Research article

Challenges and constraints in meeting international standards in UAE education: External objectives versus local realities

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the challenges faced by a private university in the United Arab Emirates in balancing the specific needs of the country's educational system with the requirements of both national reporting measures and international accreditation. It highlights some critical issues, restraints and innovations in education reform.

A higher education system of quality is necessary for the evolution of a society. Yet, in an increasingly globalised world, when information regarding local culture and the local community is subsumed by standardised information required by international accreditation agencies, higher education institutions are tasked with matching the ambitious goals they have with very diverse local realities. In-depth interviews with administrators, faculty members and students resulted in narratives that shed light on what participants perceive as the challenges to achieving international standards in an environment with many local constraints.

Strategic questions are also posed as to what shape the development of a national higher education system should take. This is against the backdrop of a recent proliferation of branch campuses of foreign universities and private universities in the Gulf region in general, and the United Arab Emirates in particular, that are primarily self-funding.

This study provides recommendations to educational leaders and policy planners to arrive at plausible, meaningful solutions to the issue of taking into account often-neglected local contextual realities, to help provide for quality education to the local population while at the same time meeting international standards.

Keywords: accreditation, higher education, private universities, United Arab Emirates, branch campuses

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

> "The real asset of any advanced nation is its people, especially the educated ones, and the prosperity and success of the people are measured by the standard of their education."
> (HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Late Founder and President of the UAE, cited in Gulf News, 2005)

As Sheikh Zayed, founding father of the United Arab Emirates, stated, the development of any country and economic wealth rests on the ability of its educational system to provide quality instruction that promotes a milieu of continual, sustained growth and development for its people. With the increased emphasis on capacity building and long-term sustainability in the global economy, many countries, particularly developing and more recently industrialised ones, such as the United Arab Emirates, are struggling with this concept in terms of idealised objectives versus concrete reality. Yes, it is true that every country struggles with this concept, yet, for countries such as the United Arab Emirates and others in the Gulf region that possess sources of economic wealth, they still lack human resources for a sustainable educational system which does not solely depend upon outsourced or expatriate work forces (Nadiri, 1994; Ali, 2001; Noori & Anderson, 2013).

With the ever-increasing emphasis placed on global ranking lists (Lindblad & Lindblad, 2009), the reality is some universities are making decisions which may not be sustainable in the long-term, for example, placing pressure on faculty to increase the quantity of research they produce, as quantity is often prized above quality. More recently in the United Arab Emirates, in line with elsewhere in the world, faculty are being asked to produce increased quantities of research that have public impact, against a backdrop of increased teaching hours, numbers of students in classes, etc. As Noori and Anderson (2013) correctly point out, accreditation and ranking serve to illustrate the impact of outside agencies on higher education institutions. They state that, even though it appears that universities have a choice as to whether or not to follow the criteria established by others for ranking or accreditation, in effect, it is not a choice at all, as the result of not following criteria imposed from outside is isolation on a financial, human and reputational level. This may not be sustainable if criteria such as local constraints are not taken into consideration. Accreditation and ranking, therefore, have both a national and international element, and are, as such, political considerations.

GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

As the Middle East remains engulfed in regional political uncertainty and turmoil, many wonder what this will mean for the region's education system, particularly as it seeks to attract international students. With higher education institutions now striving for the seal of marketing approval that international accreditation brings, in addition to submitting comprehensive data to government ministries on a regular basis (e.g., reporting comprehensive data on enrolment to the Centre for Higher Education Data and Statistics—CHEDS—in the UAE, census reporting, etc.), the same data are being provided in different formats for accreditation bodies, which adds pressure for universities to be accredited locally and internationally. Local and global rankings are assuming increased importance, as potential students have greater choice than ever before.

While everyone who works in education in the Gulf knows of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) being determined to establish "world-class" universities (Romani, 2009), the inescapable fact remains that, to date, this is not the case. The UAE Ministry of Education and Youth, in its "Vision 2020 Plan", states that "radical change in teaching/learning concepts, practices, means and styles will be effected", calling for more effective pedagogy and evaluation measures (Martin and O'Brien, 2011'). Yet, government universities, though generally well-funded, do not seem to have impactful quality or educational standards, while the vast numbers of private universities in operation similarly do not seem to generate the impact on quality and standards that many had hoped for. A careful reading of the literature would appear to confirm this is the case in most, if not all, GCC countries (see, for example, Mazawi, 2005; Cochran, 2011; McHarg, 2014; Sultana, 2001).

In order to understand the range of these recent changes, one needs to assess the importance of higher education in the Arab world, which calls into play both nationalist and geopolitical forces. Education institutions, such as the private university in this study, are today faced with the challenges that arise from exporting a set of educational, cultural and organizational practices from one political and cultural context to another very different one. How can an institution translate such practices, which are generally quite prescriptive, into a local context that is equally, if differently, prescriptive?

This is especially problematic when it comes to the role of international accreditation agencies and the accreditation process. This poses a significant challenge as to what higher education model should be adopted.

America's foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East have received scant support regionally. Yet, there remains one enduring institution that remains in the vanguard of favourable public opinion— the American university. The American model of education is seen as one that heralds progress, hence the mushrooming of more higher education institutions in the Gulf region that are based on an American model more than any other.

This, in turn, has led to American accreditation agencies, such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (the AACSB), becoming increasingly conspicuous in the process of accreditation in the United Arab Emirates, and, indeed, the whole region. How are universities supposed to, on the one hand, maintain and uphold international standards, while at the same time be cognisant of the particularities of their own market? (Goby & Nickerson, 2014; Hodgson & Claudsen, 2012; Zammuto, 2008.) This system of managing differing points of authority is referred to as the New Medievalism (Friedrichs, 2001; Noori & Anderson, 2013). International accreditation, including that of the AACSB, has not escaped criticism (Morgan, 2011; Porter, 1992; Smith, 2007).

WHY UNIVERSITIES SEEK ACCREDITATION

The decision for any program in any university to seek accreditation is usually based on recognition that the program needs to be recognized in a broader, more international arena. It is a process whereby the institution in question is asked to examine its practices in an open manner, to examine quality and improvement. In other words, the institution must first conduct a thorough and comprehensive self-analysis, before deciding which accrediting agency provides the best means of helping achieve that vision, through a process of open and ongoing dialogue. This requires a level of understanding of the local context on the part of the accrediting agency that may or may not be present. Often a university will need to modify programs that may be successful locally in order to accommodate an international accrediting body, for example, changing the delivery of MBA modules from monthly to every two months, as has happened in some universities in Dubai, despite the objections of faculty, administration and particularly students. Therefore, an in-depth appreciation of local contextual realities is a prerequisite for an external accrediting body—i.e., a level of cultural intelligence (Ang et al., 2007). In reality, however, such is not always the case.

INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION NOT AN ASSURANCE OF QUALITY OR AUTONOMY

So, what can be said to be the real reasons behind so many institutions seeking international accreditation? First, it confers prestige, which, particularly in the case of a private university, could easily translate into increased enrolment, i.e. profit. With international accreditation, institutions can then seek to persuade potential/actual students that this is the equivalent of studying abroad, especially if that university is a branch campus, or has a word such as 'American', 'Australian', 'British' or 'Canadian' included in its name. However, the reality is often quite different, no matter what claims are made by these institutions. The recent proliferation of branch campuses of foreign higher education institutions in China serves as an excellent case in point. These are commonly said to be operating at a rather different level to the institutions' base in their home countries. The same is said to be the case in the United Arab Emirates and other countries in the region, with the implication that foreign accreditation of higher education institutions is no guarantee of an education that is equivalent to that received abroad.

Politics is often at play. Some Arab governments may seek to control branch campuses or private universities in particular, in effect contributing to universities in the Middle East in general—shifting from being environments of advancement and progress to environments that are quite heavily policed. This is widely known across the region, especially with the presence of intelligence services on campuses (see, for example, Noori & Anderson, 2013). Naturally, this results in the exercise of control over the student body, faculty and administrators. What, then, does this mean for the promulgation of international standards in higher education? How often do external accrediting bodies take such factors into account?

NEO-INSTITUTIONALISM VS. NEO-LIBERALISM

In the 1970s the concept of neo-institutionalism was developed (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1991), defining organisations as either cultural or technical. Thus, higher education is generally viewed as a cultural field, because it does not produce goods that can be easily measured. It was argued than cultural resources such as prestige were of higher value to higher education institutions than economic resources (Gonzales & Núñez, 2014) which does not seem to hold true with education institutions today, particularly private ones.

Where faculty are concerned, the salient features of cultural resources are publication records, citation records and international reputation (Rusch & Wilbur, 2007). This explains why higher education institutions place priority on certain performance measures, and also help explain the influence of global ranking. However, neo-liberalism does not explain that some of these measures have led to the commercialization of higher education.

For a deeper understanding of the link between cultural resources and economics and politics, neoliberalism can provide an explanation, with an emphasis on how the market operates (Harvey, 2005). In other words, all activities can be measured for the purposes of comparison. With regard to higher education, this led many countries worldwide to position it as a market commodity, where students were rebranded as consumers and faculty seen as a source of labour, in effect depersonalising the teaching and learning experience (Mumper, Gladieux, King & Corrigan, 2011).

When education is seen as a potentially lucrative source of revenue, it is easy to see why global ranking and accreditation have increased in significance. This is what Slaughter and Leslie (1997) refer to as academic capitalism.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The central research question that informed this study was 'What are some of the challenges that private education institutions face in the United Arab Emirates when trying to balance the attainment of international standards through such means as accreditation, with the constraints posed by the particularities of the local context?'

PARTICIPANTS

The data for this study are based on in-depth interviews with fifteen former and current administrators, faculty and students at a private university in the United Arab Emirates. Each of the three groups comprised five participants, with a mixture of male and female participants of different nationalities (the university caters to more than one hundred different nationalities). As I worked at the private university in question for three years, first as a faculty member and then as an administrator, from 2012 to 2015, I was also a participant-observer.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Although the data in this study may be said to comprise a relatively small number of cases, it holds the promise of revealing wider trends in the region as more universities selectively adopt features of the American model. Qualitative data were gathered using semi-structured in-depth interviews, each lasting between thirty minutes and one hour. As is usual in this geographical context when topics of a somewhat sensitive nature are discussed, each participant was assured of anonymity to encourage forthrightness in terms of answers. Questions ranged from the participants' perception of general issues relating to education in the Middle East, to their perception of their own experiences in private higher education with regard to quality and accreditation.

The interviews were first recorded and later transcribed, which led to a codification of data, with themes emerging as a result of this process. This approach to codifying interview data and discovering emerging themes is described by researchers such as Miles and Huberman (1994) and Silverman (2015). Narratives were used to reflect participant experiences and views on what they perceive the challenges to achieving international standards in an environment with many local constraints. The narrative comments from open-ended interview questions provide a forum for meanings that describe a phenomenon as lived and perceived by the participant. By examining individual stories, the interpretations of their experiences became apparent (Boje, 2000).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is clear from the interviews that the participants have a strong grasp of the challenges faced by the private university in question and that they are aware of issues on a micro, meso and macro level. Three of the five student participants, four of the faculty participants and two of the administrator participants had previously experienced other private higher education institutions in the UAE and note that the issues are common to all institutions.

Five major challenges faced by the private university in question emerged from the interview data, namely: commercial dimension, standardisation, sustainability, governance and local culture, each of which will be addressed below:

COMMERCIAL DIMENSION

Most private universities, unlike their government counterparts, do not have a ready source of funding available. Therefore, in order to secure the finances necessary in order to improve standards and run an institution, there would appear to be an over-reliance on accreditation as the primary method of quality assurance. Noori and Anderson (2013) state that two universities in the United Arab Emirates were set up in the first place with structures to make the process of accreditation easier. Both of these institutions receive extensive funding, unlike the vast majority of private education institutions in the UAE. Accreditation will have an influence on ranking, which will in turn see more students choose to study at a particular higher education institution.

As one administrator who participated in this study opines:

> "*The language used is changing. I was in a meeting where a student was defined as an entity that generates revenue. We have little to no control over our budgets, can't hire faculty from good universities because the package we offer them does not compensate for the fact that they will have very little time to do research, given teaching duties. Everything seems to be about money: cost centres, budgetary freezes, you name it. This is counter-productive. Nobody seems to be talking about education.*" - Participant no. 2

Students are also aware of the importance afforded to accreditation as a means of generating revenue:

> "*We hear a lot about accreditation these days, as universities like to boast about it on their websites and conferences, everywhere. Of course, we know it means they will charge us more money to study, but we don't see that they improve facilities with the money. It's a business, so it's all about profit, not students, not education*" - Participant no. 15, student

STANDARDISATION

Standards ultimately mean that education and universities will be quantifiably uniform. However, placing everything that is qualitative under the quantitative umbrella of accreditation, for example, may have far-reaching repercussions. The main consequence of the standardisation process is that any new degrees that higher education institutions wish to offer need to be designed by identifying the students' required skills in order to progress in the professional context.

What is actually taking place in many universities in the United Arab Emirates, and across the region in general, is that many faculty appear to be following the 'standards', with regard to pacing, assessment etc., and are not overly concerned with sustainability, learning and effective pedagogy. This is because of an assumption that these same rules and standards will lead to an improvement in quality; yet homogenisation is not a necessary precursor to quality:

> "*Level 6, Level 7, Level 8, Level 9 . . . all this talk about standards, which take no account whatsoever of the fact that students here are not like students in other countries. They complain when we give them any work to do, go to the president or the ministry if they don't like their professor or their grades, and do not have the level of English necessary to study a degree program in English. We talk about standards, and we do all this paperwork, submit our course files online etc., but we are just ticking boxes. We can't treat all students the same, because they are not . . . The standards are too high for the actual level of students, and there is little room for creativity. Education is not one size fits all.*" - Participant no. 7, faculty member

Students see it from a different point of view:

> "*It seems as if the administration is putting pressure on the professors. This is what the professors tell us. They say they have no choice but to follow standards, and this will mean lower grades for students. But this doesn't make sense. If I study really hard and answer all questions in the mid-term and final exams, and I do research papers, why shouldn't I get an A?*

> *Why only a B? If I don't do the work, give me a bad grade, but if I do well, give me the grade I deserve, and don't use the excuse of standards changing . . . . I don't see that the quality is getting better, just that professors pretend to follow standards. If this was true, the teaching quality would change, would be better, but we don't see that. We see that professors are too busy to see us during office hours, because they have to research, so they don't care about students.*" - Participant no. 12, student

This would appear to reinforce that effective pedagogy is not taking place in classrooms, or, at the very least, that communication of the rationale behind an increase in standards to faculty and students is not happening in an open and transparent way that leads to a greater understanding of changes that are taking place.

From an organizational point of view, standardisation can be seen as a means to lower costs. In fact, in many cases, instead of reducing institutional cost, that very cost is increased, due to compromises when more uniformity is applied.

The predominant reason standardisation is now the goal is because of the newly-important rankings of universities in the Middle East as a whole, and in the United Arab Emirates in this instance. This is merely a reflection of the importance of rankings worldwide (Lindblad & Lindblad, 2009). Universities in the United Arab Emirates were ranked in 2013–2014 by CHEDS, as a result of data submitted in previous years. These rankings were not made public, as universities came to know what their own ranking was, but not the ranking of other universities. Rankings were due to be made public in April 2015, but nothing was available in the public domain at the time of writing this article, in July 2015.

SUSTAINABILITY

Universities themselves are partly to blame for the sustainability problem of education in the Gulf. By moving away from a richer information environment within the university where knowledge traditions are prized, and toward an education environment that is more driven by accrediting agencies and state directives, they have not taken account of human costs within the system of education. The transience of faculty is an issue throughout the region, something borne out by what participants have to say in this study:

> "*Contracts are for two or three years. Faculty spend a lot of time looking for their next job, just in case their contract is not renewed. This is having a spill over effect in the classroom.*"
> - Participant no. 6, faculty member

This was echoed by participant no. 11, a student who states that students worry about standards, when:

> "*Professors are always coming and going. We never know who is going to teach us, because even if a professor's name is on the list to teach next semester, and we register to take a class with that professor, when the semester comes, maybe they have left. This is happening in other universities also, because my friends tell me the same story. How can we receive a good education when we have so many different faces?*"

Other student participants also voiced their concern regarding the high turnover rate of faculty, with the following participant commenting that:

> "*I think the university is not being smart with what it does to professors. They come and go. This happened at my previous university also. To me, it seems as if conditions for professors, their salaries, are getting worse, and they don't have long contracts. I see some of these professors are excellent and they really care about their students, but they leave. That is a sign that something is wrong with contracts or salaries. I work in business, so I see the same thing in business.*" - Participant no. 14, student.

The high turnover rate of faculty, who have, in effect, little to no job security, is something that accrediting bodies have commented on, yet universities seem either unwilling or unable to invest in this area. This has a corollary effect in that resources are not then prioritised for research or professional development, despite the lip service paid to these two areas.

Administrators are aware of the issue, but are perhaps more sanguine regarding the turnover rate of faculty, stressing instead the importance of organizational structure:

> "*It's the nature of the beast. Expat life is in essence transient in nature, so there is bound to be a turnover rate. What then becomes imperative is that the systems are in place, that there is structure within the organization, so that things can run more smoothly, no matter who the personnel are.*" - Participant no. 4

One administrator, however, believes that organizational systems can change easily:

"The problem is when someone is in place and creates a system that works. When they leave, what often happens is that when someone new comes in, they want to impose their own system, as well as their own people." - Participant no. 1

This was echoed by a faculty member:

"OK, people come, people go. But sometimes good people are gotten rid of when someone new comes in, because they feel they can only trust their own team. Then the whole thing changes, there are new rules and procedures. Sometimes, even if something doesn't function perfectly, it doesn't mean it's all bad, because at least everyone is on the same page and knows what's going on. Change for the sake of change doesn't help raise standards or make for more efficient ways of doing things." - Participant no. 10

GOVERNANCE

Like the private university in this study, most, if not all, universities in the region are endeavouring to build relations with institutions and organisations on a global scale. In the case of accreditation agencies, this means universities must adhere to different structures, satisfying the requirements of outside bodies while at the same time complying with local requirements of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR) and the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), for example. Ultimately, however, it is the national government that remains the most important actor in terms of driving the direction of education policy (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007). For universities, such as the one in this study, this can lead to tension, as commented on by many of the participants.

"Listen, in our department, we are asked by the Ministry nearly every couple of weeks for different information, often with twenty-four to forty-eight hours' notice. When we submit CHEDS information and have questions to ask someone in the CAA, we often get ten different answers if we ask ten different people. Or, even worse, what was true yesterday is obsolete today, because a new decision has been made. Do they know what they want in the Ministry or the CAA? It's really confusing, and no matter what work we have to do, their requests must get priority. And who loses out? Students!" - Participant no. 3, administration

LOCAL CULTURE

Although education is increasingly affected by globalisation (accreditation, ranking, labour movement etc.), local culture, including local political culture, remains a central influence on how education policy is being shaped. This is especially true in the Middle East, where global educational issues are superseded by national issues. This is despite the fact that countries such as the UAE are to a large extent globalised, at least economically. While it is true that any higher education institution that receives international accreditation in the region is, in effect, a party to globalisation (Dodds, 2008; Noori & Anderson, 2013), by encouraging competition for status, students, and, by extension, financial resources, constraints on following this path may be placed by national agencies.

The result is that accreditation agencies, by not taking into account local contextual realties, may make decisions on erroneous assumptions—decisions that can act to the detriment of the institution concerned:

"They (accreditation team) asked us about teaching time and research time. It was clear they didn't get it. We are a teaching institution, we get hardly any research funding, we're expected to teach in summer, our class size is increasing. Just when are we supposed to find the time to do quality research? Why do they ask us questions in front of administration that they should know we can't answer? Don't they do their homework? How many of them have worked in the Gulf recently?" - Participant no. 8, faculty member

The reality is that many Western higher education institutions in the Gulf have tenuous links to their host country, something commented on by all of the student participants, one of whom says:

"Here so many universities are called American, British, Canadian … but it's just to get students to pay a lot of money. My sister went to do her Masters in the US, and she said it was completely different, studying in a real American university. We have to study courses here that we can't transfer, if we want to study abroad, like Islamic Culture or Arabic Communication, because the Ministry says we must. The university doesn't have the power to do anything about that, even when the students study their degree in English and have not studied in an Arab country before." - Participant no. 13, student

This means that when accreditation agencies do a local analysis, it can be at best flawed, particularly when those making decisions have little local knowledge. Issues such as the ratio of teaching contact hours to research time and shared governance are very different in the Gulf, where the reality is that decision-making is top-down in nature and faculty spend considerably more time in the classroom than their colleagues elsewhere, despite the outward appearance of importance paid to research.

Although private higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates are accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), these institutions are pursuing international accreditation, which could suggest that state accreditation is not seen as prestigious. What happens regularly is that private higher education institutions pursue international accreditation of specific programs, which in turn means satisfying the requirements of a myriad of different stakeholders. This leads, inevitably, to confusion as various programs within one single institution try to satisfy the demands of a number of different agencies. As some of the participants in this study explicitly state, it seems as if there is always an upcoming accreditation visit to prepare for:

> "*CAA, AACSB, where does it end? It seems there's always a panic, always an emergency, as we need to write things one way for this crowd, another way for that crowd. How are we supposed to do our best on a day-to-day level when we seem to prioritise doing the same thing in a hundred different ways, just to satisfy people who have no idea of what the reality of the situation is?*" - Participant no. 9, faculty member

It is clear that the participants in this study, be they students, faculty or administration have a broad understanding of the challenges that the higher education landscape faces. It is also clear that they are frustrated by this state of affairs, and would like stronger direction for the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the higher education market in the United Arab Emirates transitions from a national to a more regional, even global environment, the policy problem now facing higher education institutions in the country, particularly private institutions, is how to achieve competitive differentiation within an increasingly uniform – and even saturated - market.

With a central focus on external, international accreditation, there is a case to be made for the establishment of a national and/or regional accreditation body (apart from the Commission for Academic Accreditation, which operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education and Social Research—MOHESR). This body should be independent, with a mission to make it a credible player on a national, regional and international stage. There is an inherent danger that external accreditation is seen as the primary quality assurance benchmark, when perhaps benchmarks relevant to the local context would be more realistic – and perhaps also more relevant.

Education in the Middle East still tries to adopt western-based approaches which may not always be applicable to a Gulf context.

CONCLUSION

A number of challenges remain, not the least being the context in which all universities, not only private ones, operate. Despite administration purporting to understand the importance of research, faculty in many universities in the Middle East have heavy teaching workloads in what remain essentially teaching institutions. Funding for research is not readily available in many instances. Lack of tenure is an issue worldwide, but, in the Middle East, an over-reliance on two or three year contracts is having a detrimental effect on higher education standards. So too is lack of academic freedom.

Competing sources of authority, be they national (ministries of education, internal accrediting agencies) or external (external accrediting agencies) or even institutional (some administrators, such as the increased influence of finance departments, short-term consultants brought in from abroad) all have their own agendas to pursue, all of which push the individual, be that a student or faculty member, further down the list of priorities. Maybe what is needed is a return to what institutions should be doing, preparing students to be productive members of society, focusing on the creation of prepared minds.

Competing interests
None.

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