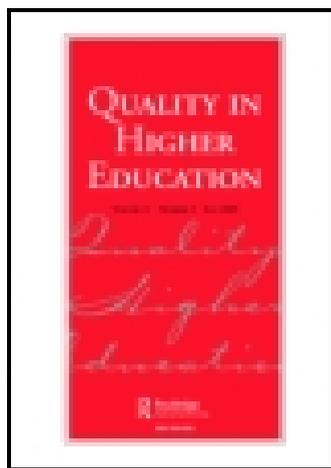


This article was downloaded by: [St. Mary's University College]

On: 11 December 2014, At: 04:02

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Quality in Higher Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cqhe20>

Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement: A Case Study of the University of Bahrain

Yaser Al-Alawi ^a, Dheya Al-Kaabi ^a, Suad Rashdan ^a & Lobna Al-Khaleefa ^a

^a University of Bahrain, Bahrain

Published online: 25 Feb 2009.

To cite this article: Yaser Al-Alawi, Dheya Al-Kaabi, Suad Rashdan & Lobna Al-Khaleefa (2009) Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement: A Case Study of the University of Bahrain, *Quality in Higher Education*, 15:1, 61-69, DOI: [10.1080/13538320902731575](https://doi.org/10.1080/13538320902731575)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13538320902731575>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement: A Case Study of the University of Bahrain

YASER AL-ALAWI*, DHEYA AL-KAABI, SUAD RASHDAN & LOBNA AL-KHALEEFA

University of Bahrain, Bahrain

ABSTRACT *In recent years, Bahrain has taken serious actions to diversify its sources of income and solve major national problems such as unemployment. Through this process it discovered that one of the main factors for its economic problems was the quality of higher education on offer. This led to the creation of a national Quality Assurance Authority that aims to regulate higher education institutes according to the national standards. This initiative is expected to both improve higher education in Bahrain and maintain international standards to ensure its reputation outside the country. To start, the Quality Assurance Authority relied indirectly on the good practices of higher education institutions in Bahrain. These were used as a benchmark for standards. This article addresses some aspects of applying quality assurance in higher education in Bahrain by using the University of Bahrain as a case study of good practices. It also compares these practices across various disciplines.*

Keywords: higher education; quality assurance; quality improvement; University of Bahrain; accreditation

Background to quality developments in Bahrain

The fourfold increase in the oil prices in 1973–1974, following independence, along with the oil boom in the early 1980s, placed an enormous amount of wealth in the hands of the governments of Bahrain and the other Gulf States giving them what has been described as a historic opportunity to achieve economic growth and sustainable economic development (Gause, 1994). However Bahrain, even before the recent world economic crisis, was suffering from high rates of unemployment, few sources of income and expensive housing.

Hence, Bahrain started to take serious initiatives to resolve its national economic problems from the roots. A major initiative in this regard was the creation of the Bahrain Development Board, which is an autonomous semi-private government agency chaired by the Crown Prince of the country. The Bahrain Development Board made a study in 2001 that identified

*Corresponding author. Mechanical Engineering Department, College of Engineering, University of Bahrain, PO Box 32038, Isa Town, Kingdom of Bahrain. Email: yalalawi@eng.uob.b

education to be one of the six key economic clusters in which it seeks to promote business investment in the country. Therefore, the Government of Bahrain has given the go-ahead for a new national project that aims to improve educational opportunities and train graduates at all levels within a definite time span and adopt new methodologies that ensure high quality for both. This is also being done to maintain a reputed standard for academic programmes and training workshops delivered by various universities and training centres in Bahrain.

Closely linked to this initiative was the United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Declaration on higher education of 1988. The declaration affirmed the importance of greater attention to quality issues as higher education expands. International agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have responded to this by promoting the widespread adoption of quality assurance in the developing countries (El-Khawas, 2002).

The Regional Bureau for Arab States of the UNDP encouraged these initiatives by funding a series of quality assurance projects. These projects were aimed at reviewing academic programmes. A three-phase project was launched in January 2002 by the UNDP to get an idea of the status of the Arab universities' performances through pilot reviews of selected universities in the region. The project's various phases involved detailed internal and external reviews of computer science programmes (2002–2003), business administration programmes (2003–2004) and education programmes (2006) in a group of Arab universities.

The UNDP project was also designed to build a regional database that would provide detailed comparable indicators of programmes, staff and finances for the leading private and public Arab universities, including the University of Bahrain (UoB). In addition, these projects have created a pool of indigenous quality evaluators that the Kingdom of Bahrain is currently relying upon to support a new national project.

On 16 November 2007, the Quality Assurance Authority was established in Bahrain to facilitate and execute the strategies of the Bahrain Development Board in the academic sector. The Quality Assurance Authority is now a full member of the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE). From the outset, the Quality Assurance Authority relied indirectly on the good practices of higher education institutions in Bahrain. These were used to benchmark standards. The UoB was considered by the Quality Assurance Authority to be a leading institution on quality matters.

Aim of this paper

This article aims to address some lessons learned from applying quality assurance processes to higher education in Bahrain. It discusses the long path that the UoB walked to improve the quality of its services. The UoB was chosen for the pilot study because it stands out as a good example of applying quality assurance in its colleges.

The paper first provides a brief background about the UoB and the mechanisms and procedures used for quality improvements and assurance. It then analyses four pilot colleges: arts, business, science, and engineering for quality assurance practices and effectiveness. The data and information from the colleges were gathered from the UoB annual reports, special quality assurance project reports and interviews with respondents from UoB academic staff who participated in these projects.

However, it is important to note that these developments were not happening in isolation. Worldwide there has been considerable development of higher education institutions. Yet, this has not led to very much self-scrutiny. Shaw (1993) attributed this to the lack of empirical research on higher education. Bahrain, through these quality assurance projects

was addressing this dearth of information by providing data to the UNDP project noted earlier.

The University of Bahrain

The UoB consists of eight colleges in the arts, business, education, engineering, information technology, law, science and applied studies. Its legacy in higher education dates back to 1968 when it was the Institute of Gulf Polytechnic. Gulf Polytechnic offered programmes in engineering and business. A few years later, the government of Bahrain established the University College of Bahrain to offer programmes in arts, science and education due to a perceived need for these disciplines in the country. In 1986, the UoB was formed through the merger of the Gulf Polytechnic and the University College of Bahrain. This was done to accommodate students with more and better services, make use of the synergy of resources, and satisfy the need for more subject disciplines.

The UoB is the only public university in Bahrain and is its largest university. It has the most academic staff, the most students, the largest number of facilities and the widest range of academic programmes on offer. The UoB is also the oldest university in Bahrain and is perceived by the government to be the most experienced higher education institution. Moreover, UoB alumni are in demand in the Bahrain employment market. All of this makes the UoB an exceptional university compared to other universities in Bahrain.

Quality Assurance Mechanisms at the UoB

The UoB established several mechanisms to assure the quality of its deliverables. Some of these mechanisms are directed to assure the quality of academic services while others are designed to assure the quality of its administrative services. The quality assurance mechanisms for the academic sector are concerned with the courses, students, and academic staff. The following sections address the quality assurance mechanisms implemented in the UoB.

Course and Instructor Evaluation. In 1997 UoB established the Centre of Management and Evaluation. Its remit is to obtain students' feedback on the quality of the class instructor and the course contents. A questionnaire is distributed three weeks prior to the end of classes through a committee formed in each department for this purpose. The entire process from distributing the questionnaires to collecting and analysing them is an extremely confidential process. Responses are anonymous to provide students with freedom of expression. Each class receives questionnaire sheets equal to the number of students in the class and these are kept in a sealed envelope. On the day of distributing the questionnaire the instructor leaves his class 15 to 20 minutes before it ends when another academic staff member distributes the questionnaire. The questionnaires are collected and sealed in the same envelope and the academic staff member who was responsible for the distribution signs the envelope and states the number of participants in the survey. Then, the sealed envelopes are collected by the committee and sent back to the Centre for analysis. This process is now under redevelopment so that it can be conducted electronically: it is hoped this will add convenience, confidentiality, and save time and effort.

The summary of the performance of each course section goes to the corresponding dean, chairperson and instructor at the beginning of the following semester to eliminate the risk of exposure of the feedback to the instructor. Instructors whose performance is below average

are asked to improve and in extreme cases this is discussed through a committee. The type of help given to such instructors includes meeting with the chairperson to discuss deficiencies and suggestions of ways for improvement. For example, the instructor may be directed to do better preparation prior to each class.

The instructor's evaluation is one of the main factors considered in contract renewal of expatriates. Although student evaluations are very important and can reliably judge many aspects of a course and a teacher's methods, their outlook is limited to their personal experience as students. The feedback on courses therefore includes a periodic evaluation of the courses and programme curriculum as well.

Total Quality Management. The UoB aims to control the level of its services to reduce the cost of employment and reduce time consumed in processing any application. Therefore, the UoB created an Office of Total Quality in 2002, primarily, to promote the concept of total quality management (TQM) in education and enhance the quality of services provided to the students. The office conducts several seminars and workshops on TQM to UoB staff. In 2003, the Training and Management Development Department was established to focus on administrative staff training. The TQM office does not integrate and control all the quality assurance processes due to the administrative bureaucracy and limited vision of the quality management role.

Academic Practice Training Programme. The UoB requires a minimum of three years of teaching experience for employing any academic staff to guarantee her/his teaching capability. However, this policy cannot be applied to its newly-appointed academic staff, who were sent on scholarships to obtain PhD degrees. Consequently, teaching skills are not guaranteed for this portion of the academic staff. Therefore, the UoB organised a one-year professional development programme for its newly-appointed academic staff, which is aimed at enhancing their teaching skills. The programme is a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice run by York St John University of the United Kingdom in partnership with the UoB. It was started in 2006.

The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice provides the participants with examples of various approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that are needed in the daily job of an academic. It creates a community of good practice among the academic staff where they can develop their knowledge and skills on teaching in higher education and boost their confidence to experiment with new effective techniques. Moreover, the programme is designed to benefit from others' experiences through peer observation and discussions.

The Colleges of Engineering and Information Technology ran the first round of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice at the UoB. In 2007, 18 academic staff joined the programme from all colleges except the College of Law as it did not have any newly-appointed academic staff. Despite the fact that most of the participants showed a satisfactory level of performance in their classes, until now there has been no reliable evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme and an evaluation at this stage would be important to assist with the redesign of the programme and to increase its effectiveness.

E-Learning Centre. In 2004, the UoB established an E-Learning centre. Its purpose is to enhance the teaching experience with up-to-date tools that are capable of improving the communication between the instructor and students. The centre managed to develop and design more than 300 e-courses covering all the university colleges over the past four years.

The centre assists academic staff in developing these courses by helping them transform their courses into an electronic format utilising multimedia. In their electronic format, courses have become more attractive, interactive, accessible and communicative. The centre reviews and improves its services periodically. Based on the feedback from instructors and students who experience the benefits from the centre services it then makes changes in its activities.

Supporting Under-Prepared Students. The UoB used to provide broad access for all students in the community based on students' high-school grade-point average (GPA) only. This impacted on the students' performance and consumed a lot of university resources. Thus, the UoB set a new policy that requests high-school graduates to pass the university test in mathematics, English and Arabic. The scores of these tests and the high-school grade-point average are combined to come up with a new score that is used to obtain entry to the desired programme. This mechanism is similar to the Scholastic Aptitude Test in the United States of America.

Other students who do not qualify for the programme of their choice are directed to the College of Applied Studies, which offers diplomas in every UoB bachelor programme. Students who succeed in passing the diploma programmes with a GPA of 3.00 out of 4.00 are directed to the desired UoB colleges.

Accreditation

The national Quality Assurance Authority is still in the process of establishing national standards for higher education. Therefore, international accreditation has been employed as an interim measure. This process is seen as central to ensuring and assuring that the quality assurance mechanisms developed and employed by the UoB are effective. External quality monitoring offers, as Harvey (1998, p. 238) has pointed out, 'an "impartial" and "objective" system-wide (or even international) mechanism for examining policy, practice and procedure. It also acts as a conduit for information intended to reassure external stakeholders, such as employers, professional bodies and the general public, as to the continued viability of provision'.

Even though the academic requirements vary from one college to another, which potentially might make the performance of the accreditation process uneven, the colleges of the UoB are encouraged to get accreditation for their programmes from international associations. So far, three out of the eight colleges of the UoB are working on this ambition. These colleges are: the College of Education, which prepared itself to get accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in the USA; the College of Engineering; and the College of Information Technology, which are both preparing to get accreditation from Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (now ABET) in the USA.

The next sections delineate the ways that the colleges in the UoB apply these various quality assurance mechanisms. Figure 1 summarises these variations for all colleges.

College of Arts

The Quality Assurance Office in the College of Arts is designed to play a part in the UoB's quality improvement aim to seek international accreditation for its academic programmes. The Quality Assurance Office was established in June 2007 and developed a one-year list of

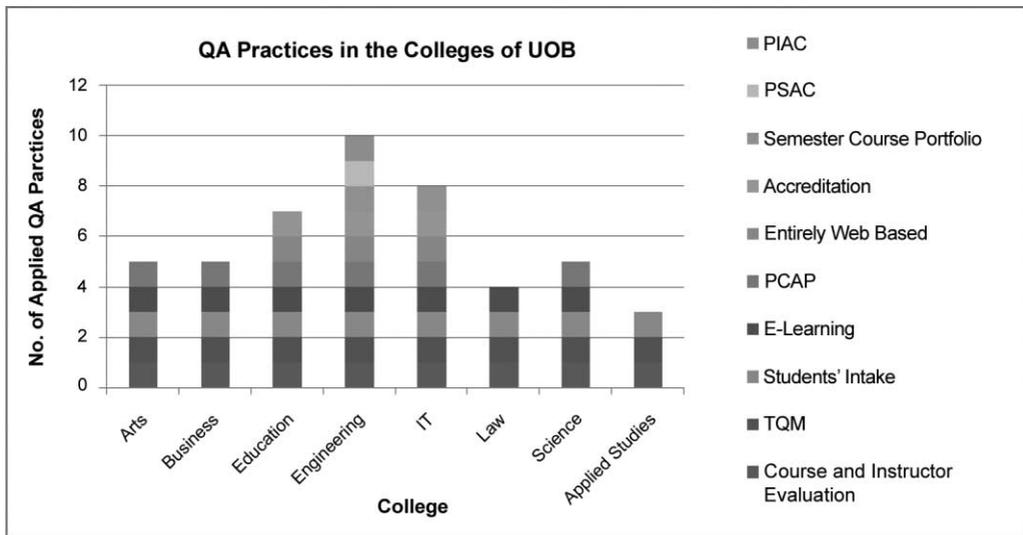


FIGURE 1. QA practices used in University of Bahrain colleges
 Key: PIAC = Programme Industrial Advisory Council
 PSAC = Programme Students' Advisory Council
 PCAP = Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice
 TQM = Total Quality Management

goals based on the accreditation experience of the College of Engineering at the UoB and some other accredited Arab universities' experiences especially in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), such as: the College of Arts in Kuwait University and College of Arts in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Quality Assurance Office achieved the following goals for the College of Arts during the academic year 2007–2008, it:

- formed quality assurance committees in its departments;
- invited quality assurance consultants to the college campus;
- assessed the feedback regarding activities from other quality assurance directors of the UoB;
- developed a software programme for archiving college quality assurance documents;
- established an archiving system for quality assurance documentation;
- prepared common templates for: programme specifications, course specifications and final examination papers.

One of the most important events among these activities was the visit of American accreditation consultants to the College of Arts in January 2008. The visit was followed by workshops introducing the main dimensions of quality assurance to the academic staff of the College. The workshops provided all College academic staff, especially the elected quality assurance committee members, the opportunity to learn how to apply quality assurance indicators to their work. In addition, several meetings were held between academic staff and the quality assurance consultants, which generated an extremely useful dialogue around several points of views about quality assurance applications and implications.

College of Business

The UoB College of Business has four departments: management and marketing, economics and finance, accounting and the continuing management education programme. In 2007 the Department of Accounting was the first department in the College of Business to successfully complete a formal audit review. This was a significant achievement for the Department, which was only established in 1992.

College of Engineering and College of IT

The College of Engineering is considered to be the most advanced college at the UoB in applying quality assurance techniques and is the most sophisticated in seeking accreditation. In addition to the general mechanisms for continuous assessment and improvement of academic programmes, the College of Engineering adopts a TQM approach for improving all of the College's academic and administrative activities. This initiative was directed by the dean of the College who has a strong belief that the College should maintain an international standard and reputation. This would help the College outperform others in the same discipline in the region and could potentially bring prosperity to the College, alumni and the country.

This vision was later translated into the preparation for accreditation from ABET (previously known by its full name, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology). The college created an Accreditation and Assessment Office (AAO) to develop a strategy and execute the quality assurance requirements for ABET accreditation. Because ABET accredit both engineering and technological programmes, the College of Engineering encouraged the College of Information Technology to go for ABET accreditation and helped to ease the process by sharing knowledge, resources and plans.

The AAO has several task committees from both colleges' academic staff to help with the quality assurance requirements. Also, the AAO made each department form a departmental accreditation committee for the departmental level of accreditation. The first stage of the departmental accreditation committee review consists of course portfolios, which are prepared by the course's instructors and coordinator. The course portfolio consists of a self-assessment report, course-assessment report and samples of students' graded papers.

At the start, the majority of the academic staff were excited about the accreditation process. However, this excitement started to diminish with the amount of work needed. Therefore, the AAO revisited its practices to cut down the amount of work required on the College's academic staff. For example, the AAO made all information available on the College web site to cut down the time consumed in obtaining the needed information by the academic staff.

Furthermore, software for course assessment and evaluation was developed by a College academic staff member to facilitate and ease the process of self-assessment and course-assessment reports. It resulted in standardised reports and course portfolios for both colleges. The information gathered on these programmes is integrated into the assessment of the programmes' performance each semester. Then action is taken to overcome the deficiencies and facilitate the recommended improvements. This software made generating reports effective, easy and reliable. In general, these initiatives of cutting down the process time reduced the opposition of the academic staff to the accreditation process and helped in restoring the original enthusiasm. Many indications of improvement can be seen and felt around the engineering campus. For instance, every department has posters of its programmes' curricula, courses offered and relationship with ABET goals, vision, mission and goals. Also, the College created standards of safety and maintenance for its laboratories,

classrooms, computer laboratories and workshops. Students' projects are developed more now to enhance the students' capabilities of design, team work, communication and writing technical reports. Design contests are conducted frequently to enhance and reward students' creativity. Academic staff are encouraged to attend conferences, workshops and increase their publication rate.

The College of Engineering developed a Programme Students' Advisory Council and a Programme Industrial Advisory Council for every bachelor programme. The Programme Students' Advisory Council is made up of students in the programme with the highest grade-point averages, along with some elected students. The Programme Industrial Advisory Council is made up of engineers with a leading position in the industry for the corresponding field of the programme. Both councils meet with the programme's academic staff twice a year to review the programme curriculum and course contents. This led to satisfying the various needs in the industry about UoB graduates and made the students involved in this process more excited to learn.

College of Science

The College of Science consists of four academic departments: biology, chemistry, mathematics and physics. Each department offers programmes leading to the Bachelor of Science degree (BSc). In addition, the Department of Mathematics offers a Master's degree programme. The BSc programmes are well established as they have similar programme components offered by many well-reputed international and regional universities. The College of Science offers many service courses to the Colleges of Engineering, Information Technology, Arts and Business.

The College of Science consists of 95 academic staff members, all of whom are determined to deliver high-quality undergraduate and graduate education to the University's students. The College's alumni are usually accepted for postgraduate study by highly-regarded international universities and they have shown excellent performance in these programmes. This would suggest that they have previously received a satisfactory education in the undergraduate programmes in the College.

Like other UoB colleges, the College of Science continuously reviews, evaluates and modifies its BSc programme's curricula. For example, the College modified its programmes to adopt different effective specialisations. In order to be recognised and to maintain a high-quality education in both undergraduate and graduate programmes at the College of Science, an effort has been made to accredit the course programmes offered by various departments. In January 2007, the dean of the College of Science requested that every department seek accreditation for their BSc programme from a recognised international association. For instance, the chairperson of the Department of Chemistry formed a departmental accreditation committee to work on this task. The committee selected the Canadian Society for Chemistry as it is one of the most suitable institutions to apply for accreditation of the BSc programme in chemistry at the UoB, and correspondence is currently in progress to explore the rules and methods of application.

Summary

The UoB offers several graduate and undergraduate programmes that are designed mainly to satisfy the demand of various economic needs in Bahrain and the Gulf Co-operation Council Countries. The quality assurance practices the UoB employs has helped the

University to deliver more reliable graduates for the employment market. Currently quality assurance at the UoB is supported by both the efforts of the national Quality Assurance Authority and various developments within its colleges. In time, it is expected that each of these will attain recognition by both regional and international quality assurance agencies and associations. The UoB is committed to ensuring a quality student experience and its staff are engaging in a range of quality-assurance activities in order to achieve this.

References

- El-Khawas, E., 2002, 'Quality assurance for higher education: shaping effective policy in developing countries', in CHAPMAN, D. W. & AUSTIN A. E. (Eds.) *Higher Education in the Developing World* (Santa Barbara, Greenwood Publishing Group).
- Gause, F. G., 1994, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York, Council on Foreign Relations Press).
- Harvey, L., 1998, 'An Assessment of Past and Current Approaches to Quality', *Australian Journal of Education*, 42(3) pp. 237–55.
- Shaw, K. E., 1993, 'Higher Education and Development in the Lower Gulf States', *Higher Education Review*, 25(3) pp. 36–47.
- University of Bahrain, 'Internal Study of Academic Infrastructure of the University of Bahrain for the period 2000–2005'. University of Bahrain.
- University of Bahrain, Academic Subject Review for BSc Chemical Engineering Program to United Nations Development Program, Regional Bureau for Arab States, Enhancement of Quality Assurance and Institutional Planning at Arab Universities. University of Bahrain.