria for admission to undergraduate studies based on fixed parameters have been employed, and for postgraduate studies the criteria are concerned with the potential to complete the thesis. There has also been the continuous updating of syllabi by each department, often in consultation with well-recognised international universities, along with the support of established training and teaching development centres for continuing professional development. Assessment of teaching performance for qualified academics and annual assessments of all staff, both academic and administrative, has been in place for some time as has the standardisation of the promotion of senior academic staff through departmental committees in consultation with well-recognised international academics.

However, there has not been an agreed quality assurance model for all Iraqi universities to follow. This has prompted the MHESR-I to construct an applicable model that can directly satisfy educational and teaching aims and that can negotiate the complexity of Iraq's situation and face its difficulties and challenges.

After having considered numerous studies on the importance of quality management systems in educational organisations and their strategic value and perspectives (Barrow, 1999) the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has found the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 9001 model (Marquardt, 1999) best suited to its purposes. It has determined that it is a necessity to ensure quality higher education programmes in Iraq. ISO methods to evaluate all elements of educational and teaching processes are applied to various areas, such as: the competence of teachers, technicians and employees; reliability of curricula; qualifications of staff; competence of administrative devices; methods and approaches of teaching and so forth. These procedures are seen as helpful to achieving a concatenation of scientific and educational targets that facilitate higher education to attain optimum competence in a range of activities, such as: participation in decision making; development of human resources; and the processes of teaching and learning.

The University of Babylon has been chosen to pioneer this applied quality assurance model, which, if it is successful, will be applied in other universities throughout the country in order to improve higher education throughout Iraq. The University of Babylon was selected due to the important steps it has already taken in quality development that have distinguished it from other Iraqi universities. It was also considered because of the outcomes of the Mid-Euphrates Conference that ranked the University at the top of a table of Iraqi and Arabic national universities.

University of Babylon quality management and assurance system

The University of Babylon includes 18 colleges and 3 research centres and has about 20,000 students. In 2007, after a comprehensive review of the literature on ISO and before commencing with an improvement programme (Lim, 2001), the University embarked on a field survey to determine the position of the University according to the standards of ISO 9001 at the 2000 application level. It also implemented a self-evaluation project at departmental level in colleges, based on local evaluation standards that involved 24 standards, accepted and approved, by Iraqi academics. The evaluation approach used interviews

conducted through workshops. These interviews identified the following issues for improvement at the University:

1. Poor record keeping and documentation.
2. Centralisation of authority.
3. Poor technical and administrative skills.
4. Poor vision for continuous improvement.
5. Lack of standards of some lab equipment.

In line with the seven-stage improvement process identified by Wend (2001), the University began to engage with this process to address the areas identified as needing improvement. The following summarises what has been done so far.

Stage One

Drawing on ISO policy on assurance of higher management, this stage of the improvement programme included the development of a higher ISO committee in the Presidency of the University and ISO committees in colleges. It also incorporated ISO representatives within the University Council. This stage was completed within six weeks.

Stage Two

This stage focuses on the ISO cultural change agenda. In the case of the University of Babylon this was achieved by holding 17 seminars, 3 conferences, 20 introductory courses for leading academic staff members, offering specialised courses to internal ISO quality auditors, 37 press conferences and newspaper interviews and displays of posters all over the University. In addition, it also focused on raising the level of morale and material rewards for distinguished staff members who engaged in the process. This stage was accomplished in six months.

Stages Three and Four

At the third stage the University of Babylon started to develop a formal system of quality assurance. This overlaps with stage four, which deals with creating seven support manuals, each focused on the key dimensions of the ISO standards. The first two, completed by 2008, are the: institutional manual 2000 (this is the overall guide for the application of the ISO 9001) and the scientific parameters manual (this describes the four steps needed to ensure continuous improvement). The remaining manuals, to be finished by the end of 2009, are the curriculum design manual that concerns the evaluation of educational programmes; the instructional manual that places an emphasis on organisational structures; the quality system procedures manual that determines the mechanisms which control the products and services of the University; the operation design manual that covers in detail the way each educational process is achieved; and finally, the quality manual that describes the extent to which the University applies each ISO objective.

Stages Five, Six and Seven

At the fifth stage the first report designed to support the improvement programme was completed and covered the first seven months of activity. Stage six focuses on applying the

outcomes of the report and stage seven consists of a final evaluation to obtain the ISO licence.

One of the early ways the University of Babylon has evaluated the progress of the ISO implementation has been to carry out a study to determine the effectiveness of training sessions in ISO programme application. Fifty administrative staff and 50 academic staff from the University enrolled on such training courses were compared to a similar number of staff who had not attended the course. The findings of this study suggest that there were significant positive results in a variety of areas including: staff motivation; knowledge of quality assurance; ability to recognise the positive and negative procedures in the academic process; ability to make informed decisions; understanding and using appropriate documentation processes; and an interest in continuous professional development. Therefore, there were significant reasons for the untrained to join the courses and participate in the improvement programme.

Challenges facing management and assurance system

Undoubtedly, applying the quality management system at the University of Babylon is intended to improve the quality of the educational experience of its students (Rama, 2005). However well intentioned it is, the process has nonetheless caused conflict with many regulations and conventions that have been in operation in the institution for a long time. This has led, in some instances, to a psychological impulse to resist the necessary changes. In addition, there are a number of external factors that have also challenged the process.

These constitute some of the lessons learned through the application of a quality management system at the University of Babylon. For example, one thing that cannot be ignored is the need to provide all staff involved with the confidence in their ability to achieve success in the improvement programme. The application of the quality management system also necessitates a well-organised administration facilitating good communication among the various activities within the University. The difficulties of satisfying all the targeted groups throughout the University can also impact on the outcomes of a systematic improvement programme.

External factors also often affect the success of using the quality management system to improve student learning. In the case of Iraq, these included: needing to find ways to match the criteria sought by the University with those of the Ministry of Education; working with limited authority especially in respect of administrative, financial and legal matters; limited financial resources for budgeting the project; the inability of the University to regulate the increasing numbers of students enrolled due to the rise in population and the limited number of universities; and, finally, the rate of development in education and the needs set by the national development plans.

The higher education system in Iraqi Kurdistan

The current Iraqi Kurdistan higher education system is composed of six public universities, four private universities (including a recently-established American university), and two public technical institutes. Most of the public universities have a full range of subjects on offer, except Hawler Medical University. It was established in 2006 to include the four medical colleges of Salahaddin University (the oldest in the region established in 1968). These colleges are medicine, dentistry, pharmacy and nursing, and encompass about 70,000 students, staffed by nearly 3500 academics and more than 2000 administrators and support staff.

Kurdistan higher education is overseen by its own Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR-K), which was established in 2006. Attempts have been made to develop a quality management, evaluation and assurance system for the region, by senior staff, academics, and external visitors from the United Kingdom and Sweden who were participating in Kurdistan's university examinations at three medical colleges. The examiners together, with internal academics, were involved in the final clinical (short case, long case and oral) M.B.Ch.B. examinations.

The University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, carried out an initial needs assessment of the regional sector and sent a delegation in December 2005, comprising six senior members of the University's academic and administrative staff to do this *in situ*. The University of Exeter was chosen to carry out this work because of its previous good relations and dialogue with the Kurdistan Regional Government. It is hoped that a long-term partnership will develop.

This needs assessment included a review of quality documents and interviews with staff and students. A report on this study was produced and included a number of observations specific to the educational opportunities available in Kurdistan (University of Exeter, 2006). For example, it was noted that there was a substantial demand for high-quality English-language teaching and assessment in Kurdistan. This was thought to be due to the fact that many Kurds consider English to be crucial to political, economic and educational progress. Another observation was that research laboratories were generally in a very poor state and, in addition to inadequate equipment, some departments did not have sufficient supplies of research materials. Similarly library and information technology services were seen to require significant investment and hardware upgrades to remain competitive. Pedagogic issues like curricula, teaching methods, staff training and development were also seen to need modification. The report suggested that university presidents must be empowered to take their institutions forward. The report was positively received by the Councils of the Universities, attracting the attention of academics as well. It is anticipated that a programme of developmental activities will now be put in place to address the concerns noted in the report.

The main vision of the Ministry in Kurdistan is to establish an integrated education system based on best practices from around the world, producing a highly-skilled and educated population, stimulating economic growth and higher standards of living for Iraqi Kurdistan. The strategy for higher education consists of short-term (two years), medium-term (three years) and long-term (10 years) plans, and has been formulated to help guide the initiatives of the Ministry and provide clear priorities for an efficient use of available resources.

These plans build on the Exeter Report and will focus on developing an administrative structure and institutional planning strategy, which includes quality assurance, reform of higher education programmes, review of the higher education structures and developing capacity building in these areas. The plans also include updating teaching support, such as laboratory equipment, advancing teaching and learning methods and organising extra-curricula activities for students. Other areas of development that feature in these plans include: creating an information database to link educational institutions to all related areas in the Ministry; establishing complementary research centres within the universities; establishing a modern admission system; establishing student welfare services; reviewing academic and administrative employment and recruitment procedures; and improving the general working environment for staff including remuneration and assessment of performance. After two years, the American University in Lebanon will conduct an evaluation of Iraqi Kurdistan universities to reveal any improvements in development.

Establishing quality assurance system in Iraqi Kurdistan

In addition to the Exeter Report, the second major stimulus for developing quality assurance in Iraqi Kurdistan was a series of international conferences on Iraqi higher education. The first two were organised by the University of Westminster in London in 2004 and 2005. In October 2006, the MHESR-K organised another conference entitled, 'For a Contemporary Education System', aimed at reforming and establishing the curricula and language of teaching in Kurdistan universities. Most recently, an International Conference on Higher Education in Iraq was held in Erbil in December 2007 and was organised by the MHESR-K with the cooperation and participation of the MHESR-I and the London-based Iraq Higher Education Organising Committee. This conference was funded by the Kurdistan Regional Government and attracted over 500 participants: academics, university presidents, professors and senior staff from different universities in the USA, UK, Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Poland, Australia and Canada, including many Iraqi immigrant academics. Papers dealt with the following eight key issues: models for interactive higher education; capacity building; developing curricula; quality assurance; higher studies and scientific research; the role of universities in society; different types of higher education; and decentralisation of higher education.

The outcomes of the conference were similar to the University of Exeter's report (Iraqi Higher Education Organising Committee 2007). They concluded that: universities are a leading part of society and teaching faculties are the core of universities; a quality assurance board should be set up; specialisations in higher studies are needed; quality research should be developed to meet the needs of employers; and steps should be taken to decentralise the higher education sector in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Prime Minister was very keen to attract support from a highly professional team with experience in designing and delivering programmes, not only in their own country but overseas. This led the Council of Ministers of Kurdistan Regional Government to sign an agreement with the National School of Government in the United Kingdom. This agreement included an eight-week training course, delivered by the National School of Government (2007–2008), for 31 general directors and advisors from different ministries, including the MHESR-I. Those who completed the course are now responsible for establishing quality assurance systems in all the departments and ministries of Iraqi Kurdistan. This course is considered to be just the starting point in what is intended to be an ongoing programme across a broad range of training and support for quality development.

To quote from the speech by Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani, at the launch of the quality assurance training programme:

When one looks around the world, now and in the past, one sees no better model for efficient and effective government than the UK. More than any other country in the world, the UK rightfully prides itself on developing the highest standards of public services. We want to make serious efforts so that one day we can achieve their model here.

The National School of Government has been developed over a number of years into a business school uniquely positioned within government, and this unique position provides a platform from which it is able to promote the current leading practice and thinking in public administration to government in the United Kingdom and internationally. It has concluded top-level training and consultancy for United Kingdom public administration for

over 20 years. The choice to use their expertise in Kurdistan was not difficult and the Kurdistan Regional Government was extremely pleased that they have been able to help (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2006).

Summary

International models have been extremely helpful to the development of quality assurance in both Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. In spite of the obvious challenges facing this country, due to recent historic events, local educational leaders are committed to maintaining a high-quality educational experience for its entire people, those in the region and elsewhere in the world.

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