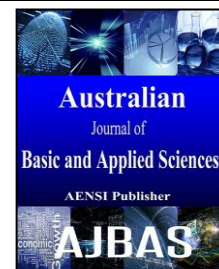




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Challenges of Applying Quality Management to Private Higher Education Institutions in the Sultanate of Oman

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ABSTRACT

In order to keep up with an increasingly competitive global environment, administrators and educators are constantly looking for ways to make the services they provide more effective and meaningful. To achieve this, one of the managerial tools that has been introduced is quality management. The purpose of this paper is to identify the challenges that Omani private higher education institutions (HEIs) face in implementing quality management. To meet this objective, an extensive literature review was undertaken in order to understand the quality management approach in the higher education sector, and the challenges of implementing such an initiative; followed by eight semi-structured interviews with top management in selected private HEIs in the Muscat governorate. The analysis of this qualitative research identified five challenges most frequently faced by Omani private HEIs. The barriers were: a lack of qualified human resources, a lack of quality training, increasing administrative and academic workloads, excessive paperwork, and ineffective academic partnerships with foreign HEIs

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INTRODUCTION

Around the world, most manufacturing systems are starting to apply quality methods such as quality assurance, quality control, and total quality management. The philosophy of quality management is being implemented in differing types of business of all sizes in the hope of improving performance in terms of reaching required growth rates and increasing profit (Al-Tarawneh and Mubaslat, 2011).

According to Omachonu and Ross (2004) the concept of quality means different things to different people. It also takes on a different meaning depending on whether a product, a service, or a combination of both is offered. Consequently, there are several well-known definitions of quality management. For example, it is defined as "a method for ensuring that all the activities necessary for the design, development and implementation of product or service are effective and efficient with respect to the system and its performance" (Charantimath, 2011, p.5). From this it can be understood that quality management emphasizes product quality as well as the means to achieve it. Quality management, which is also referred to as total quality management, consists of three major components: quality control,

quality assurance and quality improvement. In order to achieve more consistent quality, quality management uses a combination of quality assurance and the improved control of processes (Charantimath, 2011).

In the late 1950's, quality management principles were formulated by Dr. W. Edwards Deming, but his ideas were not accepted by Americans. On the other hand, in order to overcome the effects of World War II and build a strong economy, Japan embraced quality management philosophy. As a result of the implementation of quality management principles, Japanese industry was able to become highly competitive globally. In the 1980's, the rest of the world realized the value of a quality management approach for businesses (Winn and Green, 1998). Gradually, the quality management approach has become commonplace in areas such as administration, business, engineering, and service sectors such as education and health. It has become a uniquely effective management system for meeting the difficulties faced by these institutions in trying to achieve the highest possible production quality, or providing quality services (Hegazy, 2012). The next section focuses on a relevant literature review to help

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provide both the context and motivation for this study.

Quality Management and Higher Education:

There has always been a strong link between the economy and education. Higher education especially plays a key role in boosting the economy by enriching the quality the workforce. Not only that, but higher education is an essential investment necessary to improve the overall quality of life of those undertaking it (Al-Tarawneh and Mubaslat, 2011). There is no doubt that the quality of education is shaping the long-term prosperity and wellbeing of both nations and their people, which has encouraged many countries to improve and reform their educational systems (Babbar, 1995).

Nowadays, educational institutions are facing growing challenges from global competition and more sophisticated students, particularly with regard to their changing needs (Al-Tarawneh and Mubaslat, 2011). These reasons, along with many more factors have forced HEIs to adopt quality systems. Some of the reasons include: declining quality of graduates, increasing competition and growing mandates for accountability by accreditation associations, legislature, and funding bodies (Ariff *et al.*, 2007). As an example, in Malaysia, there were frequent complaints in connection with the quality of students completing local higher education. The graduates were found lacking generic skills and unable to adapt and communicate effectively (Ariff *et al.*, 2007). Providing a higher quality service has therefore become a strategic aim for HEIs in Malaysia and around the world. To achieve this goal, several quality tools and techniques have been used, and quality management has proved to be among the most effective quality techniques utilized (Quinn *et al.*, 2009; Babbar, 1995).

As has been previously stated, in the past quality management was recognized as an important management philosophy and is now widely worldwide in the industrial field (Winn and Green, 1998). Due to the undeniable success of quality management implementation in the industrial sector, service organizations have gradually started to follow in their footsteps and consider the use of such initiatives. As a result, quality management has been applied to health care, hotels and education (Al-Tarawneh and Mubaslat, 2011; Babbar, 1995). Its application in education has been particularly successful in the development of higher education systems. While most of the implementation has been in the administrative areas of institutions, some institutions have implemented quality systems to guide curriculum development (Winn and Green, 1998).

The interest in this emerging philosophy among the educational community began in 1990 when Oregon State University adopted the quality management philosophy and has experienced great

success in improving its administrative process (Winn and Green, 1998). As a result, during the past few decades, there have been an increasing number of global universities and colleges which have turned to quality management to give them a competitive advantage. There are many who argue the potential benefits of quality management for the educational sector. Goldberg and Cole (2002), for example, emphasize that "*education can be improved through quality management*" (p.10). Therefore, the use of the quality management approach has become a logical step in coping with new challenges such as those listed above. Furthermore, it is one of the most important techniques available for improving the quality of educational processes and services; particularly in administrative applications (Sallis, 2005). It is also a useful method of making an institution more competitive and sustainable (Salameh *et al.*, 2011). To investigate the results of applying quality management in educational institutions, many studies have been conducted (Winn and Green, 1998; Kanji *et al.*, 1999). As an example Kanji *et al.* (1999) found that institutions using a quality system perform significantly better than those that do not. Also, a quality approach has been proven to not only aid development, but to solve problems, and to satisfy customers and stakeholders (Kanji *et al.*, 1999).

In order to ensure that the system of quality management implementation is effective, there are several interconnected factors that need to be accounted for. Based on wide ranging experiences with quality management implementation, it is clear that the successful introduction of a quality approach requires three major components - planning, time, and effort (Venkatraman, 2007; Talib *et al.*, 2011). Whereas Handfield *et al.* (1999) and Quinn *et al.* (2009) provide a more specific list of important elements which contribute to the successful implementation of quality system, including: top management commitment, strategic planning processes, human and financial resource management, involvement and empowerment of employees, training, and organizational culture.

Quality Management in Omani Higher Education:

Over the past 45 years, the Sultanate of Oman has witnessed rapid growth and development in all sectors. Thus, as the result of a need for qualified cadres to carry out and implement the aims and objectives of the development, the government has given significant attention to education (Baporikar and Shah, 2012).

It is worth mentioning that prior to 1970 there were limited opportunities for Omani secondary school graduates to be enrolled into higher education (Carroll *et al.*, 2009). However, the lack of opportunities available to those students is certainly no longer an issue as the numbers have continued to increase rapidly. For example, the number of

students enrolled in general education in Oman during the 1975/76 academic year was 55,752, this number increased to 218,914 during the 1985/86 academic year, then to 488,797 by the mid-nineties, while the 2006/07 academic year saw this number reach 563,602 (MoE, 2011 / 2012). As a result of this rapid expansion, one of the primary tasks for Oman as a developing country has been to include as large a portion of the eligible age group as possible through judicious expansion of its higher education system (Issan and Osman, 2010). However, continuing increases in the number of secondary education graduates combined with a limited capacity of the public higher education system has put pressure on the government to balance demand for higher education and actual admission to these institutions. Oman realizes that investment in its human resources is crucial to building a strong society, therefore non-governmental solutions to make up the shortfall have been sought. Encouraging collaboration and foreign investment in the private higher education sector have been seen as the best strategies to increase competition and demand in response to dramatic changes in society and business - all with the aim of providing society and the marketplace with well qualified graduates (Al-Lamki, 2006). Arising from this, in the mid 1990s private higher education in Oman was established. It began with one college with a total of 150 students offering a diploma. Since 1995, the private higher education sector has undergone a great deal of development and has made especially significant progress in the task of absorbing secondary school graduates. For example, during the 2011/12 academic year, the number of private HEIs stood at 27 universities and colleges which enrolled more than 40,000 students (MoHE, 22 March 2013).

Since the opening of the first private HEI in Oman, the Ministry of Higher Education, using a range of different procedures, has been diligent in attending to quality issues related to education in the higher education private sector (MoHE, 27 March 2013). For instance, in order to ensure the quality of the programs delivered by private HEIs, most of these institutions have academic affiliation agreements with international universities, primarily with Western universities in the USA and Europe (MoHE, 22 March 2013). As a consequence, the educational private sector has witnessed the launch of multiple quality programs which has led to unpredictable results. Razvi and Carroll (2007) point out that "*Oman imported a diverse range of quality assurance systems, including wide variances in standards, data, approval mechanisms, transnational quality assurance mechanisms and transparency, none of these were borne from the Omani context*" (p.2). As a result, a number of Omani literature reviews have confirmed over the last few years that quality in the higher education system needs significant improvement. These reviews reveal that

even though the private higher education sector is enthusiastic about implementing quality management programs, these institutions have still not made the improvements required to satisfy Omani stakeholders (Al-Lamki, 2002, 2006; Al Harthey, 2011). Moreover, reports issued by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) indicate that although there are efforts being made by private sector institutions to establish quality departments and units to ensure they are achieving their quality objectives, there is an urgent need to review the current affiliation agreements with Western academic institutions, and quality management of private Omani HEIs (OAAA, March 2011; September 2012; November 2012).

Based on these criticisms, the major argument of this paper is that although the quality management system and some of its concepts and practices are implemented by Omani private HEIs, there are still some concerns related to the quality of the output of these institutions. Because there are a limited number of studies relevant to quality management available to personnel in Omani HEIs, there is a need to conduct research on quality management practices. The main goal of this study is to determine the reasons for the poor quality performances of these institutions, which despite the adoption of quality programs, are not sufficient. Uncovering the reasons behind these sub-standard performances lies in comprehending the difficulties and challenges faced by Omani private institutions in their daily quality operations and processes.

Research Methodology:

Following an extensive review of the literature on quality management in higher education, semi-structured interviews with top management were used as a data collection tool. The aim of this qualitative study was to determine the challenges and problems impeding the implementation of quality management in the institutions sampled. This issue cannot easily be explored through a survey or questionnaire, therefore, qualitative techniques were used in order to more fully examine the respondents' opinions on the philosophy of quality management. Moreover, a qualitative approach is able to provide more evidence of educational leaders' understanding of the challenges of quality management implementation. In this study, the research question to be addressed is: what challenges associated with managing quality are perceived as the main obstacles to quality management success in Omani private HEIs?

The interviewees were selected randomly from private HEIs in Muscat. Eight (8) educational leaders working in a variety of private universities and colleges were interviewed. The semi-structured interviews took place between March 9 and 31, 2014. The target group were contacted via email and telephone to schedule appointments (day and time)

for the interview session. All interviews took place at the interviewees' work places. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes. In order to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants, there was no attempt to identify their names and job titles.

To define the main challenges, interviewees were asked five questions related to their quality practices. They were asked to express their opinions about their quality management and the most prominent challenges they faced. After gaining the approval of the respondents, an audio recorder was used throughout the discussions. In addition, the researcher took hand written notes during the sessions. After all the interviews were completed, the discussions were transcribed. Through reading drafts of interviews and examining hand written notes, both common themes and unique issues from the interviews were identified and analyzed.

It is hoped that knowledge gained from this study will benefit the Omani government, particularly the Ministry of Higher Education, in its policy-related decision-making processes. Moreover, it can serve as a guide to private HEIs when they carry out quality related seminars and workshops; and any other activities to promote quality

improvement and excellence amongst employees. This should not only be useful to those institutions implementing quality management, but also to those trying to sustain quality management.

Findings and Discussion:

As has been previously stated, the purpose of this paper is not to provide details on specific implementation. Instead, it is to determine the most important challenges related to daily quality practices in private HEIs, from the perspective of top management.

More specifically, this section deals with analysis of eight interviews conducted with top-level administrators working at private institutions in Muscat. The top management interviewed included participants in high ranking leadership positions such as Dean, Associate Dean, Head of Human Resources, and Head of Quality Assurance (see Appendix 1). The analysis of interviews revealed key themes relevant to challenges facing private HEIs in implementing quality management. The five main obstacles are illustrated by the following table (n = 8):

Table 1: Challenges Facing Omani Private HEIs when Implementing Quality Management.

No.	Themes/challenges	Number of interviewees who cited this challenge	%
1	Lack of qualified human resources	6	75
2	Lack of quality training	6	75
3	Increasing administrative and academic burdens	5	62.5
4	Focusing on paperwork	4	50
5	Ineffectiveness of academic partnership with foreign HEIs	4	50

All of the interviewees agreed that the introduction of a quality system helped Omani educational institutions to improve their operations, and the services they provide to beneficiaries. This finding is in accordance with Winn and Green (1998) who emphasized that "*a quality management system can be a powerful tool in the educational setting even though it was developed with manufacturing processes in mind*" (p.28). Nevertheless, the interviewees stressed the fact that quality management approaches within Omani private HEIs need to be adapted to suit the educational environment in Oman.

Furthermore, as shown in table 1, the findings of this study reveal that there were five major challenges facing quality management practices in private HEIs in Oman. The obstacles include a lack of qualified human resources, a lack of quality training, increasing administrative and academic workloads, excessive paperwork, and ineffective academic partnerships with foreign HEIs.

Based on the eight interviews, it was found that a lack of qualified human resources was the main challenge to successful quality management implementation in Omani private HEIs. Six out of the eight interviewees mentioned that implementing

a quality management program requires highly qualified staff. Interviewee 7 commented on this, by stating: "*Lack of specialized HR in general and quality management in particular, is the main obstacle that we face*". He added "*We have done a lot of work, we have achieved what were requests from us, but the work could be more productive if it is done by professional people*". The quality literature has shown that the success of implementing quality management in educational institutions depends largely on qualified staff (Aly and Akpovi, 2001; Goldberg, 2002; Jamali *et al.*, 2010). Muhammad *et al.* (2009) stressed that good HEIs require good qualified staff in numbers commensurate with the task they have to undertake. Without good staff, these institutions cannot hope to accomplish excellence.

Moreover, this study revealed that 75% of the interviewees reported a lack of available quality training opportunities. The majority of interviewees identified a lack of training as one of the major challenges to quality in the educational sector. Few private institutions have quality training programs. They stated that implementing a quality management approach requires a highly trained and educated team. The interviewees determined two main reasons

behind the lack of training: Firstly, quality program training is dependent on the availability of funding. Most of the interviewees attributed funding as an obstacle in implementing training programs. Interviewee 6 simply stated the following, "*To be honest with you, we don't have enough funding for training and education*". Secondly, due to the absence of specialists in quality management, employees are often working on quality issues in addition to their main tasks. As a result, training, especially outside the institution, takes them away from their jobs.

The literature supports these current findings; in the Arab world, results from Hegazy (2012) showed that lack of a training plan for all employees at sport clubs is among obstacles to applying quality management systems to sport institutions in Saudi Arabia. For a quality management system to be successful, educational institutions must commit to training staff at all levels. Institutions should provide comprehensive training - including communication skills, and problem-solving tools. Quality studies have confirmed that providing training and education is one essential pillar required for successful quality management implementation (Babbar, 1995; Sirvanci, 2004; Quinn *et al.*, 2009). Oakland (2004) stressed that training is the single most significant component in improving quality of performance. He argues that "*education and training must be continuous to meet not only changes in technology, but also changes in the environment in which an organization operates, its structure, and perhaps most important of all the people who work there*" (p. 421).

The third most pressing challenge the interviews uncovered was increasing administrative and academic workloads. As the study's results show, private HEIs suffer from a shortage of qualified academic and administrative staff. Therefore, as a natural result of staff shortages, existing staff are being used to perform quality tasks and other work in addition to their main duties. Staff members are required to act outside their areas of expertise. Interviewee 3 observed that "*we are forced to assign quality tasks to existing staff*". Large workloads prevent employees participating in any additional activities, decision-making, and training courses as stated by interviewee 5. Jalal's (2011) study supports this view. He found that staff, especially at the high level, had too many tasks in Iranian Medical Sciences Universities, which is one major reason that prevented quality management implementation. Moreover, the interviewees indicate another important issue, which is the high job turnover rate within private HEIs, particularly among non-Omanis, in search of better incentives. According to OAAA reports the staff turnover rate in 2008/09 reached 45.5% in one of the private colleges (OAAA, March 2011). As a result, such high levels of turnover will potentially have a negative impact on quality.

The fourth and fifth equally biggest challenges were excessive paperwork and ineffective academic partnerships with foreign HEIs. The interviewees believed that excessive paperwork was one of the barriers that hinder the ability of institutions to make a successful transformation to a quality management system. According to their responses, the current quality management system involved too much paperwork. According to interviewee 8, the ongoing quality practices exist on "paper only", and practical implementation remains elusive. "*Quality activities supposed to concentrate on implementation rather than documentation*" is the view expressed by interviewee 6. The interviewees considered the excessive attention to detail and documentation as a barrier that hinders the quality journey. This finding is in line with the literature, as an example Glover (1993) found that the most common reason for ineffective implementation is when a system of quality simply becomes much more work, rather than a new way of doing things.

In terms of academic partnerships with foreign HEIs, even though most executives interviewed mentioned that having such academic affiliation agreements helps Omani institutions to achieve their quality goals, the results indicated that there was poor coordination of communication between local institutions and affiliated institutions. This result is supported by the findings of Al Harthy (2011). He concluded that total dependence of the local universities and colleges on the academic affiliation system is not be enough to ensure quality, and will not help Omani private institutions to improve their educational services. He added that academic affiliation with foreign universities should be considered a method of assisting the development of quality, instead of being the single determinant.

Moreover, based on the opinion of the interviewees, the responsibilities involved in an affiliation agreement are often undefined and unclear, which can cause obstacles in fostering genuine partnerships with those institutions. This result is consistent with the observations of an OAAA panel during its auditing process. The OAAA stressed that Omani institutions need to review the nature of their agreements in conjunction with their affiliated institutions to ensure more effective partnerships, particularly, in relation to quality arrangements (OAAA, September 2012; November 2012, November 2013).

Conclusion:

From this study, it can be concluded that even though quality management was first developed in industrial companies, it is now accepted and adopted by both profit and service organizations around the world as a management philosophy. The available literature points out that quality management has received wide acclaim as an effective approach for achieving quality and performance enhancements.

Because of this, academic institutions started to explore the potential for implementing this approach in education, and gradually this quality technique has become the most commonly used in the higher education sector.

This paper is an attempt to investigate the challenges of implementing quality management within Omani private universities and colleges. It contributes by providing insights into the difficulties to meet expected quality results. In this study, it was discovered that the challenges of successful quality management implementation are very similar among institutions from different parts of the world. Of course, there are also slight differences in the obstacles depending on context. In Oman, the results showed five major obstacles facing quality management implementation within private HEIs. Those obstacles were: a lack of qualified human resources, a lack of quality training, increasing administrative and academic workloads, excessive paperwork, and ineffective academic partnerships with foreign HEIs.

In conclusion, this qualitative study indicated that many Omani private HEIs faced many of the same obstacles when they began implementing quality management systems. However, the literature has shown that many educational institutions in general were able to recognize and overcome these difficulties. Understanding the obstacles to quality management success will help institutions learn lessons from unsuccessful experiences, and take appropriate action to overcome these challenges. A question often asked is, 'what can be done to overcome barriers to quality management implementation?'

In order to overcome the obstacles that have been indicated above, there are a variety of suggestions that have been put forth concerning the successful implementation of quality management in the Omani educational context. Firstly, although studies have shown that principles of quality management can be highly effective in the educational sector, a quality approach must be made compatible with the local educational environment. Secondly, to ensure the effectiveness of quality management practices, and to achieve total quality in higher education, all employees in the organization should be involved and empowered. Finally, adequate training programs must be provided to ensure that quality systems work efficiently and effectively. It must be borne in mind that the change will not come overnight; as previously stated, application of quality methods requires cultural change, and in order to integrate the appropriate quality philosophy and techniques into an organization's culture - planning, time, and effort is needed.

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Appendix (1):

Table: Interviews Conducted with Top Management of Selected Private HEIs in the Muscat Governorate.

The Interviewees	Date of Interview	Workplace
Interviewee 1	March 9, 2014	Mazoon College
Interviewee 2	March 10, 2014	Scientific College of Design
Interviewee 3	March 11, 2014	Arab Open University
Interviewee 4	March 12, 2014	Bayan College
Interviewee 5	March 12, 2014	Bayan College
Interviewee 6	March 17, 2014	Scientific College of Design
Interviewee 7	March 24, 2014	AL-Zahra College for Women
Interviewee 8	March 30, 2014	Oman Dental College