The role of quality assurance in Saudi higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

Quality assurance, quality assessment, and world rankings have become competitively and increasingly a global concern and a worldwide pursuit among higher education institutions leading them to review their aims, objectives, academic practices, target students and scholars. This paper provides a comprehensive review and discussion of quality assurance policies and practices (as described in the form of accreditation self-study reports) of four selected Saudi public universities which normally assess their quality through their accreditation pursuit and efforts to catch a seat in global rankings both nationally and internationally. These official reports form the first step in pursuing and evaluating quality assurance. The review of the selected reports in this paper is proceeded by a thematic analysis of interview data with selected academic professors and leaders. Findings indicated that due to the centralization and bureaucracy imposed by the ministry, individual universities' creativity is normally limited and that raise questions regarding the reliability and value of self-study reports mandated by official evaluation entity in the country and submitted by public universities. Moreover, although accreditation, as part of quality assurance in Saudi Arabia frames the quality standard, increases confidence on the programs and enhances public trust on the educational institutions, accreditation is not the whole story.

1. Introduction

Higher Education in Saudi Arabia is centralized. While it has not been explicitly declared that education system in Saudi Arabia is centralized, there have been many managements and leading process and practices that pictures such centralization. As largely mentioned by previous research and reports, analysis of such previous literature clearly illustrates how this centralization dominates education system in the country. Illustrated by Meemar, Poppink and Palmer (2018), the ministry of education sets overall standards for the country's educational system, and it is responsible for the hiring of staff and leaders, setting educational policies and curricula, allocating financial resources, selecting textbooks, and providing overall supervision and administration of all educational processes. It is also indicated by other research that most centralized systems of education globally, exist in developing countries where the education providers are the central educational governance.

One main picture of centralization in the Saudi higher education, though it has been considered as a step toward reform and consolidation in the field of education in Saudi Arabia, the government has merged the Ministry of Higher Education with the Ministry of Education. However, the merging of the two huge and pivotal organizations came like a bolt from the blue, adding layers of bureaucracy and slowing the work and development plans, which left many scholars skeptical of the effectiveness of the mergence. They reason that the educational authority has become even more centralized. Theoretically, this trend toward centralization might be attributed to the importance of the authority's relationship with external stakeholders such as the parents, the community, and minor bodies. The centralization of authority would theoretically and practically minimize the power of these external members and strengthen the power of the vertical hierarchy within the educational governance. Additionally, the social political environment has always been the scapegoat for the excessive concentration of power. The absence of an accountability system, and the family and tribal mentality are all factors hindering government endeavors in the delegation of decision-making and decentralization (Aburizaizah, 2021). Accesses to education and ensuring quality educational outcomes continue to be two of the difficulties facing education systems in developing countries (UNESCO, 2008). As the pressure for quality assurance in education and the expansion of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, which has brought about increased demands for quality assurance and pressure on these institutions to advance their existing QA operations, one major initiative of the country's Higher Education Council (HEC) has led to the establishment of the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA).

As a result of centralization approaches, there are significant similarities in procedures and practices in quality assurance measures and processes implemented by all public educational institutions across the country inclusive of higher education as well. In research funded by the Organization for Economic Development (OECD), Vincent-Lancrin, Fisher and Pfotenhauer (2015) noted that quality assurance in

higher education that combines accreditation and enhancement is relatively considered a recent phenomenon. However, cases in Saudi Arabia indicate that there is little evidence about quality assurance practices and accreditation impact on enhancing students learning in tertiary education. Throughout this paper, several centralized accreditation practices and policies are reviewed and discussed with examples from selected Saudi public universities followed by an analysis of data retrieved from interviewees who represent higher education academics and leaders.

2. Background

Explained by Charles (2007), the origins of quality assurance in higher education can be traced back to a number of higher education milestones in the Western context. Medieval institutions of learning maintained institutional quality through various means. Guilds were formed by students that prescribed specific regulations that their own professors should follow in holding classes. These regulations aimed to ensure that the welfare of the students as learners was not disregarded. At the same time, professors themselves formed master-guilds which sought to safeguard the quality of teaching. The quality of entire institutions of higher learning was overseen by the government, which granted charters and helped institutions develop their own capacity to review their academic programmes and evaluate the effectiveness of their operations. The concept and practices of quality assurance has been in existence since the industrial age, in which the mas production of different goods required that there be some mechanisms in place for checking that the each of the goods produced was fit for public consumption (Dill, 2010). However, it was only during the latter half of the 20th century that this concept and its practice found its way to the operation of higher education institutions (Charles, 2007; Dill, 2010).

As explained by Barnabas (2007), the early higher education institutions did have different standards of quality established and did maintain some practices focused on securing such standards. However, quality assurance in higher education as it is known today began with the establishment of governmental and non-governmental agencies that sought to develop and examine different dimensions of quality in higher education institutions and provide corresponding accreditation based on the levels of quality found.

With more cases appearing in developing countries, quality assurance has a global leading role in shaping tertiary educational institutions. In a discussion provided by Darwin and Lewis (2005), tertiary educational institutions are growing tremendously and synchronized by a growing number of enrolled students and leading to a more globalized world. Inevitably, quality assurance practices, including accreditation at all levels, efficient teaching and learning, accountability, and evaluation, have become of a valid relevance to tertiary education stakeholders. In other words, an urgent move toward managing quality assurance in adequate and efficient ways has become a demand nowadays. It is usually the process of quality assurance that leads to excellence among tertiary education institutions. However, "ensuring that the quality of educational programs meets local and international standards simultaneously has become a great challenge in many countries" (OECD & World Bank, 2007). For example, as mentioned by Tricia Ryan (2015), there is a range of opinions about the value of international criteria for quality assurance of higher education because such standardization may jeopardize the integrity of the countries' higher education systems and may not necessarily improve the quality of the academic programs (OECD & World Bank, 2007, p. 38–39).

Defined by the quality assurance system, the core function for higher education institutions can be summarized by the following elements: administration, curriculum, learning outcomes, faculty efficiency, and resource allocation (Westerheijden Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007). Quality assurance in higher education is a very sophisticated mechanism that must be meaningful to evaluate, assure, and improve the university. It should adopt clear evaluation procedures and products to achieve the desired quality. From another perspective, Hayward (2006) described the notion of quality as 'fitness for purpose'. In tertiary education institutions, Anane and Addaney (2016) explain that such fitness is portrayed in an institution's ability to prepare its students for the main purpose that institution was founded for.

As the demand for quality education increases, there is a growing demand for quality assurance for international universities where there is increased mobility of students, faculty, programs, and higher education institutions in global networks (Hou, 2012; Varonism, 2014).

2.1. The pulse of quality assurance in the Saudi HE today

Reviewing the literature, it was found that in different countries all over the world, studies are being conducted to determine the extent of implementation of quality assurance activities in higher education institutions within such countries and the challenges that the implementation of such activities face in the given contexts. In the Saudi Arabian context, only one general study on quality assurance in higher education was identified. Darandari et al. (2009) discussed how the rapid growth of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia has generated increased need for quality assurance, prompting the development of the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment

Status of Quality in Saudi Arabia after years of considering the funding for quality practices, the Saudi government, as mentioned by Nurunnabi (2017), invested an amount equal to a third of its national Gross Domestic Product (GPD) on the field of education in 2016. This effort formed part of the ambitious 'Vision 2030′ reforms whose 14-year time frame aimed to reduce the Saudi economy's dependence on oil and move towards a knowledge-based economy (Chidambaram, 2014). The Saudi 2030 vision for reform addresses recommendations by international institutions like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank, which encourage cost-effective approaches to corporate governance reform, valorizing the quality of education (Cammack, 2006; Carroll, 2014; OECD, 2005).

Moving to one major component of quality, accreditation is a central mechanism within the quality assurance system. It consists of different layers of a systematic process which aims to meet performance standards. Accreditation procedures and focus are determined based on stakeholders' intentions (Ahmed, Ahmed & Siddiek, 2013). In 2004, because of the social demand for a mechanism to develop a system to evaluate the quality of higher education as well as to cope with the expansion of higher education institutions in Saudi, the government established The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA); its role was to accredit local institutions and individual programs within the institution.

2.2. The Saudi national center for academic accreditation and evaluation (NCAAE)

In 2016, and under a royal decree, NCAAA has become part of a new body named as the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation, run by ETEC. The Center has been assigned to resume the work carried out previously by the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment. Among the tasks that are expected of the NCAAA are to establish quality assurance standards in Saudi Arabian higher education that are consistent with international benchmarks and relevant to Saudi Arabian national interests, to integrate internationally recognized best practices in quality assurance protocols for higher education institutions, to serve as a guide to quality assurance for higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia and provide support to these institutions in developing their own quality assurance systems, and developing a database of best practices and relevant quality indicators for higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia (NCAAA, 2010).

The NCAAA's role is still active, under the umbrella of ETEC. It provides several services as listed below:

• Institutional accreditation.

Fig. 1. Institutional Accreditation Steps
Note. Retrieved from *Education & Training Evaluation Commission* (https://etec.gov.sa/en/productsandservices/ncaaa/accreditation/pages/stepsofaccreditation.aspx).

- Program accreditation.
- Requirements and standards to pursue international accreditations.

Each of these services has specific procedures and stems with the following example for institutional accreditation shown in Fig. 1.

As illustrated above, the NCAAA accreditation process consists of self-study reports, completed by the institution, and a site visit conducted on a later stage if the self-study report is satisfactory (Education & Training Evaluation, 2021). The same review process is implemented for both public and private universities. NCAAA as an organization is relatively new, even if we consider its early structure; furthermore, its influence on higher education quality is expected to be limited (Lemaitre, 2009). The Saudi National Qualifications Framework is an important component in the system of accreditation and quality assurance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is designed by NCAAA to ensure that the quality of post-secondary education is equivalent to high international standards (NCAAA, 2009).

Meager evidence on the impact of quality assurance on enhancing universities' outcomes remain the case here, though many of these universities have received national quality assurance system established for them and experienced all accreditation processes. established quality assurance systems and processes. Since 2004 until the present day, students are not meeting the skill-requirements of the Saudi labor market (Al-Shammari, 2009). The role these commissions play can conflict with various stakeholders' interests, including the government, and the policymakers in centralized systems, or the higher education organization itself (Jarvis, 2014). Aside from the differences in types of services and quality frameworks developed and used by different agencies, another difficulty identified in the literature is a lack of cultural sensitivity (Gift, Leo-Rhynie & Moniquette, 2006; Hodson & Thomas, 2001; Smith, 2010). Furthermore, Stella and Woodhouse (2011), as presented by Ryan (2015), argued higher education institutions in developing countries could be at a disadvantage in transnational education and the establishment of a set of minimum standards. Quality assurance outcomes had become more diverse, and therefore, needed to be measured in more diverse ways. With the rapid changes in economic which necessitates a synchronized improvement, there are still evidence that current graduates are not meeting the needs of the economy.

3. Methodology

Saudi higher education is the context of this paper with two kinds of data driven: accreditation reports of four universities and interviews with purposive samples of participants. Four accreditation documents from four public universities labeled as U1, U2, U3, U4. The four universities are selected based on certain considerations such as age, number of population and varied regions across the country. Three of these universities are public while one is private. Three were established between the years 1957–1975 while one established in 2006. Two universities share a larger body of enrollment between 55,000–90,000 of students' body while two universities have less body of enrollment ranging between 15,000–27,000 students. They also cover different regions such as the western, central, and northern regions in Saudi Arabia.

The four documents selected for analysis are self-study reports which include all policies and procedures to be reviewed and discussed throughout this paper. It is important to mention here that there was difficulty in accessing quality assurance-related documents from individual universities, which often do not allow open access to their reports. This has led to a limited number of institutions involved and prevented the author from treating these universities as case studies.

The interviews were conducted by email with a sample made up of four male and three female participants ($N = 7$) made up of PhD holding university teaching staff working for three different local universities and have interest in quality assurance and accreditation. Four participants were selected from a social science background and three from the field of science. All seven participants had over 10 years of tertiary teaching experience or held managerial positions at the university such as dean, vice dean, or department head. These participants will be indicated throughout this article with reference to their number (i.e., P.1, P.2). The interview questions, as listed below, were shared with participants via email:

Q1 What is your perspective about accreditation as part of educational Quality Assurance system in Saudi Arabia?
Q2 Is it important to have quality assurance in Saudi governmental universities? Explain your opinion.
Q3 Do you think that governmental universities are facing any kind of challenges in terms of Quality Assurance? Explain your opinion.

Q4 What are the most prominent challenges as per your perspective?

Q5 Do you think, overcoming the challenge could set up quality assurance? Explain your opinion.

Q6 What are the factors that could help universities to have good QA system?

Thematic analysis was carried out using the computer software program NVivo.12 for both the interview data and document analysis. This first step of the analysis was the first level of coding of data into broad categories and reducing this information into descriptive labels. These descriptive labels were sorted for patterns into smaller subsets to identify codes, which show patterns of data, which are alike and unalike. Emerging patterns developed which fitted the data that helped to explain reoccurring relationships in the data. Data which did not easily fit were identified as outliers and was used to test the rest of the data. NVivo is particularly useful for organizing large amounts of textual data in a visually clean and ordered way, allowing patterns to become more obvious and analysis easier. NVivo provides a quicker and easier way to order data and to put it into meaningful categories. The data can easily be stored and changed at will as new ideas or interpretations emerge in the researcher's mind. There are also several handy functions such as a memos section to aid in the analysis. The researcher can record thoughts or observations about the interviews and an attributes section in which more factual data about the participants can be stored (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Welsh, 2002).

4. Findings

This section outlines the results obtained through reviewing analyzing accreditation documents of selected areas such as mission, vision, bureaucracy impact, and key improvement factors, then moving to the next section which includes the responses retrieved from interviewed participants.

4.1. Document analysis

The self-study form (SSF) as provided by the NCAAA and publicly accessible online, is a required document that all higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia must use. The form is divided into three main sections: institution profile, including resources and facilities; institution's self-study process, indicating key performance indicators, KPI; and analysis of KPI outcomes, highlighting strengths and weaknesses.

4.1.1. How these forms are perceived

'Since its inception, U4 founding pioneers have emphasized quality in the fabric of every component of the university system. The commitment to quality was not an add-on arrangement to its operation but a fundamental pillar in the design of the university. Not only the unique characteristics of U4 have positioned it to secure a clean slate privilege of the university starting days, but also quality was attached to its individual initiatives and foundation steps. With partnership and the visionary Saudi pioneers who championed the framing of this institution brought a one-of-a-kind cumulative experience in higher education that mandated quality assurance' (Self-study report).

Vendors, student-centered university philosophy and more importantly people and faculty are living indicators of "Quality by Design" the university is built on. The founding pioneers came to the framing process with decades of higher education experience and a true comprehensive list of "what to avoid" in the design of U4. The extract below is from NCAAA report submitted by U4:

"…encouraged creativity and innovation amongst colleges, with clear guidelines (e.g., rewarding the colleges that achieved the accreditation with 750,000 Saudi Riyals). The University also recognized research that was submitted in high-ranking journals and created prizes to faculty who are outstanding…"

The self-study report from the mathematic department, U2, as a public university noted that:

'Inability of some staff in understanding the meaning of quality and the benefits for the college and students and the improving of the educational process to prepare graduates who are able to the Advancement of society'.

'Presently, the college has the system of identifying weakness and mistakes committed by the faculty in teaching through the conduct of both peer and students' evaluation of teaching. Improvement initiative has been taken in the form of training, advising, and counseling activities (Evidence 5 of Standard 3). However, there are no written guidelines available to guide the process'. (Self-study report – College of Nursing, U2)

The above report also noted a delay in communicating survey results formally to the faculties due to administrative issues. It highlighted a strong need for representation of strengths & weaknesses identified through evaluations to both student groups and faculties.

4.1.2. Overcoming challenges

Regular monitoring of goals and objectives of the quality assurance plan by use of appropriate indicators (Self-study report, College of Nursing, U2) is used to design quality assurance processes to ensure continuous improvements in performance.

'Validation forum whereby the Dean communicates the results separately with the students of both sections. Faculties are strongly emphasized to prepare an action plan for improvements there by gaining the confidence and creating a sense of feeling among students that their feedbacks are addressed' (Self-study report, College of Nursing, U2).

Other quality assurance processes are explained by U1 as follows:

'Teaching and other staff involved in the program must be committed to improving both their own performance and the quality of the program as a whole. Regular evaluations of quality must be undertaken within each course based on valid evidence and appropriate benchmarks and plans for improvement made and implemented. Central importance must be attached to student learning outcomes with each course contributing to the achievement of overall program objectives' (Self-study report, Zoology program, U1).

4.1.3. Factors in improving quality assurance systems

Largely aligned with the interview data, for management and faculty to be wholly committed to quality assurance management and continuous improvement, points of building on strengths of the program include the following (self-study report- mathematics departments at U2):

– All program levels are committed to improve quality.
– All departments must submit the official course and program reports on a regular basis.
– All departments must conduct and administer evaluation surveys and peer observations on a regular basis.
– Feedback retrieved from stakeholders, graduates, staff members and employers form an evidence-based source of decision making throughout the improvement processes and quality assurance.

Looking at two different universities, similar in size and age, from different geographical locations in SA, their vision, and mission appear to be similar. Another example NCAAA form requires "institution profile," such as (number of students, staff, ratio, learning facilities, etc.), which higher education institutions have no control over.

4.1.4. Quality assurance practices in Saudi higher education

With the Ministry of Education's bureaucratic system, U2 expressed their vision as a "world Class University with sustainability and community engagement" whereas U1 stated that their mission was "To be a world-class university and a leader in building the knowledge society". The difference being that University U2 called their statement a vision while University U1 calls it a mission. Another comparison between two universities from two different geographical locations that are relatively new with a smaller size and budget in comparison with the aforementioned universities, are U3, which stated its vision as "a distinguished

university in education, research and community service" and U4, which stated its vision as "to develop leadership and excellence in education and conducting scientific research for serving the community in order to build a knowledge-based economy".

KPIs must be formed based on the Ministry of Education's vision, and in the case of SA, must be designed in alignment with the 2030 Vision. This situation limits individual universities' creativity and raises questions regarding the reliability of self-study reports provided by universities. In HE institutions, KPIs are set to evaluate process and outcomes; nonetheless, the goal for the process must be set and defined clearly. Centralized contexts such as Saudi higher education institutions can lack full engagement in designing quality systems that meets specific goals, however individual institutions can tailor their own quality assurance goals and procedures. The NCAAA is a procedural form organization that has no contribution in defining or choosing their goals for the accreditation process. Dysfunctions occur when methods to quality assurance are determined before the purpose; accordingly, determining processes and outcomes take more effort, leading to inefficient recommendations (Jarvis, 2014).

Research reports in Saudi universities present a pertinent example of a compliance culture. Public university policies depend on faculty academic promotion, while funding to researchers depend on publishing in high impact-factor journals. That policy may imply researchers and fundraisers focus more on the means to win funding or to receive academic promotions rather than on the goal of producing valuable research to drive the economy or social innovation.

4.2. Interview analysis

All but one participant (87%) felt quality assurance to be vital to Saudi higher education institutions as illustrated below:

> 'They can help institutions ensure that they are using their best potential to deliver quality educational services…Without quality assurance, it is difficult to evaluate ongoing practice, and hence it would be not possible to make meaningful improvements' (P.1).
> 'It is vital to have quality assurance in Saudi governmental universities. First, to ensure that all universities are on the same stand of fulfilling academic quality assurance requirements, second; to ensure that their outcomes, i.e., graduates, are very well equipped to contribute to the economy' (P.3).
> 'Definitely quality assurance and management should top all the priorities in all universities for more valid transparent outcomes' (P.5)

Further reasons given were that quality assurance raises community confidence in the educational programs (P.4), and as a means of developing competitiveness with world-leading institutions by comparing common practices (P.6). One participant noted that quality assurance 'might not be sufficient for guaranteeing high ranking for the universities. There are other standards which must be considered such as teaching quality, extension education and presence of international students' (P.2).

4.2.1. Accreditation as part of quality assurance in higher education

Stakeholder interviewees in general agreed that the purposes of accreditation centered around aiding in delivering a quality education program, and a means of reflecting best practice in delivering educational services (P.1).

'It is important considering accreditation as part of educational quality assurance system in Saudi Arabia as it frames the quality standard for all education institutions. In addition, it increases confidence on the programs and enhances public trust on the educational institutions. It reinforces Saudi universities to compete internationally'. (P.2)

'Accreditation is what enhances the institution's reputation and represents its national/ international recognition in terms of standards of quality, and it is essential for Saudi institutions to obtain accreditation to guarantee high positions to its graduates in the international job market'. (P.4)

'Accreditation standards address all aspects related to quality in education institute, starting from the mission and strategic planning down to teaching and learning, forming a cohesive quality assurance system'. (P.3)

One participant noted however that accreditation should not be higher education's primary goal;

'Accreditation is not the whole story. Though being accredited could be fancy thing, universities should not make accreditation the ultimate goal as this may lead to unexpected consequences in any sector or department when they are accredited'. (P.6)

4.2.2. Quality assurance challenges in higher education public institutions

A list of challenges appeared as presented below:

– Challenges of scale: Inequality of facilities based on size; 'Large universities have state-of-the-art facilities that make it easier to maintain student-to instructor ratio for instance. Of course, this is not the case for smaller universities that may not only lack available facilities, but also lack the required manpower to provide and retain quality educational services' (P.1).
– Small scale universities face challenges in terms of the degree of funding and support from the Saudi Ministry of Education to establish quality assurance programs (P.3). This leads to a shortage of training and capacity building to establish and carry out the program.
– Length been established: newly established institutions might lack guidelines, training programs and sessions, as well as expertise in quality assurance management (P.5).
– Lack of experience: a challenge of particular relevance to newly established Saudi Universities (P.6), and a lack of understanding of self-assessment among university officials (P.7).
– Culturally-related challenges: 'Governmental universities need to raise the culture of quality among their academic staff so that requirements of quality and accreditation become routine work among the tasks of the faculty members' (P.4).
– Meeting pre-set quality assurance regulations: 'Existence of traditional patterns of quality assurance, such as standards relating to the establishment of universities and colleges and other regulations determined by a central governments or local authorities' (P.7)
– Matching with market requirements: 'persistent clear division between labor market demands and university outcomes' (P.7).
– Short-termism/lack of long-term focus: 'many universities find themselves obliged to focus on assessing their attainment of mid-term objectives and annual plans, not of long-term goals and a continuous national, round-the-clock sustained development' (P.7).

The most prominent challenges are set out below:

– Documentation requirements by the NCAAA: 'in many cases our institution does not give itself adequate time to obtain the documentation that reflects the desired practices by the accrediting body. As a result, documentation is provided; however, it does not necessarily reflect actual ongoing practices. This creates a mismatch between the observed performance and the documented performance' (P.1).
– Establishing quality assurance culture (P.3).
– 'Raising the level of professional performances, increasing the sense of professional responsibility, and controlling the quality of the university outputs' (P.4). Staff training and clarity of deadlines and reports for measuring quality assurance was a recurring prominent challenge among the interviewees.
– Outdated policies and regulations: 'Any amendment or changing in them may require long time of bureaucratic administrative procedures which may delay or sometimes prevent any kind of quality assurance practices' (P.6).

4.2.3. Overcoming challenges

'Universities needed first to spend money to train staff on how to measure quality at different levels' (P.6) and address old and outdated policies by reforming their internal systems. (p.6) noted that:

'It is difficult to apply quality assurance at very early stages. The universities need to hire experts to help them in these early stages which could raise financial issues. Then as the time passes, Saudi universities staff will gain the quality assurance skills'.

All interviewees think that overcoming challenges played a central role in establishing and developing quality assurance within their higher education institution. P.1 thinks it would make the quality assurance process more efficient, and 'that if the quality assurance documentation that is required for the academic accreditation is given enough time, it would reflect the ongoing practices in a more valid way'. P.3 indicated that 'Once the support from the ministry is there and the culture is spread, quality assurance will become part of the daily business'.

P.5 emphasized the importance of having an open dialog about the challenges and difficulties to find solutions. P.4 argued that instead of focusing on quality assurance, it is more important to 'emphasize continuous support for quality improvement measures rather than trying to reach standards required'.

5. Discussion

This paper provides a review and discussion of quality assurance policies and practices through two sources: 1-accreditation self-study reports of four Saudi public universities which normally assess their quality through the accreditation pursuit and to catch a seat in global rankings, and 2- interviews with academic professors and leasers.

Results obtained from the reports as the institutions' first step in pursuing and evaluating quality assurance show that the self-Study report is the primary document used to demonstrate the institution's compliance with certain criteria and policies. Although these forms are predetermined in their components and standards, higher education institutions are still required to write Key Performance Indicator (KPI) and benchmarking on their performances with the actual situation and the target situation. Writing KPIs is not an easy process, specifically for a centralized education system. Another issue appears in terms of the type of data that are assumed to have the greatest value in the report. In NCAAA reports, quantifiable outcomes are dominant. For example, the report focuses on the number of educational programs, the existence and number of specialized committees, the availability of resources, and the completion of activities. In fact, universities tend to measure quality with a simple linear function of value judgment, keeping in mind that inexperienced staff and the need for guidelines and systems to catch up with quality assurance requirements are considered major challenges.

With the Ministry of Education's bureaucratic system, reports implicitly reveal that all public universities are centralized and funded by the government; resources and facilities are provided by the ministry of education. Even staff members are hired on unified benefit contracts, regulated by the ministry, leading to a type of relation between universities and the Ministry of Education that raises questions regarding the effectiveness of the self-study reports universities are required to submit. As a result, no sensible differences or innovations among higher education institutions pertaining to their vision, mission, and goals and the claim that submitting recognized research to high-ranking journals encourages innovation and creativity within the institution is false. Levitt (2002) argues that failing to take into account practical implementation, innovation never happens. Relating this rigid and direct relationship between funding and achievement is negative and would harm quality and in the 1980s, that was the case in Western Europe. Quality judgment was based on rewards and sanctions, and it created a compliance culture where the goal of the quality process was to meet the criteria formulated, but these criteria were appropriate for the context of the organization (Jarvis, 2014). Quality assurance is a very delicate mechanism that requires a diversified systems approach, balancing between the intrinsic motives of the organization and the extrinsic motives of the stakeholders-the government in this case.

As the Saudi education policy imposes a centralized system, this paper is not criticizing centralization, but the value of the current reported mechanisms. The centralized system practiced by the Ministry of Education has categorized universities in terms of their size, role, and funding structure. This classification system has limited their independence, creativity, and ability to be innovative. This indicates that the current accreditation process has limited impact on the development of universities; even more, the current practices of quality assurance implemented by NCAAA could negatively affect the quality at these universities. Beckey and Brookes (2008) argued that some quality practices are a "waste of time" and are mainly adopted from industrial fields into the higher education contexts with no consideration to the nature of the education management field and the sociology of human involvement. Implementing quality assurance procedures without a clear analysis of the educational context has minimal effect on quality enhancement. In a clearer description, insignificant quality processes normally neglect critical educational issues like curriculum, students learning needs, and faculty tenure on account of non-academic practices like registration and purchasing (Alzafari & Kratzer, 2019; Jarvis, 2014).

Results obtained from interviewees' responses indicated their perspectives on accreditation as part of educational Quality Assurance system in Saudi Arabia, the important of QA in Saudi governmental universities, QA challenges and corresponding impact, and factors that promote good QA system.

The majority perceive accreditation as an important part of quality assurance system, has a role in framing standard and establishing trust in the higher education institution means of authentication. Although the accreditation exercise is relatively new in higher education, it is becoming a necessity that most universities are adopting in order to stay in the game (Ferran, 2016).

Two interviewees perceive accreditation as a tool that enhances the reputation of universities and a key factor for graduates' position in the wider labor market, and because accreditation standards address all aspects related to quality in education institute, starting from the mission and strategic planning down to teaching and learning, authentication of educational quality is being taken more seriously, and institutions are being accountable for the results and outcomes of any accreditation measurement (Aad, 2019). However, accreditation isn't the solo and final goal for an institution. Nowadays, the scope of accreditation has broadened to incorporate the manner through which the educational institution is capable to achieving its pre-set goals and objectives that are defined in alignment to core values and vision (Hogan, 2001).

Regardless of QA significance and as represented by accreditation, challenges are inevitable and usually emerge in cases where the size of an institution enables to disables its' success in QA. Other challenges might be related to the lack of funding that supports QA practices, inexperienced personnel, and management in the field of QA, lack of understanding of self-assessment, low awareness of QA practices and concepts among faculty and students and using traditional modes of quality assurance. Introducing a QA system in an organization is a difficult task on its own since it affects the "business as usual" status and introduces additional burden to personnel, especially in an academic environment where most of the necessary quality processes are seen as non-academic, taking away valuable staff time from research and other academic activities. Establishing a quality assurance system in a period where the vast majority of the higher education community is against formal QA processes makes the implementation even more difficult (Trivellas, Ipsilantis, Papadopoulos, & Kantas, 2012). Thus, the lack of a participative culture on QA, stimulating discussions and analysis for current and future actions may conclude to disappointment and alienation among the staff or even resistance to change.

More importantly is the link between the university's outcomes and employability forming a crucial challenge throughout QA processes. One of the main objectives of higher education is to provide its graduates

with the skills needed to succeed in the labor market. This mission is especially important in the context of today's innovation driven, skills-based, globalized economies. It also corresponds to one of the main expectations of students, namely that they will be able to get a good job at the conclusion of their studies (OECD, 2017).

With all these challenges, participants have given several recommendations to enhance QA practices such as training QA staff and focusing on continuous improvements rather than reaching a threshold QA standard. QA should provide incentives for the kinds of improvement that go beyond simply meeting prescribed criteria. An effective quality assurance system should focus on both improvement and accountability (OECD, 2008). While focusing on bodies involved in QA, Newton (2001) highlights the importance of the 'implementation gap': defined as the difference between planned outcomes of policy, or preferred definitions, and the outcomes of the implementation process. He suggests that there is a gap between what was designed into and expected of the quality assurance system and what, at ground level, prevented this from being achieved. The success of a quality assurance system may be dependent less on the rigor of application or the neatness of the 'dry' documented quality assurance system per se and more on its contingent use by actors, and on how the quality assurance system is viewed and interpreted by them (Newton, 2001). There has been a constant emphasis on the significance of preparedness of staff to quality assurance activities as some of the major reasons for the weakness of the quality assurance system are the lack mechanisms of analysis of the information gathered during the quality review, inadequacies of the selection process of and the training offered to evaluators, and the lack of effectiveness of evaluation committees (Sabiote & Gutierrez, 2003). Similarly, the lack of sufficient training in conducting self-reviews seem to hinder the success of quality assurance activities (Silva, Reich & Gallegos, 1997).

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Varied perceptions and interpretations appear among universities and officials. People and faculty are living indicators of "Quality by Design" the university is built on and a true comprehensive list of "what to avoid" in the design of some universities are significant as well. While official accreditation forms ask higher education institutions to write Key Performance Indicator (KPI) and benchmarking on their performances with the actual situation and the target situation, writing KPIs is not an easy process, specifically for a centralized education system. In actual practices, universities tend to measure quality with a simple linear function of value judgment and with the Ministry of Education's bureaucratic system, the relation between universities and the Ministry raises questions regarding the effectiveness of the self-study reports universities are required to submit and limits their independence, creativity, and ability to be innovative. It is dysfunctional when the methods of quality assurance are determined before the purposes; accordingly, determining processes and outcomes is more time-consuming and leads to inefficient recommendations.

Other characteristics of quality assurance appear in the autonomy and the culture which play important roles in identifying the right tool to ensure and enhance quality. While some false conceptions of quality are related to submitting recognized research to high-ranking journals leading to innovation and creativity within the institution. On the other side, a list of challenges appeared are indicated such as challenges of scale, the degree of funding and support from the Saudi Ministry of Education to establish quality assurance programs, lack of understanding of self-assessment among university officials, culturally related challenges, and outdated policies and regulations.

It is for these critics and opinions, a call for more creativity in quality assurance and accreditation, where a profound comprehension and understanding of major differences between creativity and accreditation impacts on higher education institutions. Additional time is needed to rethink and take over creative and autonomous reformation and added

responsibility for the implementation of a correct quality assurance standards. The fructifying potentials of universities to implement quality assurance vary enormously with the different variables of each university. Without clearly appreciating a degree of autonomy for these institutions, focusing more on researchers and the implementation of their research, considering valid feedback from self-study reports, quality assurance in higher education will not grow and prosper depending on the illusion of a typical accreditation process.

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I declare that I have no conflict of interest.

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