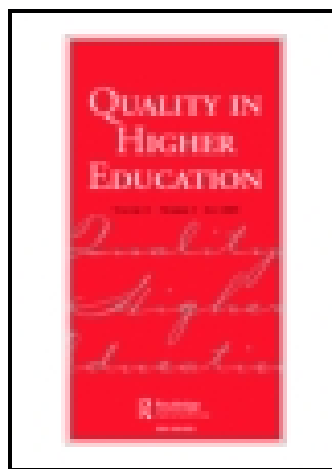


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# Small Steps Lead to Quality Assurance and Enhancement in Qatar University

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper presents a brief overview of Qatar University's history since it was started in 1973. Its primary focus is on the various small, but important, steps taken by the University to address the needs of quality assurance and enhancement. The Qatar University Reform Plan is described in detail. Its aims are to continually improve the quality of instructional and educational services, and promote administrative efficiency at the University. The paper also discusses changes made following the report of the University's participation in the United Nations Development Programme/Regional Bureau for Arab States review of the Graduate Diploma in Special Education in the College of Education.*

**Keywords:** Qatar University Reform Plan; United Nations Development Programme; quality assurance and enhancement; Gulf States

## Introduction

Major global changes have encouraged higher education systems around the world to be more responsive to local needs, national concerns and global issues. In this context, higher education systems need to be accountable and consider rapid policy changes to meet the realities of the changing world.

The higher education system in the State of Qatar comprises nine universities divided into two systems; national and international universities. The only national university is Qatar University (QU) and there are eight international universities. QU was established in 1973. QU has focused on ensuring quality education in all its programmes. The University is internationally recognised with strong ties to other institutions of higher education. It is an active member in several prestigious regional and international associations, including the Union of Arab Universities, the League of Islamic Universities and the International Association of Universities. As a result, QU has been successful in attracting a large number of distinguished scholars, researchers and staff members from other Arab countries and

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beyond. QU is supervised by a Board of Regents and offers bachelor's degrees in all of its colleges and postgraduate diplomas in some selected programmes.

'Traditional higher education programmers have been required to demonstrate more explicitly their quality and effectiveness' (El -Khawas, 2006, p. 23). However, new forms of higher education such as borderless (transnational) higher education, which includes educational provision that crosses conventional boundaries of time, space and geography, are expected to demonstrate their quality with more transparency and higher accountability. As noted, such programmes, when combined with information and communication technology developments, may require more fundamental changes in quality assurance arrangements (Middlehurst, 2002). In other words, the free-market economy and globalisation of educational provision have made quality assurance in higher education an imperative worldwide.

In this regard, the question is not whether there is a need for quality assurance systems in higher education, but to what extent the quality assurance system in a given country is functional. Different countries have been taking different steps towards this end (Bazargan, 2007). Therefore, establishing quality assurance systems, especially in transnational higher education in developing countries, is an urgent need. In 2003, QU embarked on an ambitious Reform Initiative that aims to continually evolve the quality of instructional and educational services, and promote its administrative efficiency.

QU aims to be a model national university that offers a high quality, learner-centred education. All members of the University, both academic and administrative staff and students, are expected to advance the scholarly and social values that the University embodies. Three fundamental principles guide the QU reform process: autonomy, decentralisation and accountability; each contributing uniquely towards a balance of steady and effective reform. New policies and procedures are required for staff and administrative evaluation and budget controls, as well as for processes to review personnel, policy and procedural decisions. Furthermore, accountability requires new compensation policies to implement the results of assessments and evaluations.

The Board of Regents, chaired by the Heir Apparent, His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, the University President, and the newly established Office of Institutional Research and Planning are leading the implementation of the Reform. A Senior Reform Committee, made up of QU and international experts on university management and operations, has been formed to provide consultation to the leaders of the Reform. Also involved in this initiative is a staff project that comprises members of the QU academic and administrative staff as well as researchers from the RAND-Qatar Policy Institute. (The RAND Corporation is an independent American research institution that aims to help improve policy- and decision-making through research and analysis.)

Based on the experiences of different countries, the process of building a quality management and assurance system, within a national higher education system may be divided into six stages (Bazargan, 2004, p. 154). These are summarised as follows:

1. Reflecting on national needs for quality assurance and the trends of evaluation and accreditations around the world;
2. Conducting pilot studies and experiments in relation to quality assurance;
3. Conceptualising appropriate quality management and assurance systems for the country;
4. Developing a sense of ownership for the quality management and assurance system among academic staff, higher education managers and promoting an evaluation culture;

5. Developing the quality management and assurance system;
6. Implementing the quality management and assurance system.

In Qatar, attempts have been made to implement the above-mentioned steps and develop a quality management and assurance system. Research activities to establish local needs for quality assurance in higher education have been started. The outcomes of the study reveal that there is a need for broad reforms in governance, administration and organisational structure if the University is to serve the nation adequately in the coming decades. The University must have autonomy to manage its own affairs, provide a more rigorous education for its students, and enhance the quality of staff instruction and scholarly endeavours. Through the accomplishment of these goals it is hoped that through decentralisation the University can successfully assume its authority, and the consequent responsibility for managing its own affairs. The University is developing new mechanisms for governance, financial control and personnel management in order to enhance the quality assurance of higher education in line with international standards.

### **The Reform and students**

Part of the QU Reform has included the development of a core curriculum for all programmes. The new curriculum is intended to provide a broad foundation of knowledge and skills that prepares students for multiple professional careers and social roles. The Reform also provides students with better systems of advising and registration, as well as academic support services available at the Student Learning Support Centre. The Centre is a supportive environment where students can seek assistance with course assignments, instructors, transitioning to college academic life or other academic issues. The Student Learning Support Centre programmes include: peer tutoring; the Writing Lab; writing workshops; and the 'Academic Success Workshop Series'. Students may also seek confidential, individual academic counselling from the professional staff at the Centre. All Centre programmes are designed to help students become independent and successful learners by improving their study skills and self-confidence, increasing their knowledge of course material, encouraging a positive attitude toward education and preparing them for lifelong learning. All services are free of charge to QU students.

An Office of Staff and Instructional Development has also been established in order to assist academic units in devising and administering programmes to support the professional and pedagogical development of staff. The University provides its non-academic staff with suitable training to develop their knowledge, skills and abilities. Therefore, the participation of students in developing an environment of academic excellence through their performance in classes and participation in research is critical to the success of the Reform.

### **College of Education experiences with the United Nations Development Programme/ Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP/RBAS)**

In 1973 His Highness, The Emir of Qatar issued a decree proclaiming the establishment of the College of Education. Fifty-seven male and 93 female students were admitted in the first year. In later years, rapid development in the country made it necessary for the College of Education to be expanded to accommodate new areas of specialisation. At present, as per the new structure, QU consists of seven colleges namely the College of Education, the

College of Arts & Sciences, the College of Sharia & Islamic Studies, the College of Engineering, the College of Business & Economics, the College of Law and the College of Pharmacy.

The Graduate Diploma in Special Education in the College of Education was opened to students in 2002 with a segregated class of 42 postgraduate students, both female and male. It was then developed over three years in response to a formal request from the Supreme Council for Family Affairs: a civil society institute which proposes and lays out plans, programmes and projects to ensure the family's development and the prosperity of its members. In 2003–2004 the programme was revised in light of the evaluation and a new programme was implemented in 2004–2005 (Lazarus *et al.*, 2004).

The Graduate Diploma in Special Education programme is particularly important for development of quality assurance at QU because it was selected by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to take part in its 'Enhancement of Quality Assurance and Institutional Planning' project at the Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS) (Al-Attiyah & Khalifa, 2006, pp. 7, 14, 73). Thus, in 2005–2006, the UNDP/RBAS carried out the review of the Graduate Diploma in Special Education. The UNDP/RBAS project's development objective is the introduction in Arab universities of independent systems of quality assessment of programmes with reference to internationally-accepted criteria, procedures and benchmarks. The method used for review is a modified version of Academic Subject Review as developed for implementation in 2000 by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the United Kingdom. This method is itself a direct development of the earlier Subject Review method used to review academic disciplines at UK universities over the period 1992 to 2001 (UNDP, 2006b, pp. 11, 19). The review cycle as structured and implemented by the project included training workshops for representatives of participating universities and reviewers recruited from among the trained representatives and from the UK (UNDP/RBAS, 2006a, p. 3).

The reviewers reached the following judgements in relation to the Graduate Diploma in Special Education. They found that the academic standards and the intended learning outcomes were developed within a framework of significant external references, and in response to the changing needs of Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision in the country. The close match between the programme aims and the programme and course learning outcomes, provides an effective basis for the development of the curriculum and the assessment of student achievement. The programme has been developed within a strong collaborative partnership between the special needs community and the College of Education. The design and structure of the fieldwork component provides well-planned progression in the curriculum, and facilitates the structured application of professional/academic knowledge to practice (UNDP/RBAS, 2006c). The Report results also showed that: research is related to teaching and learning through student and staff input to conferences; and the use of IT effectively enhances student learning (UNDP/RBAS, 2006c).

The Report's recommendations for improvement have to take place in the next QU project. It will need to focus on: reviewing the continuing development of the learning outcomes and preparation for further study at master's level or professional engagement at senior levels. Academic staff should consider which types of examination might be most effective in measuring analysis, synthesis and evaluative skills. There is a need for an agreed formal system of moderation of marking students' work to ensure equity and standards (UNDP/RBAS, 2006c).

Report results also showed that the quality of student progression is good. The Report concludes that admission processes are transparent and fair. The programme Handbook is an excellent example of good practice worthy of further dissemination. Academic and

professional support is freely available both formally and informally. The practical fieldwork components of the programme are supported by named and experienced support staff from both the University and placement centres such as: the Shafallah Centre for students with disability; the Al-Noor Institute for Blind Students; and inclusion schools in Ministry of Education and independent schools (UNDP/RBAS, 2006c).

The Report gives a few recommendations for improvement, such as: mature students would benefit from guidance and support in academic and learning skills, including information research skills (UNDP/RBAS, 2006c); the provision, organisation and take-up of professional development opportunities are excellent and staff should continue take-up of these opportunities; current work to enhance academic standards and quality assurance of the programme by using appropriate external reference points is encouraged; implementation of formal and systematic institutional level systems for quality assurance and enhancement within the University should have clear pathways and reporting mechanisms from programme level (UNDP/RBAS, 2006c).

The report closes on a note that quality assurance and enhancement is satisfactory (UNDP/RBAS, 2006a).

In accordance with the above results, steps and actions have been introduced for changes in quality assurance at the University. The UNDP/RBAS project report recommended establishing a formal system for periodic review of provision at programme level and implementing formal and systematic institutional level systems for quality assurance and evaluation within the University (UNDP/RBAS, 2006c).

In the autumn of 2006, one of the first actions taken to address the recommendations of the Report was to establish the Student Learning Outcomes Assessment System (SLOAS). This is run by the Academic Evaluation Office (AEO) at QU. The system is meant to establish evidence, analyse information and utilise the outcomes to enhance the entire educational process, and is based on providing feedback to stakeholders: students; staff members; and partners (AEO, 2007b). It is also based on systematic and well-designed processes for evaluating plans and is conducive to improvement and effective development.

The SLOAS aims to provide feedback and guidance for individual students and to present them with information about their progress in meeting learning expectations, an integral part of higher education. It assists the University and staff members to improve programmes and courses. By establishing the assessment system, QU can now evaluate its students' success at achieving learning goals and can use the measures to plan improvement efforts (AEO, 2007b).

Before introducing the SLOAS, it was reviewed by the Quality Group, staff members in QU, as well as by an expert from the United States of America to ensure its validity and reliability. In the spring of 2007, the AEO with the Quality Group announced two seminars for QU staff to prepare them to utilise the SLOAS. Three workshops were held to determine and verify the policies and procedures of the system and the timeline to conduct the annual outcomes assessment progress report. In 2007–2008, AEO also held several workshops to train staff members and coordinators of the programme on how to select the learning outcomes and its assessments.

Also in the spring of 2007, each college in QU was asked to establish a committee or, failing that, responsibility would be assigned to an existing relevant committee, for general oversight of the system, review of the programmes' submitted results, and coordination with AEO (2007b). A mission statement has been drawn-up along with derivative goals and students' learning outcomes. Measurements for students' learning outcomes were selected and a timeframe for gathering and reporting data was formulated. The AEO



was eager to help in the development of these assessment designs and constructive feedback by providing workshops and individual assistance to each programme (AEO, 2007b).

According to the timeline for submitting the annual outcomes assessment progress report to the AEO, 21 programmes plus the foundation programme at QU were asked to finalise their report by the end of June 2007 and submit it to the AEO (2007a). In July 2007, the AEO submitted an individual report for each programme and college and an overall report to the University management. These results showed that student learning outcomes are not written for some programmes. Those programmes' review processes were not formally informed by the assessment of student learning outcomes.

The AEO and the Quality Group evaluated the programmes' annual outcomes assessment progress report. Reviews of programme reports about the learning outcomes assessment results showed that 63.4% of the 22 programmes had used the mission statement briefly, memorably and distinctively. It clearly supported the Department's, College's and University's missions. It pinpointed who the stakeholders are and 36.6% of the 22 programmes stated the purpose of these stakeholders in the mission.

The findings indicated that 54.5% of the 22 programmes' student learning outcomes were consistent and supported the programmes' objectives in clear and definite terms, describing the: abilities; knowledge; values; attitudes; and performance expected of the students.

Some 50% of the 22 programmes actually used assessment methods and instruments to assess student learning outcomes. At the time results of the other 50% of the 22 programmes showed that the assessment methods and instruments they used were not well aligned to what they intend students to learn. They tend to assess what students say about the topic. These assessments were not appropriate for assessing learning outcomes. Recommendations were made to focus on learning results not learning processes in addition to merging more than one learning outcome. It was clear that too much information and detail were included in the learning outcome statements.

Again 50% of the 22 programmes' assessment methods of students' ability and learning outcomes were not clear. Recommendations were made to have 'external measures' such as standardised tests to provide validity for the internal measures.

In the spring of 2008, programme assessment plans provided the University administration with the tools of assessment for all students in the programmes being assessed. Additional information on indicators of student progression, such as: enrolment, attrition, attendance, survey results, and evaluations of students' performances (for example, writing samples, student teaching or internships, research or honours projects) were also collected to provide useful data which programmes in QU can interpret to determine whether students have achieved particular learning outcomes in order to meet the expectations of students, employers and stakeholders, and the international standards of quality assurance and evaluation of higher education (AEO, 2007a).

### **The Development and Quality Assurance Stage after implementing the SLOAS**

After submitting the annual outcomes assessment progress report the system's cycle was completed and the results were utilised to address developments of the programme. Development and improvement were achieved through changes in learning methodologies and strategies, and sharing of outstanding performance of academic staff members. Furthermore, the results of the SLOAS are communicated to stakeholders, including: students; college management; and programme partners through annual reports (AEO, 2007a).

In 2006–2007, the College of Education established a Quality Assurance Committee (QAC). The aims of the committee are to review all programme learning outcomes and syllabi and to review and modify the syllabi of the College of Education in order to meet the expectations of QU staff, students and stakeholders (College of Education, 2007a).

All the core courses and requirements were reviewed and modified according to the criteria of QAC in the College of Education, and then the reviewed syllabi were sent to the external reviewers from the American University of Beirut and Texas A&M University (TAMU). The reports showed that some courses needed to be revisited because the content needed to be made more general. For example, social psychology should provide students with an introduction to the field of social psychology, its key concepts and methodologies (College of Education, 2007b).

In autumn 2007, the QAC implemented the QAC Peer Observation System in the College. The main objective was to improve practice through giving staff constructive feedback that ensures the quality of student learning within the strategy of the College and to work towards attaining accreditation (QAC, 2008).

Braskamp and Ory (1994) list the following suggestions for adopting peer observation to train observers. It is highly recommended by educational experts and it is used by QAC.

1. Training helps instructors focus on desired criteria and learn how to observe correctly.
2. Alternatively, academic officers can select several observers from the list of recommended potential observers nominated by the instructor.
3. Observations by more than two colleagues are recommended, since all staff, quite naturally, rely on their own experiences, values, and definitions of effective teaching in making their assessments.
4. Each observer can highlight similarities and differences by writing summary reports.
5. Descriptive reports, focusing on agreed-upon tools and behaviours including specific examples of instructor and student behaviours are recommended.
6. The summary is more balanced and fair if it contains both positive and negative observations.

### Methods and procedures

Within the first two weeks of the spring 2008 semester, each programme in the College of Education provided the QAC with a list of all the courses taught by staff members in that programme. The list contained course titles, names of the teaching staff, lecture room numbers, dates and times.

The QAC used a clear procedure for determining the courses and staff members visited in the spring semester with the goal of visiting all staff members at the College by the end of the next year, 2008–2009. This supports the College of Education's quest to provide high quality teaching and learning experiences in all its programmes and to attain international accreditation and recognition (College of Education, 2008a, pp. 2–3, 4).

The process was started by the QAC announcing when the peer observation visits would begin. They also referred staff to a published manual and held meetings with staff members in each programme to explain the system. The use of course portfolios in the observation process was clarified at these meetings. Academic staff were told that every attempt would be made to visit each of them at least once a year. This is all set out in the Manual of Peer Observation (College of Education, 2008b).



### Pilot study

A pilot study ran from March through May in 2008. A total of 12 staff members from different programmes in the College of Education participated in the pilot study. At the beginning of the spring 2008 semester, the QAC determined the master list of all the staff members to be observed that semester (College of Education, 2008b).

Peer observation visits were conducted by two observers. They consisted of one QAC representative ideally from the same programme as the staff member to be observed and another member of academic staff who may or may not have been a member of the QAC. In the process of appointing observers to conduct a peer visit, the QAC made every effort to ensure that there was no conflict of interest between any of the 'observers' and the 'observed' (College of Education, 2008b).

Peer observers arrived at the class 10 minutes prior to scheduled lecture time. Observers sat down in a neutral area during the lecture. They made notes and collected information, observations and evidence on a Peer Observation Form. Peer observers prepared a confidential joint report on the class visit. They met the observed staff member at the agreed time to discuss pertinent observations. Then they invited the observed staff member to comment on the observation report before it was submitted to the Chair of the QAC. A copy of the completed joint report went to the staff member within 48 hours of completing the discussion session.

The Peer Observation Checklist was a collaborative work by a team from QAC. It is divided into five areas: Educational Objective; Presentation Skills; Running the Learning Environment; Instructional Strategies; and Assessment Techniques (College of Education, 2008a, pp. 9–12).

The results of the Peer Observation Checklist showed that 83% of teaching staff provided an introduction and clarified class objectives, provided the main elements of the lecture and related knowledge with its practical applications, used varied activities, used suitable and varied instructional techniques for class (such as, discussion, cooperative learning, questioning to check students' comprehension and networking). In addition, 75% of staff started class on time and motivated students to learn and used suitable communication skills, verbal and others. The highest results the Peer Observation Checklist showed were that 100% of the teaching staff summarised the lecture's main points (individually or collaboratively with students), ended class on time and asked different types of questions to check students' comprehension during class.

According to the results of the Peer Observation forms, 92% of academic staff members explained information and ideas in a clear and comprehensible manner, used suitable technological tools, attracted students' attention constantly during class, used suitable reinforcement techniques and treated students with respect (accepted the opinions of others openly). The lowest result of the Peer Observation Checklist showed that 67% of staff members asked summative questions to ensure the acquisition and achievement of objectives.

The results of the class observation notes showed that academic staff think classrooms are not well-prepared for teaching group work or discussion panels and that the seats and tables were not sufficiently comfortable for the three-hour classes. They also noted that they had shortages of technology and materials especially in the art classes. QU has taken these results into consideration and set a plan to maintain all the facilities in QU, such as fit a new video projector and other new technology to be used in the classroom.

The College of Education enhances quality assurance by following up students and alumni through their participation and involvement in all areas of the College. The Alumni

Student Support Committee was started in 2006–2007. Its first remit was to work with the students at risk (low achievement students) through regular meetings and workshops. The second was to work with distinguished students (high-achievement students) through supporting their performance and rewarding them. The third focused on peer support for students in postgraduate programmes by arranging different experiences, such as sharing evaluation of graduate projects. Another scheme, in collaboration with the alumni committee, focused on continued communication with College alumni through offering them chances to be partners with the College's different activities and annual conferences, also to become a part of other QU students' services.

## Conclusion

There is still room for considerable improvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement in QU, in particular, the processes need to address the sustainability of efforts to self-evaluate and manage improvement plans. There is a definite need to establish coherent systems at the University, faculty, programme and course levels. These include: 1) an annual evaluation to monitor and make provision to anticipate problems and deal with them as and when, and before they arise; and 2) to enhance quality through regular programme reviews to maintain and ensure its currency. Specifically designated persons or committees need to be identified to account for quality assurance and enhancement. Processes and procedures need to be established to ensure the timely identification of problems.

More interactive use of feedback from all stakeholders, including: students, staff, schools, professional bodies and Ministry officials, where relevant, would be helpful in this process as well. The point of feedback is not to gather data and return 'results'; it is a process that starts with the questions of decision-makers, that involves them in the gathering and interpreting of data, and that informs and helps guide continuous improvement. This leads to developing a culture in which increased awareness and commitment to quality assurance and enhancement becomes the norm. Lastly, it is also critical that the Qatari community engage with the University to ensure it fulfils its vision in serving the needs of Qatari society.

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