Theme	Quality Assurance for Enhancement
Title	***Quality Assurance as an Empowerment Tool for Women: A Case from Saudi Arabia***
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Abstract

This study aims at introducing how quality assurance processes and the power of local quality assurance and accreditation agency were used to reform higher education institutions with regard to decision-making and access to resources for women. A responsive case study design was used with open-ended inquiry methods and qualitative data. The case study was conducted at a major Saudi university. Results showed moderate changes at individual, organizational, and community levels. Women were empowered partially, by gaining more shared leadership, decision-making, and access to government and community resources. The comprehensive quality standards devoted to gender equality and the full support from the local quality assurance agency (NCAAA) helped in attaining this empowerment. A strong leadership with clear vision and the awareness of women staff helped in speeding the change and reform process. The study showed that in order to bring organizational changes, driving forces should be increased and restraining forces should be decreased. More effective empowerment is needed for women, which requires real opportunities and changes of procedures and practices restricting their full empowerment.

1- Introduction

Quality assurance has become central in the context of recent educational reforms. The process of empowerment is accompanied with structural, organizational, cultural, and system changes in the organization, which can be achieved through quality assurance processes. Furthermore, periodic self-evaluations involve open communications and reflections that can lead collective group decisions, moderate biases, and force systematic and sustainable improvements.

2- The Purpose of the Study

This study aims at introducing how quality assurance processes and the power of local quality assurance and accreditation agency were used to reform higher education institutions with regard to empowering women, using a major university in Saudi Arabia as a case study.

3- Social and Institutional Context

Saudi Arabia has witnessed major economical and educational changes during the last few years and new reform initiatives were established. The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment in Saudi Arabia (NCAAA) has developed a new quality assurance and accreditation system (2004). Sequentially, institutional restructuring started to emerge within universities (Darandari and Hoke, 2007). NCAAA emphasized gender equality throughout the quality standards and system, and specified a sub-standard for it within the main quality standards called "*Relationship Between Sections for Male and Female Students*". It requires that leaders of both sections participate in institutional governance and be fully involved in strategic planning and senior management with effective and continuing communication; programs be planned and resources provided that ensure achieving comparable standards; resources and facilities equally distributed to meet the requirements of program delivery and associated services in each section (NCAAA, 2007).

Most of public and private universities and colleges established quality centers and units and developed strategic plans for quality. They formed quality committees and representatives at different levels. One of the universities led the change was King Saud University (KSU); which is a leading university in Saudi Arabia and the Arab region. KSU was established in 1957, and has a main campus for men and separate campuses for women. Besides it has some health science colleges that has one location for both males and females.

A new rector was assigned to KSU two years ago, who is positive and assertive. He sought changes, at all university levels, required to meet local and international standards and aimed for globalization and excellence. Since his appointment, the university has witnessed powerful changes with a new vision and regulations. The new changes emphasized quality, responsibilities, rights, and equality. He helped in creating a climate that facilitates quality culture. New positions were created for quality to enforce quick change. A dean for quality, vice deans, supervisors, and representatives at the different levels were assigned in both male and female sections.

The university and programs conducted two major self-evaluations (initial and developmental) using NCAAA system, in addition to consulting experts from international accreditation agencies, resulting in priorities for improvement. New administrative and academic plans were developed to suit new priorities and required changes.

4-   Theoretical Framework

Empowerment Definitions and Theory

Empowerment is a broad concept that is defined in different ways. It indicates: 1)roles and responsibilities, incentives, organizational structure and shared information and skills; 2) redistributing decision making power to those who do not currently have it; 3) emphasis on employee enhancement and training; 4) improvement, inclusion, capacity building, and social justice (Dowling, 2008; Fetterman, 2001; Fetterman and Wandersman, 2005; 2007; Geralis and Terziovski).

Empowerment evaluation is the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination. It applies to individuals, organizations, communities, and societies or cultures. Zimmerman (2000) provides a theoretical framework, where empowerment through evaluation is attentive to empowering processes and outcomes. **Empowerment processes** refer to attempts to gain control, obtain needed resources, and critically understand one's social environment. The process is empowering when it helps people develop skills so they can become independent problem solvers and decision makers. Empowering processes vary across levels of analysis. At the *individual level*, empowering processes are those that provide opportunities for people to work with others, learn decision-making skills, and manage resources. Empowered individuals are critically aware and therefore able to analyze what must change, posses a sense of control, and engage in participatory behaviors. At an *organizational level*, empowering processes are those in which responsibility and leadership are shared and opportunities to participate in decision-making are made available. Empowering processes at the *community level* includes accessible government, media, and other community resources. Empowered groups compete effectively for resources, influence policy, and are networked to others (Schulz et al., 1995; Zimmerman, 2000). **Empowerment outcomes** refer to operationalization of empowerment that allows the study of the effects of interventions designed to empower participants. It also differs across levels of analysis. At the *individual level*, outcomes include situation specific perceived control, skills, and proactive behaviors. At the *organization level*, outcomes include organizational networks, effective resource acquisition, and policy leverage. At the *community level*, outcomes include evidence of pluralism, the existence of organizational coalitions, and accessible community resources (Fetterman, 1996).

Quality Assurance as Empowerment Tool in Higher Education

Quality assurance is seen as an installation of power (Morley, 2003). The process of empowerment needs to be accompanied by an agreed value system and a set of principles to guide decision-making and access to resources. This can be achieved through well-based quality assurance systems and agencies. Empowerment through quality assurance involves application of agreed standards to action so that wider stakeholders could benefit and thus reform can be achieved (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Furthermore, internal evaluation is a major part of quality assurance, which

involves empowerment. The entire group is responsible for conducting the evaluation, thus can serve as a check on its own members, moderating the various biases and agendas of individual members. Coote and Pfeffer (1991) categorized four major approaches to quality, one of them is based on empowerment:

1- ***The traditional approach***: to convey prestige and positional advantage.
2- ***The scientific or expert approach:*** to conform to standards determined by experts. It includes the "fitness for purpose**"** approach, which contributes to the goal of giving every one equal opportunity.
3- ***The managerial or excellence approach:*** focuses on the need to improve service quality and customer satisfaction, like Total Quality Management-TQM. "Responsiveness**"** is derived from the "excellence" approach. It requires appropriate forms of management and professional care. Horizontally rather than vertically organized systems are necessary to require involvement from all levels and all are responsible for quality (Connor 1997).
4- ***The consumerist approach***: to make the customer more powerful. It is a democratic approach to achieve common goals and meet individual needs, which evaluates quality through understanding the consumer perspective. "Empowerment" is derived from the "consumerist" approach, and the process of assuring quality can help to bridge the gab between them. It has a fundamental aim of ensuring that users not only have more say but more power in the policy making process.

Quality and Organizational Development and Transformation:
Empowerment is at the centre of "structural theory of power in organizations" (Kanter, 1977) and the quality movement is the origin of "organization development" in universities that has a longer presence (Torraco and Hoover, 2005). "TQM" and "learning organization" are complementary management practices used in the organization renewal processes (Dowling, 2008).

The important elements for enforcing large-scale transformative change include a clear and compelling vision, exceptional leadership abilities, and culture, norms of behavior and shared values among a group of people. In large organizations, variety of social forces affects everyone; these forces comprise the corporate culture, which has a significant influence on human behavior, and is difficult to change. Where there is commitment to make change, empowerment becomes a function of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders coach staff and provide formative learning and delegate responsibility through assigning projects that contain appropriate learning experiences (Labianca et al., 2000; Ozaralli, 2003). Other important factor is illumination - typically a new insight or understanding about roles and structures- which is an eye-opening, revealing, and enlightening experience. The process of empowerment should create a dynamic community of learners as people engage in the art and science of evaluating themselves. The democratic approach to quality acknowledges that empowerment is both end and means in modern system, and it can be achieved through an open system that involves access to information, transparent and conspicuous decision-making, and public accountability. Furthermore, empowerment emerges when the conditions creating powerlessness are removed (Jarratt et al., 2005).

Empowerment and Gender Relations within a Context of Social Change

Empowerment is important wherever inequalities in sharing knowledge, power and resources prevent individuals or groups from improving quality. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is actively involved in gender equality and integrating it in organizational policies, programs and resource allocations. It emphasizes investing in women's capacities and empowering them to make their own choices, and stresses that their empowerment is crucial to the goal of sustainable development (UNDP, 2008).

5-   Methodology

This study has been undertaken using "responsive case study" design allowing the working hypotheses to emerge from the information as it is collected through open-ended inquiry methods, which provided information that is grounded in experience. The case study (KSU university) was conducted with nondirective and participative format using qualitative methods. The inquiry took the form of successive repetitions of four elements: purposive sampling, inductive analysis of the data obtained, development of theory based on the inductive analysis, and a constantly emerging patterns. The data elements were repeated until redundancy or saturation is achieved, and the same information was obtained from a number of sources. This design was used to create opportunities for participants to share their experiences of empowerment allowing dimensions of analysis to emerge from patterns found in their experiences. Categories and theoretical relationships were derived from an examination of the field notes. The patterns were discussed with participants for validation and verification (Lincoln and Guba, 1985;. Stake, 1995).

6-   Data Sources

The data was collected at two stages. The first stage of the case study included participant observation, unstructured informal interviews, minutes of meetings, and document analysis and all relevant information related to the case study throughout the past two years (2007-2008), given that the author was on site and participated in leading the process of quality assurance and change in women campuses at KSU. The second stage included unstructured formal in-depth interviews and discussions with purposive sample of thirty-two key informants; including quality directors and representatives, administrators and faculty from males and females at KSU, in addition to three representatives from other universities. The major areas of focus in empowerment were: the extent of using quality assurance to empower women and its effect on the university; the level achieved; enablers and barriers; similarities between KSU and other universities; and the effect on social change. In the findings, some quotations will have the note (w) indicating a woman participant and (m) indicating a man participant. The study is limited for faculty and administrators.

7-   Findings

The findings of the study show that there are almost equal opportunities in salary, regulations, and major practices, such as attending conference, for males and females. However, there are differences regarding the equality of decision-making and leadership. The implementation of quality assurance system at King Saud University have helped in enforcing major changes related to processes and outcomes empowerment at individual, organizational, and community levels. Women have succeeded to some

level in their claims for more effective-shared leadership, decision-making, and access to government and community resources, based on the new quality assurance framework. The major findings are as follows:

7-1:   A Well Established University Can Lead the Change

With a clear vision and strong leadership, KSU led its way for change. This was apparent from all sources of data and discussions. KSU seems to have a very strong history and strong scholars. When internal factors (strong leadership) and internal factors (pressure for local and international accreditation) occurred, the formula for change was almost there. In many meetings and interviews, the rector acted strongly towards empowering women while keeping them accountable. Furthermore, he helped in getting funds to build one campus for all women colleges at a high level standards. A note about him in documents included the following:

> The rector acknowledged the challenge of administrative and academic divide in the female campuses. However, he emphasizes that his aspiration for female faculty is to have the same opportunities and the same funding support as male faculty. He stresses that all faculty should be treated the same. He further notes that the building of the new female campus will be close to the main administration building, and can bring female leadership closer, and enable for fast responses. The rector also emphasizes the need for a female vice-rector for women affairs.

Many developments occurred and some were due to the leadership vision. This was noted in the following statements from a faculty member (w): "many changes happened recently in limited time…our classes, facilities, and equipments...even library changed. Committees now are shared and selection is based on quality". An administrator (m) also indicated that more empowerment will be embedded in the future strategic plan for KSU: "quality is a main factor to make university more institutionalized. We will endorse major changes in KSU strategic plan that needs to be highly approved, and women empowerment is embedded in it".

7-2:   Enablers that Helped Women Empowerment

Female Knowledge and Assertiveness: Organizational and individual changes happened because female leaders required changes and acted as change agents. The strong leadership, knowledge, maturity, and high level of awareness of female faculty staff helped in attaining reform. They used driving forces such as the new strong leadership, the government support for women, and seeking national and international accreditation, to speed up the change process. Female faculty staff identified weaknesses related to gender equality that could prevent the university from achieving national and international accreditation and recognition. This was considered a major priority to change, and they managed to attract attention to it.

Self Evaluation Exercises: During the university self-evaluation, transparent and critical discussions and reflections occurred through different university meetings and evaluation exercises at all levels, which led to changes affected women positively. The female faculty and leaders used this positive open system to push for more reform regarding their main issues, including equal leadership, decision-making, and independent funding. Furthermore, they required that the organizational structure and authorities be reviewed to allow for these changes. As a consequence, they are now

members of the major committees at the university level, and they attend council meetings at the university, program, and unit levels.

The process made male and female aware of important factors need to be considered for reform. With detailed and itemized scales for the quality standards, and evidence-based approach, comparisons were easy between sections –males and females- at institutional or program level. The process was public and many workshops were held to discuss processes and results, which illuminated faculty staff and administrators. Two senior female administrators expressed their empowerment through knowledge and implementation of the new quality system. One of them expressed that saying: "we know now a lot about quality, evaluation processes affected us and made us interpret many things that we were not aware of before. It is reflected indirectly in our speech and plans and gave us vision and background". The other one said:

> We have a quality culture now to some level … women awareness about quality increased by implementation of quality standards. We started to know what should we ask for…we discovered that there are standards that we need to meet and we have some thing to validate our arguments. We want women to be involved in all stages of planning and to get opportunities, preparation, and training like men.

Enforcement from Higher Authority: The local agency for quality assurance and accreditation (NCAAA) put clear standards and system that force full participation of women. They force that through rigorous monitoring of the exercises of self-evaluation that they required from institutions. It played a major role, forcing discussions and communications about the major issues between the males and females faculty. At KSU, separate and common self-study reports were issued, allowing for reflections and illumination for all. This process increased female inputs on reports that were taken seriously by the university leaders. A quality representative (w) at college level emphasized the role of her work with quality committees on her academic life stating the following:

> I know now more information that I did not know before, but men used to know long time ago…I am one of the people who are very happy now…now I am more enlightened. It affected me even at home…I talk to my sons about their responsibilities and rights as well as quality and accreditation requirements. It affected my way of thinking. I think about it and apply it every where. I question rights, weakness and strengths.

7-3:   Moderate Achievement Compared to High Aspirations of Women
The study revealed that female faculty and leaders at KSU are happy with what they have achieved, however what they aspired for was full participation and authorities, which did not happen yet. This was indicated by different stakeholders from both sides. A note by a quality director (w) was:

> I do not think we have equal decision-making like men yet, we achieved 30-40% . All female faculty now attend department meetings, and female vice deans attend college councils, plus deans attending university council… but do they give women same budget or employment authorities…till now we do not have a women leader for the university. They gave male deans administrative authority but female do not have authority on any college…even a college vice dean....now a female vice dean is the only one representing the women in the college council and their voices are like 1 to 10, when they say no they are not heard in the council.

7-4:   Main Reasons Behind Resistance for Change

Restraining Forces Are Still There: It seems that women did not put enough efforts in reducing restraining forces for empowerment, such as peer pressure, group norms, threat to established power and resource allocations, poor communication, and status quo. Location can also be an obstacle. Participants indicated that in other Arabic countries, what helped them is that females and males share the same administration and location, thus it is possible for the head to be a man or woman.

Lack of Transforming Empowerment Processes: Many processes used to empower women are not truly empowering. One of the reasons of lack of progress is limited understanding. Women need to learn more about decision-making and resources management skills, and need to be able to analyze what must be changed, and to engage in participatory behaviors. To move to transformative change, clear strategies and action plans should be put in place and be systematic. Empowerment of women requires going beyond providing them leading positions to providing them real opportunities and change of values, procedures, and practices restricting them. This requires analysis of all aspects from women perspective, so they can affect design implementation and outcomes. Previous issues are apparent in the following comments of a vice dean for quality (m):

> Quality standards do not have details about functions for female and male...when women were given the opportunity to be independent they refused…they may not know the formula correctly about how to get more power and what kind of empowerment they need. If women want more empowerment, they have to come with a reasonable plan that takes into considerations actual capabilities and physical as well as social barriers. A female can be a head of a department but separation in campus is a barrier… if vice rectors are from women, how can they manage working with men and they are not in their campus. In societies where female can be heads of departments, the women have offices next to their colleagues.

Problems in the Implementation of Quality: Some females raised questions about the implementation of quality and empowerment. For some, quality has transformative potential, and is perceived as part of a democratising process. It facilitates organisational development and maintenance of professional standards. For others, it is about customer satisfaction. This difference appeared through a statement by a quality director (m), who noted that:

> Quality is more about culture than standards. In the university, quality was taken as academic standards and not as Total Quality, which relates to empowerment. We do not look at faculty as a customer. We need to improve quality for internal customers and it will reflect on external customers…we need to look at women as internal consumers… I think women are very capable and serious… what applies on men applies to women...same rights and responsibilities.

Individual Culture and Status Quo as Restraining Forces: Some restraining forces relate to the personality of some individuals, which is affected by what they were used to and *has nothing to do with ideology. Some men have very positive and progressive views*. They played major roles in empowering women. They expressed that they look forward to have women as heads of departments and leaders of the university, and that some women are much better than men. However, *other men have negative attitudes towards the idea of sharing decisions with women*. They are used to hold higher degrees and higher positions before. Nowadays, the number of highly educated

women increased. Some men see this affecting their status quo. In order to facilitate change, it is suggested that new regulations or enforcement be put in place. A head of an administrative department, who used to be a head of a department (m), mentioned that:

> I look forward to have a head from women…some men have problems in accepting leadership of women or sharing decision making with them, but they are minority…now with the change forced by the rector, they get used to it. The problems are at department level and only with some… I think it is psychological and has nothing to do with ideology.

A quality supervisor (w) also said:

> Some times I see my vice head or vice dean can not take the decision, because quality culture is still weak… the university is part of the society… we came from a culture that tells the man he should have the final word. Their view about women being capable or not of making decisions need to be changed and that change will take time. Before, highly educated women were rare...now situation changed and our requirements as well, so traditional thinking does not fit.

A quality director (m) emphasized changing power by changing regulations:

> Quality is implemented by individual efforts and no enough pressure is there… the rector is supportive for women but no lobbying that force change…just voices of women and internationalism. There is a need to specify empowerment issues in regulations …no body who has power will leave it easily.

7-5: Similarities and Differences

Similarities and Differences within KSU: Females in some colleges and departments have high power and equality. Some health science colleges require more sharing between the two genders, thus do not have the same challenges for female faculty. A vice dean (w) clarified this point indicating that:

> Our college is different…most of the time authorities are the same for males or females…however, this does not apply to all health colleges…some have shared department meetings but do not have the same authorities.

Another previous head of a department (w) from another college confirmed that saying:

> We are one team... I represent men and women in my department…we do not have any problems…decisions are shared…they just separate student males from females. We sit at the same table and take decisions…this is at the department level, but at the college level the representation is limited just to one.

Similarities Between KSU and Other Universities: It seems that other large public universities are going through almost the same challenges. Representatives from other well established universities expressed the same concerns. Others from less experienced universities expressed that women are still struggling and not involved equally even in self evaluation processes. An administrator from KSU (m) said: "I think we are ahead of other universities in Saudi Arabia, and that we achieved a lot in empowering women that could be considered good ."

7-6: Other Factors Need to Be Considered

In order to bring organizational change, driving forces should be increased and restraining forces should be decreased, including education and training, participation and cooperation, support, communication, negotiation, and coercion – forcing. There

is questioning about the range of empowerment available for women and the reasons deriving it. A quality director (w) explained that:

> I think that males are working towards complying with quality requirements and they want to achieve accreditation. That is why they accept changes. They did not make it for us. I question why department heads are from men and not women…it can be now … we have new technology that can enable it …one year a man and another a woman… quality means equivalent opportunities based on competence…. some times woman has more experience and qualification than men.

More Focus and logical reliable solutions are needed. Organizational structure and shared information and skills as well as capacity building and training for women are significant factors to facilitate empowerment. Information and direct communication are enablers of change. Women expressed that men are close from the leadership, so they can have more access to power and funds. Furthermore, women seems to need more clarity about what they want to do, and there are variations in women capability to clarify their issues. A senior leader (w) expressed that "women had major developments … but there are main obstacles such as lack of more information about university and authority". Figure 1 summarizes the issue, showing that the current status for women is higher than before, with quality assurance playing a major factor, but still more change is needed. There are some driving forces that need to be dealt with and many restraining forces that need to be considered.
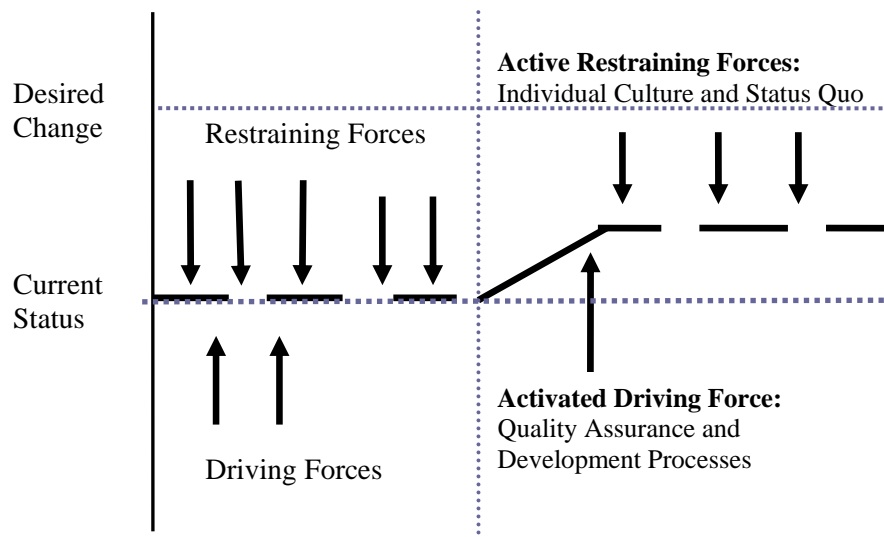
Figure 1: Driving vs. Restraining Forces Affecting Women Empowerment

7-8:   Effect on Society

Participants expressed that the change in the university can affect the society because KSU could be considered as a model for other universities, and the output of the university is an input for society and knowledge building.

8-   Conclusions

Empowerment is a key to organizational learning that is essential for change. This study showed that implementing a quality assurance system at King Saud University has helped in enforcing major changes related to processes and outcomes empowerment happened at individual, organizational, and community levels. Women have succeeded to some level in their claims for more effective and shared leadership, decision-making, and access to resources, based on the new quality assurance framework.

They played a major role in identifying weaknesses at the university related to gender equality that could prevent the university from achieving national and international accreditation and recognition. Inequalities were put as major issues to change, and they managed to draw attention to them. These processes were empowered by the local quality assurance agency (NCAAA), of which women received full support. The comprehensiveness of the quality standards, where some of them were devoted to gender equality, was a major factor in the process of empowerment. Moreover, a strong leadership from the rector, who was eager to achieve international recognition, helped in speeding the change process. Women knowledge, maturity, and high level of awareness helped in attaining reform.

Finally, the major lessons learned are that institutions with strong faculty and leadership can lead change. However, some processes used are not truly empowering. To move to transformative change, clear strategies and action plans should be put in place and be systematic. More focus is needed on holistic framework to integrate implementation with developmental goals. Empowerment of women requires going beyond providing leading positions to providing them with real opportunities. It needs change of values, procedures, and practices restricting them. This requires analysis of all aspects from women perspective, so they can affect design implementation and outcomes. In order to bring organizational changes, driving forces should be increased and restraining forces should be decreased. In the case of KSU, some restraining forces are still there, including problems in the implementation of quality, individual culture and status quo, and limited understanding. Driving forces include education and training, participation and cooperation, support, communication, and negotiation. Women need to be trained more on decision-making and effective competitiveness for resources.

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