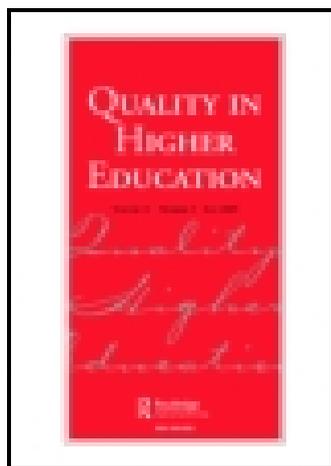


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The Quality Assurance System for Post-Secondary Education in Saudi Arabia: A Comprehensive, Developmental and Unified Approach

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ABSTRACT *The rapid growth in the number of post-secondary institutions in Saudi Arabia over the last few years necessitated the creation of a government agency for accreditation and quality assurance. The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment was established in 2004 for this purpose. Between 2005 and 2008, it developed a new three-stage quality assurance and accreditation system that benefited from the international expertise, while keeping its characteristics. This comprehensive detailed system was implemented gradually with wide acceptance. It included standards in 11 areas of activity for both programmes and institutions, including: a national qualifications framework that specifies generic standards of learning outcomes, and supporting materials such as key performance indicators, student surveys, self-evaluation scales, templates for programme plans and reports, and handbooks detailing quality assurance processes. During this period, considerable help has been provided by the British Council through the Excellence in Higher Education project.*

Keywords: National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment; Saudi quality assurance system; developmental review; pilot review; *Excellence in Higher Education* project

Introduction

This study aims to depict the experience of Saudi Arabia in introducing a quality assurance system to higher education institutions. It used a multiple case design with mixed qualitative

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and quantitative methods. Case examples are at university-level, and patterns across these cases were explored. Cases were selected purposely to present the different experiences for the different types of universities. Data collection and analysis included interviews and focus groups with quality centre directors and vice-directors, surveys with open-ended and closed questions for those who were involved in quality assurance processes in the institutions, document analysis, and reflections from key informants through the various stages of the system's developments.

Historical background

There was no quality system for higher education at the national level in Saudi Arabia before the establishment of the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) in 2004. Before that, all accreditation and quality assurance initiatives were taken by individual universities, mainly King Abdulaziz University, King Saud University, King Faisal University and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals. Accreditation or recognition was related to programmes offered by colleges in certain professional fields. For example, all engineering programmes at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals were granted the Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology (USA) style accreditation from 1993 until 2001 and were recognised to be 'substantially equivalent' to similar programmes in the United States. (From 2005 to 2007 the Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology (now known as ABET) transitioned from the 'substantial equivalence' to a new 'non-domestic accreditation' plan.) Then all engineering science programmes at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals received ABET 'substantial equivalence' from 2001 until 2008. Their College of Industrial Management received accreditation from 2002 until 2013 from The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (USA).

Unlike emerging Saudi universities, King Abdulaziz University and King Saud University resumed their efforts in this field that started in the late 1980s. For example, the College of Engineering at King Saud University was granted ABET-style accreditation from 1988 to 1993, and then resumed the process recently. Fourteen engineering programmes, six geological programmes, a dental programme and a post-graduate educational diploma at King Abdulaziz University were also recently accredited by ABET, the British Geological Society, the Association of Dental Education in Europe and the United Nations Development Programme. Four programmes in the Faculty of Economic and Administration are ready for assessment by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business and the British Association of MBAs. In addition, King Abdulaziz University Hospital and some development and service centres gained accreditation from international bodies (Abulfaraj *et al.*, 2006; Al-Eisa & Sahab, 2006; Zahed *et al.*, 2008).

Recently, the educational hospitals within universities in Saudi Arabia have also witnessed significant progress and participated, with the Saudi Council for Health Specialties and the Ministry of Health, in a Kingdom-wide system of regulations for professional standards, licensure of practitioners, international accreditation of educational programmes and formation of national associations (Tumulty, 2004).

Due to local demands, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) offered some initiatives in the Arab region to support the efforts for quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. It held conferences between 2000 and 2003, and offered training that encouraged the establishment of quality assurance frameworks and agencies in each country, including the Gulf countries (UNESCO, 2004).

The effect of policy context on implementing standards and quality models

Quality is a complex construct with different dimensions and it is important to use the approach to quality that fits both the aims of the system and the context within which it operates (Harvey, 2006). Becoming a 'learning organisation' involves building a culture of quality (Daft, 2006). The quality system requires a shift to a quality culture and quality management system to be driven at all levels instead of top-down. The quality culture approach differs from traditional quality management strategies because it focuses on the values, attitudes and behaviours of an academic community to embrace a shared vision of the mission of an institution, to achieve an understanding of its standards for quality, and ways to meet them. The concept of quality culture needs to be developed in theory and practice (EUA, 2006; Harvey & Stensaker, 2007; Vettori *et al.*, 2007).

Saudi Arabian educational planners aim at introducing the best international quality system practices. They examine these different approaches, adapting them to the Saudi national context, and make necessary changes. They also developed self-evaluation scales based on good-practice-standards, which are useful in encouraging self-evaluation and focusing the improvement efforts. Most of the Saudi universities use centralised systems and managerial concepts involving quality control, quality mechanisms, and quality management in a top-down approach. Centralised systems focus on the top-down implementation of generalised quality management strategies and models, while decentralised systems support the quality culture approach. They rely on delegating decision-making power and monitoring duties to teachers, researchers, students and administrators (EUA, 2008).

The emergence of the quality assurance system for higher education within the Saudi Arabian context

Recently, post-secondary institutions in Saudi Arabia have increased tremendously in number in a short time. Public universities increased from 8 in 2003 to 22 in 2008 and more than 20 private universities and colleges were approved. One hundred and two colleges for girls and 18 teacher colleges were transferred to the Ministry of Higher Education and merged with universities. Nursing and other health institutions were transferred to the Ministry of Higher Education. There are 12 community colleges, with 47 public and 61 private nursing and health institutions. The number of public vocational and technical institutions increased to 47, and over 60 private specialised technical colleges and institutions were established. In addition, there are military colleges and many small specialised institutions (NCAAA, 2008).

The rapid growth in numbers and increasing demands for continuing study opportunities necessitated the need for an effective higher education quality system. Private sector expansion reinforced the need for providing a national mechanism to ensure the consistency in educational standards and the comparability to international highly-regarded educational systems, considering Saudi Arabian culture and economic development.

In 2004, the Saudi government recognised the need for a quality assurance and accreditation system for all post-secondary institutions and programmes. The NCAAA became the official government agency for accreditation and quality assurance of post-secondary governmental and private institutions and programmes with the exception of military education. The NCAAA is an independent body, financially and administratively, reporting to the Higher Council of Education. Its responsibilities include establishing standards,

criteria and procedures for accreditation, reviewing and evaluating performance of existing and new institutions, accrediting institutions and programmes, and supporting improvements in quality (Al-Musallam, 2007). The Commission became a full member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education in 2005.

The Commission assessment of quality is based on performance in relation to accepted standards of good practice and fitness for purpose. It developed standards in 11 broad areas of activity and a national qualifications framework that specifies generic standards of learning outcomes for each level of qualification. Institutions are required to establish internal quality assurance systems that ensure high levels of quality in all of these 11 areas. These internal systems must include processes of strategic planning in relation to institutional mission statements, short- and long-term planning and reporting procedures based on evidence of quality of performance. Periodic comprehensive self-studies must be undertaken to assess performance and plan for improvement.

These self-studies are followed by independent external peer reviews that verify the conclusions of self-studies and consider performance in relation to international standards. The Commission should consider the reports from these independent external reviews in making its decisions on accreditation.

The primary objective of this system is continuous improvement with accreditation serving as a device to achieve this objective (as well as providing assurance that necessary standards have been achieved). The system was based on a fundamental assumption that institutions wish to operate with high and increasing levels of quality, comparable to, and wherever possible exceeding, international standards. The Commission assists institutions in achieving these improvements. An important consideration in accreditation judgements is the existence and effective use of quality improvement mechanisms (NCAAA, 2007a).

Establishing, modifying and testing the quality assurance systems in Saudi Arabia

During 2005 and 2006, a series of four national symposiums were held by NCAAA to raise awareness and understanding of quality assurance and accreditation arrangements. Participants were mainly academics and senior administrative university and college staff from across the country.

Draft standards were prepared and three handbooks were issued: the first defines the system and major terms, the second explains internal quality assurance arrangements, and the third describes external quality review arrangements. They benefited from international practices, with variations relevant to Saudi Arabia.

To assist institutions with their self-evaluation, there were 11 standards presented as self-evaluation scales, divided into 5 domains. Each standard has sub-standards that include elements. The standards are:

- A) **Institutional Context:**
 - 1) Mission, Goals and Objectives;
 - 2) Governance and Administration;
 - 3) Management of Quality Assurance and Improvement;
- B) **Quality of Learning and Teaching:**
 - 4) Learning and Teaching;
- C) **Support for Student Learning:**
 - 5) Student Administration and Support Services;
 - 6) Learning Resources;

D) Supporting Infrastructure:

7)

Facilities and Equipment;

8) Financial Planning and Management;

9) Employment Processes;

E) Community Contributions:

10) Research;

11) Institutional Relationships with the Community.

A qualifications framework for higher education was prepared describing minimum credit-hour requirements for qualifications, with special emphasis on creative problem solving and desirable graduate attributes. It describes generic standards of learning outcomes at each level in five domains of learning: knowledge; cognitive skills; interpersonal skills and responsibility; communication, information technology and numerical skills; and, where relevant, psychomotor skills (NCAAA, 2007a).

A programme is regarded as an integrated package of courses and activities leading to a qualification. Templates were provided for programme and course specifications, annual reports, and periodic self-study reports to assure the coverage of all requirements. They emphasise integrated programme planning, learning and teaching as well as assessment strategies that develop the full range of intended learning outcomes.

Draft documents and procedures were reviewed by international experts from different countries with established quality assurance systems (UK, USA, Canada and Australia). They were reviewed in a national seminar by over 300 participants from Saudi Arabian higher education institutions. Then they were reviewed by all Saudi universities and by a panel of quality assurance representatives. Amendments were made in the documents in response to feedback.

More than 40 workshops were held in different locations by NCAAA throughout the country and were repeated on a semester-by-semester basis for two years and with total attendance of approximately 2500 participants from different universities and colleges. The workshops covered three general topics: a general introduction to quality assurance processes; institutional quality assurance including strategies for introducing change and strategic planning; processes for programme and course planning; and quality assurance using the templates that had been prepared. This early engagement in the work encouraged the institutions to adopt the new quality assurance system (Darandari & Hoke, 2007).

Testing the system using a pilot review project

Before the full implementation of the new system, field trials of the internal and external quality assurance processes were conducted in different institutions and a sample of different kinds of educational programmes. Two universities were invited and agreed to participate: King Abdulaziz University, a large comprehensive public university, and Prince Sultan University, a small private university. The aims were to ensure the standards and procedures were workable and relevant to different types of institutions and to identify any further modifications or clarifications required in the internal processes or the procedures followed in external reviews. The pilot project also aimed to give the participating institutions the opportunity to develop their capacity and to provide a source of advice to other institutions beginning these procedures at a later time (NCAAA, 2007c).

After initial briefings by NCAAA, each university conducted self-studies using the format provided in the Commission's templates and the self-evaluation scales prepared by the Commission, and completed a programme specification for each of the programmes being reviewed, with a sample of course specifications. The reviews included processes for both institutional and programme accreditation.

The Commission arranged for the external reviews to be done by teams of international quality reviewers with extensive experience in both programme and institutional quality assurance. It sought advice from international quality assurance agencies and invited experts who were recommended by these agencies. The review teams were drawn from several countries to ensure a broad perspective. They followed the Commission processes for review, making suggestions but did not make recommendations on accreditation. The institutions and the external review teams made suggestions on the review processes and documents. Procedures were modified to reflect these comments.

The Pilot Review Project supported the approach adopted by the Commission. A modified set of standards for use in the self-evaluation of programmes, as well as additional documents, has been prepared, including illustrative programme and course specifications, a set of proposed key performance indicators and recommended student evaluation surveys.

In addition to the interaction between the Commission and the international quality agencies, this was a valuable experience for many who had not previously been involved with accreditation processes. This experience included the use of different strategies for gathering and reporting information relevant to standards, the use of the self-evaluation scales and the understanding of relationships between central planning committees and subcommittees. In addition, the pilot institutions were able to help other institutions beginning the process. Interviews were conducted with quality centre directors and vice-directors in both institutions and one director summarised his experience emphasising the following:

Generally, the pilot review was a great learning experience for our institution. The strengths and weaknesses were identified and given appropriate attention. The strategic directions of our institution became more focused...the experts' suggestions and recommendations were very constructive and helped us build a high quality educational system.

The project director said:

the pilot project identified practical issues and problems that were resolved within the institutions or through consultation with the Commission...issues included processes for gathering evidence of quality, identifying appropriate performance benchmarks, relationships among subcommittees and steering committees, male and female campuses, and the necessity of involvement by the highest levels of administration in processes to ensure that all key participants are involved and meet time commitments. The project experience reinforced the need for inclusion of ongoing evaluations within institutions as a normal element in institutional and programme management.

Saudi institutions implement the new quality assurance system and build their capacity

During 2007 and 2008, several important steps were taken to encourage implementation of the quality assurance system. This was a second stage of transitional development.

In February 2007, NCAAA encouraged all higher education institutions to establish quality centres to help lead and coordinate quality assurance initiatives in their institutions. Each institution was asked to carry out an initial self-evaluation based on the newly developed standards, using the self-evaluation scales. The main expected outcome of this self-evaluation was that institutions would become familiar with the new system, start to identify matters on which reliable evidence could be collected, and to identify areas where improvements are required. The institutions were asked to complete this initial self-evaluation by the end of June 2007. NCAAA prepared feedback reports to all institutions, which included comments and suggestions on the reports.

The Commission then asked institutions to prepare strategic plans for quality improvement that included actions to implement the requirements of the quality assurance system and to deal with any significant deficiencies discovered, in preparation for evaluations for accreditation beginning in 2009. A total of 21 universities and colleges participated in this stage, 9 of them were public and 12 were private (NCAAA, 2007b).

In almost all cases, the institutions formed committees to investigate and report on the matters addressed in the Commission's standards. In many cases, quality judgements were based on consensus opinions rather than firm evidence. There was limited use of student and other opinion surveys, or statistical data, and there was little use of comparative information for benchmarking purposes. Many had underestimated the amount of time and effort required for a task of this sort. The problems have been recognised and action is being taken to deal with them within the universities.

A second development has also had a major effect in the private universities and colleges. The Ministry of Higher Education has introduced a system of scholarships for students in these programmes provided the programmes in which they are enrolled meet quality standards. The Ministry asked the Commission to conduct these quality evaluations, which it has done based on a sub-set of the programme quality standards. This has led those institutions to move quickly to meet these requirements and has provided useful experience with the standards for academic staff from other institutions who are involved in these programme evaluations.

The NCAAA quality system expects higher education institutions and programmes to base their course and programme descriptions on the National Qualifications Framework and to conduct a planning and review cycle that helps them achieve their goals and the NCAAA's 11 standards (Figure 1).

Quality enhancement and capacity building at national and institutional level

In the second stage, participation in quality assurance activities and commission workshops increased the awareness of quality at all institutional levels. The Saudi quality system emphasises the development of teaching, learning and assessment using multiple strategies as a form of quality assurance and quality improvement. Institutions realised that they need to build organisational capacity through increasing the skills of staff and changing their attitudes towards quality systems. Many universities have established quality centres, centres for teaching and learning, academic and administration development units, and academic assessment units.

From 2005 to 2008, the British Council's *Excellence in Higher Education* project provided training workshops on: quality assurance and enhancement; quality management; and strategies for teaching and learning and assessment. Four workshops were held in Saudi Arabia and five in other Gulf countries. Around 230 Saudi participants, mainly involved

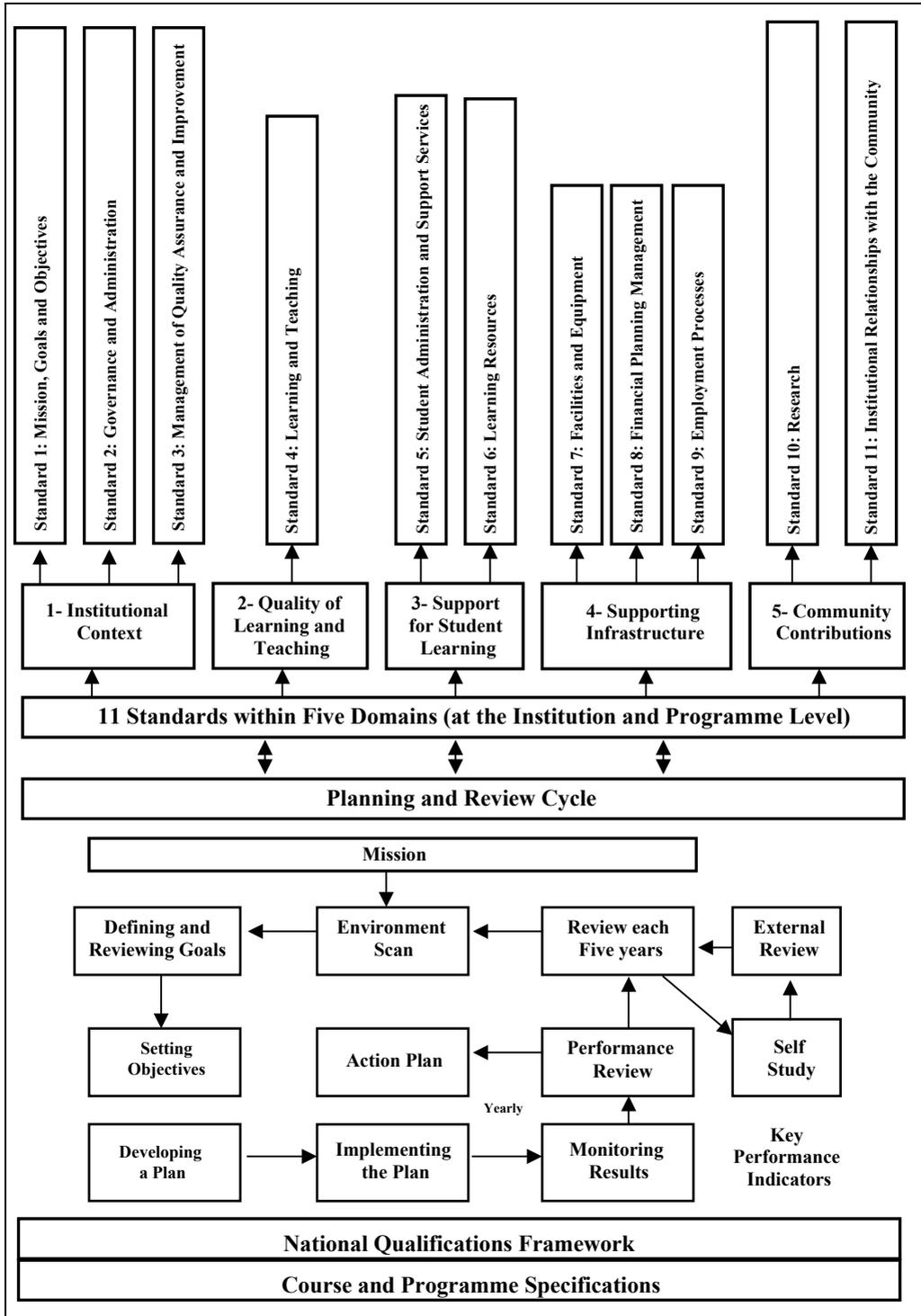


FIGURE 1. Quality assurance and accreditation in Saudi Arabia

with quality assurance or learning and teaching centres, attended these workshops. The workshops were useful, appreciated and well received as indicated by the British Council evaluation surveys from all participants. A sample of 45 participants affirmed that the topics were very important and provided them with tools to build their quality systems, covered a wide range of experiences and kept them abreast of the latest trends in the field.

Between 2006 and 2008, the British Council's project conducted 4 study tours to the UK, and around 28 directors or vice-directors of quality centres in institutions attended them. They visited quality agencies and met quality leaders and directors of some British institutions. The British Council tour evaluation surveys showed that the tours met the participant's expectations. Interviews with 16 of the participants revealed that the tours helped them learn a lot about UK quality assurance and enhancement systems and mechanisms.

Some progress has happened at this stage, particularly in internal quality systems within the universities. Many institutions have started a plan-implement-monitor-review cycle. The study conducted by Darandari and Hoke (2007) showed increased evaluation activities in higher education institutions for quality assurance purposes. This present study tracked the progress in evaluation activities at the major institutions. Results showed significant increase in implementing all evaluation activities from the previous study, except for peer review which is still developing. The impact on student learning is still too early to measure at this stage (Table 1).

Building internal quality assurance systems and getting ready for accreditation

In the third stage of development, developmental reviews are being undertaken in some institutions. In November 2007, the Ministry of Higher Education selected four institutions to undertake the developmental reviews and arrangements have been made by the Commission. The developmental reviews simulate the self-study and external review processes but do not involve an actual recommendation on accreditation, aiming at providing institutions

TABLE 1. Percentage from samples of universities and colleges reporting evaluation activities in 2007 and 2008

Evaluation Activity	2007 (n=35)	2008 (n=18)*	Increase in Percentage
	%	%	
1- Student Evaluation of Teachers	77	88	11
2- Chair Evaluation of Teachers	54	88	34
3- Peer Observation	26	18	-8
4- Self-Evaluation	46	82	36
5- Workshop Evaluations	31	82	51
6- Events/Activities Evaluation	40	76	36
7- Institutional Reports	40	65	25
8- Programme Reports	57	65	8
9- Course Reports	66	76	10
10- Satisfaction Surveys	40	53	13
11- Curriculum Reviews	57	59	2
12- Strategic Planning	54	100	46
13- Quality Assurance Committee meetings	74	100	26
14- Internal Reviews	34	59	25
15- External Reviews	29	35	6
Average	48	70	22

* The sample in 2007 was 35 institutions and the sample in 2008 was 18 institutions from the previous sample.

with the experience in processes for self-study and accreditation. Actual accreditation will start in 2009. The developmental reviews are being carried out in three public universities and one private college: King Saud University-Riyadh, King Faisal University-Dammam and Al Hassa, Al-Qassim University-Buraidah and the College of Business Administration-Jeddah.

In each case, there is an institutional review and reviews of between 5 and 10 separate 4-year degree programme fields. Two types of self-study reports and reviews were undertaken. One was dealing with institutional self-study and external review and the other dealing with programme accreditation and review. Criteria for quality included two main elements. First, the level of achievement of the goals and objectives that the institution (and each of the programmes) is trying to achieve. Second, consistency with generally-accepted standards of good practice.

Despite the fact that this project is still ongoing, the experiences gained from it were seen as very helpful. A director of a quality centre said:

...the developmental review has helped us and was a great experience for us at all levels. It helped in figuring out what we still need in building our internal quality system...all directions needed were in NCAAA materials...we are more focused now but we still have management problems relating to time and coordination... despite our efforts, the task was somewhat challenging.

Specialised and professional quality assurance activities and standards

The first and second stages stressed the general requirements for quality assurance for higher education institutions and programmes. The Commission has not yet developed detailed standards for particular fields of study. In the third stage, additional work has been done to prepare for quality assurance activities in post-secondary technical training. A qualifications framework and a set of standards have been prepared. After a thorough search in international highly-regarded technical training systems, three experts from the USA, Scotland and Australia were invited to assist in building the standards. Technical training institutions, related government organisations, industry representatives and employers were consulted.

Concluding remarks

In only four years, Saudi Arabia has developed, established, tested and implemented a new quality assurance system for higher education, benefiting from international expertise, while keeping its unique characteristics. The system is very comprehensive, detailed, and has illustrative support materials to assist in its implementation. It was introduced through three stages, which resulted in a reasonable acceptance amongst the higher education sectors as indicated by interviews. The developments and changes in the quality system were monitored and evaluated through different projects at institutional level. As expressed from participating parties, the trials helped in time management, management structure and team management issues. The continuous training, support and capacity-building activities provided by NCAAA for institutions have helped in creating a positive relationship.

Since all post-secondary institutions were encouraged to apply the new quality assurance system as a unified approach, substantial internal re-structuring has occurred. At present, almost all the higher education institutions have quality centres and committees to work on quality at different levels. It appeared from university reports and records, and from

surveys, that institutions have become more focused and they have their own visions, missions, objectives and strategic plans. There has been a major shift in designing and implementing learning outcomes at programme level. More attention is being given to best practices in teaching and learning.

There were some difficulties in implementation: accreditation of programmes seems to be time consuming. Universities, colleges and programmes have different levels of experience and resources (Al-Yafi, 2008). The size of the institution, its type (private or public) and management structure were major factors in the quality management approaches used and the time needed for implementation. As the quality assurance system was introduced very recently, the concept of quality culture is still underdeveloped in many of Saudi Arabian institutions. In addition, the differences between the management ideologies within the universities that depend on centralisation, and the ones introduced by the new quality system that needs decentralisation and a quality culture, posed a challenge in the implementation.

Finally, the lessons learned are changing the mind set of participants and drawing a concept map. These are important in achieving quick successful quality implementation. A quality map needs to be designed, introduced and clarified to all stakeholders before implementing the system. It should provide a broad overview of the quality assurance system, framework, tools, management structures and analysis for the national and global environments. Participants need to know where they are, where they want to go, how they are similar or different from others nationally and internationally, what should be changed and to what level and what the alternatives are. Change within an institution or a system is a process that needs to be addressed so everyone will be on the same page.

The NCAAA has a combination of both. Its function is based on assessment and accreditation and quality enhancement. The higher education institutions have not matured yet, however they are required to consider both approaches (standards-based and fitness for purpose) using quantitative and qualitative data. Peer assessment is one of the critical elements. The recommendations of the peers have an important place in the accreditation process.

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