

External international quality assurance at a higher education institution and becoming a  
learning organisation: A case study in the United Arab Emirates

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My name appears on the front page of this thesis suggesting that this accomplishment at the end of the doctoral journey belongs to me. What does not appear there are the names of the countless people I have come across along the way. Some gave insights, some gave tips, some listened to me at difficult times and some celebrated the milestones with me. To a greater or lesser extent, numerous people supported me while I was going through moments of joy and times of anxiety. I felt thrilled, optimistic or intelligent one day, but disillusioned, foolish or distracted the next. I am truly thankful for their care and belief in me.

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### Abstract

Designed to focus on a practice-based issue, this interpretive single case study aimed to explore the hypothesised influence of extensive US-Based accreditation experience of a UAE higher education institution in it becoming a learning organisation. Conventionally, neither institutions nor accrediting bodies intend to use QA processes for becoming a learning organisation. However, common aspects between the espoused values of QA and learning organisations suggest that institutions may make use of external QA processes as a catalyst to institute a sustainable learning and quality-focused environment.

The research topic was developed considering the global significance of the concepts in higher education contexts. The broader goal of the inquiry was to generate knowledge so as to inform local, regional and international practitioners on how to best invest resources to turn the external quality assurance processes into a sustainable growth opportunity for the institutions. In order to minimise bias and maximise rigour in this interpretive case study, the researcher employed mixed methodology and data analyses based primarily on a specific framework based on three building blocks of learning organisations: supportive learning environment, learning practices and leadership that supports learning. Data was collected from three different sources in order to triangulate the findings; a) documentary analysis, b) a publicly accessible learning organisation survey, and c) semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

The results of the study indicate that external QA processes may potentially be utilised to become a learning organisation. However, institutional realities, external demands, and other contextual factors might enhance or hinder the possibilities. Despite the limitations of this practice-based study being conducted in one relatively small higher education institution in the UAE, the findings are largely consistent with the relevant literature. Thus, the generated knowledge lent itself to the development of a conceptual academic leadership model. As a result, recommendations are made to local and international practitioners on how to utilise the QA processes as a catalyst for becoming a learning organisation to combat constant changes and sustain growth. Some emergent recommendations are also made for QA policy makers who may be seeking ways to focus more on the quality enhancement aspect of QA.

*Keywords:* learning organisations, quality assurance, higher education, leadership

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis project relates and analyses two highly pertinent and debated concepts in higher education: quality assurance (QA) and learning organisations (LO). While the former is widely researched, the latter is a relatively newer concept in higher education (HE). Researching into the influence of QA from the perspective of learning in an organisation might potentially offer valuable insights to practitioners in the field.

Increasing pressures for public answerability and accountability have enforced HEIs worldwide to assure their quality (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010). While scholars continue to debate on topics such as what quality is and how it can be measured or assured, many HEIs, either mandatorily or voluntarily, have been involved with QA. Typically, institutions go through several rigorous processes to meet the standards prescribed by the external accrediting agencies, such as the preparation of the self-study (self-evaluation of practices) reports based on the required standards, followed by the evaluation of the documents and site visits, the receipt of the feedback reports and the verdict about the accreditation status based on this documentation and peer-reviewed observation. The QA phenomena present more complications for HEIs in developing countries, where education systems commonly have significant limitations when compared with the educational background and experience of those in the Western countries. Consequently, it is not unusual for HEIs in the developing world to emulate the QA procedures implemented in the West, especially in the U.S.A. with its over 100 years of experience as mentioned in Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2015), (See also Blanco Ramírez, 2014).

On the other hand, the concept of LO, which was popularised originally for the business world by Senge (1990) has attracted attention in HE contexts, and the relevance, usefulness, and practicality of it, are still being discussed. The popularised LO concept was essentially based on Senge's (1990) extensive research on organisational learning theories and practices. For corporations, not only to survive but also to grow in a world that is ever-changing politically, economically and technologically, learning continuously, taking risks, being open to new ideas and experimentation, and learning from others' experiences are considered to be essential qualities (Garvin, 1993). When one considers the financial cuts, internal and external politics and other academic challenges that HEIs have been going through, the idea of applying the principles of LOs in the context of HE seems to be appropriate.

Even though consensus has yet to be reached both about the relevance and effectiveness of LOs or about the impacts of QA in HE, one can notice several commonalities between the two. For example, LOs are entities in which members' skills are nurtured to reach shared goals, and they learn, try, test, analyse and reflect on their experiences (Senge, 1990). These characteristics can be cultivated in an institution if the QA processes are managed appropriately because essentially the primary aim of the QA providers is to establish the culture of continuous learning and improvement in an institution (CHEA, 2015) and they encourage experimentation, analysis, reflection and continuous learning. Thus, the main hypothesis of this study is that QA processes may help HEIs become LOs.

Zayed University where I am currently working provided a favourable setting to explore the abovementioned concepts by being an institution dedicated to improving its practices by seeking international recognition and accountability via US-Based accreditation agencies and by being in a developing country. I aimed to explore whether several aspects of QA processes, such as reflecting on the practices during self-study processes, discussions on more innovative approaches or experimentation and decision-making stages have helped to cultivate significant characteristics of LOs in my workplace, which has gone through both institutional and specialised accreditation processes.

### **Research Purpose, Hypotheses, the Main and Sub-Questions**

This thesis project aims to explore how far the rigorous accreditation processes experienced by a university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have influenced it becoming a learning organisation. The broader goal of the inquiry is to generate knowledge so as to inform practitioners on how to best invest resources in turning the accreditation processes into a sustainable growth opportunity for HEIs.

The main research question (RQ) of the thesis is: "*How have US-Based external quality assurance processes influenced Zayed University in becoming a learning organisation?*" The literature on the characteristics of LOs and the intended outcomes of QA processes for HEIs is critiqued in Chapter 2. As elaborated in the literature review, the requirements of US-Based external QA from HEIs appear to resonate with the main characteristics of LOs, which could potentially be experienced during the processes. Secondly, the procedures followed to gain accreditation might have enabling or constraining impacts on Zayed University's (ZU) development as a learning organisation. Also, the perceptions of various actors that have taken different roles could be different about the

phenomena. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that becoming a learning organisation was not the initial intention of ZU, neither was it one of the promises of the accreditation bodies. Thus, another hypothesis of the study was that rigorous processes that HEIs go through during accreditation processes may be utilised to become LOs. Finally, I also hypothesised that Garvin, Edmondson and Gino's (2008) LO framework, of which details are presented in the literature review, could be used as the theoretical basis to inquire into the RQ.

Four sub-questions were developed from these considerations so as to explore the hypotheses made with the aim of responding to the main RQ:

- 1a) What aspects (if any) of the US-Based accreditation criteria relate to the characteristics of LOs as defined in three building blocks (Garvin et al., 2008)?
- 1b) Which of these aspects are addressed in the accreditation-related institutional documents (if any)?
- 2) How do the current perceptions of ZU's college members relate to what is found on the accreditation documents?
- 3) What are the perceptions of people holding different roles in ZU on concepts related to accreditation processes and becoming a learning organisation?
- 4) What are the emergent implications and recommendations that this study could contribute to local, regional and international practitioners and researchers?

The study was structured using Garvin et al.'s (2008) LO framework, which also offers a diagnostic scale (LOS, n.d.) that could be utilised while seeking the perceptions of individuals in an organisation under three main constructs (i.e. three building blocks of learning organisations). A detailed account of its suitability in this study is presented in the literature review. Even though the scale was prepared for corporate use, the content and the wording of the questions seemed largely applicable in HE contexts. According to Garvin and his colleagues (2008), LOs need to establish the working environments, practices, and leadership in such a way as to allow them to continuously improve. The components of the building blocks complement each other, and weaknesses in any of them influence the effectiveness of the institution. The diagnostic survey tool aims to initiate a dialogue for improvement of practices. Thus, this comprehensive framework was found suitable to analytically explore how the current practices and the perceptions of ZU members reflect aspects of LOs, and how, and what aspects of external international QA processes might/might not have contributed to it.

### **Contextual Background**

The study was held in the youngest of the three federally funded HEIs in the UAE, ZU, which was originally founded in 1998 to offer tertiary education to female Emirati students, and named after the nation's highly respected and forward thinking late founder Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan. The HEI's vision, mission, and development correspond with the national context. Hence, while introducing the institution itself, some information about the host country will be presented to offer a broader picture.

### **The UAE, Economic Realities, Aspirations and Social Context**

The UAE is a small Muslim state which is made up of seven emirates and governed as a constitutional federation of monarchies. The UAE is one of the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries in the Arabian Gulf region. Formerly, the Emirates were among British-Trucial States in the region, and became sovereign on December 2, 1971. However, each emirate kept a semi-independent status.

The UAE has experienced a remarkable change from an economy based on simple local farming, fishing, and pearl diving done by tribal inhabitants (Al Sadik, 2001), to a highly diversified business environment, mainly owing to the oil revenue (Shihab, 2001), and the liberal international investment opportunities (Rawazik & Carroll, 2009). A vast amount of resources has been allocated to develop and enhance many educational, cultural and social aspects of life. As a result, qualifying many projects using 'world-class' and using superlatives has become commonplace, arguably because of the sustained economic success and confidence gained thanks to grand schemes (Walters, Kadragic & Walters, 2006) such as the world's tallest tower, the biggest mall or the Dubai Expo 2020.

After the discovery of oil, the UAE had to develop and enact an immigration policy as an underdeveloped tribal nation in the early 60's, which was in need of qualified workforce (Al-Ali, 2008; Shihab, 2001; Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014). The country owes its modernisation and remarkable success to qualified expatriate professionals. Added to the limited increase in the number of qualified and/or willing Emiratis to fill the positions (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014) and the demographic imbalance, the UAE's strategic plan to diversify her economy has dramatically increased the reliance on expatriate workforce (Rawazik & Carroll, 2009). Thus, the nationals comprise less than 20% of the whole population (Yaghi & Yaghi, 2014) and around 10% of the workforce (Al-Jenaibi, 2012; Read & Lee-Davies, 2013). In other words, the UAE's public and the great majority of the private

sector currently functions owing to the Non-Emiratis coming mainly from Asian and South Asian countries as well as from many Western nations and Africa (De Bel Air, 2015), making the UAE a cultural mosaic.

On the one hand, the UAE has transformed itself into a hub of real estate, energy, tourism and other creative knowledge-based businesses, and on the other, she invested in education, which raised its rank from 65th in 2011 to 15th in 2013 in Global Innovation Index (Byat & Sultan, 2014). Free education is provided to the nationals from K-12 to the end of their tertiary education so long as they meet entry requirements (Raven, 2011; Wilkins, 2010). The UAE government has developed policies to implement educational programmes in schools to equip students with 21st-century skills, and created partnerships with top universities of the world to offer high-quality educational opportunities to the nationals (Byat & Sultan, 2014). It seems that this resource-based economy is determined to evolve into a skills-based one (Muysken & Nour, 2006) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with her own human capital.

### **Higher Education in the UAE and Assuring its Quality**

Establishing HEIs for Emiratis in order to promote and sustain economic development was a priority for the UAE government (Rawazik & Carroll, 2009), so in 1976 United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) in Al Ain, a big city in the Abu Dhabi emirate, was created by royal decree. To provide technical-vocational HE to men and women in each emirate, the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) were established, again with a royal decree in 1989. Following that in 1998, Zayed University opened for women in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and expanded later with male campuses in 2009 in both emirates. These HEIs were created in accordance with high international standards ensuring that the funding allocated by the government was appropriately used for the development of its youth (Rawazik & Carroll, 2009).

Further, private HEIs were also established in the 'free zones' of the semi-independent emirates, and international branch universities reached record numbers in the UAE (Wilkins, 2011; Rawazik & Carroll, 2009). In order to maintain international standards of all these HEIs, three kinds of QA schemes are in place: 1) the federal accrediting body, the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) monitors all the federal and private institutions, and the programs they offer; 2) emirate-based QA agencies that monitor the international branch campuses in the 'free zones' such as Knowledge and Human

Development Authority in Dubai; and 3) optional external international accreditation provided by Western accrediting bodies for the whole institution and/or programmes.

Until as recently as 2014, the quality assessment of the federal HEIs was an institutional responsibility, i.e. their quality was not federally monitored by the CAA. In particular, for ZU, which is the main context of this study, QA was voluntarily sought after via a particular US-Based regional accrediting body: The Middle States Commission of Higher Education (MSCHE) for the institution and five specialised accreditation bodies for five of its seven colleges. The following section will portray a brief history of ZU's foundation and its QA journey. Even though ZU had to go through the CAA accreditation for the last two years, the external international accreditation processes it has gone through will be the focus for the purpose of the thesis.

### **Zayed University**

ZU was founded in 1998 as an outcomes-based university that modelled the American Liberal Arts tradition with an intention to get accredited by a US-Based accrediting body. The founding mission was to offer young Emirati women free tertiary education in two major emirates, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. After 2009, ZU established male campuses adjacent but separate from the female campuses to maintain segregated tertiary education in line with Islamic values, as in the other federal HEIs for undergraduate students in the UAE. This is probably so as not to discourage traditional families who may not let their daughters receive tertiary education otherwise. Currently, ZU has approximately ten thousand male and female students on both campuses in total. It is important to note that ZU is an English-medium university but the expected proficiency level of the students to pursue academic studies is lower than many highly regarded universities in the world according to a report prepared by two external consultants, Dr. Diane Schmitt and Professor Liz Hamp-Lyons in 2015.

When planned, ZU aimed to be different from the other two federal HEIs. It would not offer vocational-technical programs as in the HCT, and it would emphasise developing students' English and Arabic fluency, leadership and information technology skills, which are different missions from the UAEU's. Additionally, ZU received consultancy from senior academics from several American universities, and the first provost who served between 1999 and 2003 initiated the negotiations with the MSCHE (Zayed University, 2008). Following an initial self-assessment process, ZU was granted a candidate status in March 2004, after which an extensive self-reflective period started to prepare for the site visit

scheduled for 2008. With leadership at the highest administrative levels, 14 MSCHE standards were shared by ten working groups, which consisted of members from both campuses representing various colleges that are co-chaired by an administrator and a faculty member (ZU, 2008). That is, the self-study was prepared with the combined efforts of around 90 members of ZU holding various roles and responsibilities, as detailed in self-study (ZU, 2008).

ZU's vision statement represented the aspirations of this young and ambitious university which is similar to that of the country: "Zayed University shall become the leading university in the region, embodying the same rigorous standards and intellectual elements found in major universities throughout the world." (ZU, 2008; 2013). Initial aims included offering a student-centred and learning-outcomes-based curricular model at high standards, and all the programs were designed to achieve the vision. Recently, the vision statement shared on the current website was amended: "Zayed University will be the leading university in the United Arab Emirates and recognised globally for its participation in educational and cultural achievements and enrichment of economic and social development." (Zayed University, Vision, 2017). Although it seems that ZU has kept its ambition to an extent, the revised vision may be interpreted as more realistic based on years of experience and self-reflection during the rigorous international accreditation processes.

Currently, mostly Western (acting) deans and academic directors, who report to Emirati upper-management, manage the members of ZU who mostly have Western educational and/or employment backgrounds. When founded, Western academics were appointed to most of the upper-management posts at ZU, whereas many were replaced by Emiratis between 2012-2013. When changes happened, rumours led to uncertainties, discontent, anxiety, and apprehension. As my employment dates back only to 2013, I am not personally aware of the previous management style; however, observably, the current one has been building trust. ZU has high aspirations, offers research funding generously and promotes modern activities such as creative art exhibitions, innovation days, carnivals for student presentations. Organisational dynamics has been affected by these positively; however, the research expectations with the teaching load causes stress as in many other HEIs worldwide.

### Zayed University and Assuring its Quality

ZU gained institutional accreditation in 2008 and was re-accredited in 2013, following which it presented progress reports in 2014 and 2016, and an upcoming report will be presented in 2018. That is, ZU's continuous improvement and partnership with the MSCHE has been active and evolving, which is congruent with the visions and missions of both ZU and the MSCHE. Additionally, ZU's colleges have also been engaged in specialised accreditation. Currently, the university has seven colleges and five of these have gained US-Based accreditation (Table 1.1).

*Table 1.1*

*Zayed University's Degree Granting Colleges and Accreditation*

<b>Zayed University's colleges</b>	<b>Accrediting body</b>
College of Arts and Creative Sciences	National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD)
College of Business	The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)
College of Education	The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)
College of Technological Innovations	Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET)
College of Communication and Media Sciences	Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC)
College of Humanities and Social Sciences*	N/A
College of Natural and Health Sciences*	N/A

\* Before the 2016–2017 academic year, these two colleges were together called the College of Sustainability Sciences and Humanities.

Apart from these seven degree-granting colleges, ZU has the Academic Bridge Program, which offers Academic English preparation classes, and the University College, which offers foundational studies prior to students' entrance in their majors such as in Math, Arabic, Academic Writing and Global Awareness. ZU also has other units that are expected of a modern university such as the library, the Office of Student Affairs, administrative units, and Center for Educational Innovation, which offers faculty scholarly teaching and learning support. In this particular study, only the colleges were taken into consideration in order to investigate into a narrower and more academic-oriented focus, i.e., the rest of the units were excluded.

### **Faculty and Student Profiles**

Faculty members at ZU come from nearly fifty countries from around the world, who have held significant Western educational background as students and/or experience as professors. This is said to be an intentional institutional policy to build a modern, student-centred, outcomes-based teaching and learning environment according to the self-study documents. However, another reason may be because well-educated Emiratis are not prepared to work as teachers or academics for comparatively lower salaries and/or consider teaching to be a low-status job (Raven, 2011). Currently, only 2% of the faculty are Emiratis although UAE nationals comprise approximately 95% of the students.

The UAE's HE policy was initially established on four principles: founding and managing federal universities, appointing highly qualified international faculty, offering free English-medium instruction and making it available to all qualified Emiratis (Fox, 2007). It seems that the UAE models highly regarded tertiary education providers in the U.K., U.S.A., and Europe, and genuinely aspires to reach high standards both in education and in other fields. Equipping modern buildings with the latest educational technology or offering competitive packages to highly qualified foreign professors may be possible owing to the financial success in a relatively short time period. However, most students' cultural, religious and traditional values and educational background influence their creativity, reflective and critical thinking skills, and sometimes hinder their performance when Western lenses are used. In other words, educational progress may require more time as it necessitates deeper philosophical reformation because of the students' past experiences or the baggage they bring from their backgrounds.

A vast majority of ZU students come from mono-gendered K-12 educational environments, taught by Arabic expatriate teachers who mostly implement traditional teaching techniques largely in Arabic (Findlow, 2005; Raven, 2011; Zayed University, 2013), and in general, educational expectations of Emirati students are based on receiving certification (Ashour & Fatima, 2016). Therefore, most students face various challenges because of the educational and social environment at ZU. Some tension and conflicts are experienced when students are exposed to the expectations of Western standards based on the espoused values of the HE and the professional ethics of professors with Western backgrounds and educational values. For example, faculty members may face complaints because students cannot meet the expectations of assignments that require teamwork, creative thinking or academic language skills yet they still expect high grades. These kinds of issues

might have caused some strain during the discussions on programme developments and common rubrics to assess learning outcomes during the accreditation processes.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

This study was conducted by me as an online doctoral student, who has been working at ZU's Academic Bridge Program as an expatriate English teacher since 2013. My current position does not entail a practitioner's role in relation to accreditation processes. The choice of this particular topic is associated with my dedication to continuous improvement as a person, a professional and a member of the institution, the development of which I would like to contribute to.

While experiencing the privileges of being an insider researcher, taking precautions to maintain some distance in order to minimise the likely subjective judgements (Drake & Heath, 2008) was necessary. Therefore, I approached the topic and the participants mindfully and with the help of a specific framework. On the other hand, by being a faculty member in a support unit that was not accredited, and thus excluded from the study, I also had an outsider role. This identity also offered several advantages: for example, when asking questions related to leadership matters that could be political or sensitive, I was very comfortable. Additionally, being an expatriate academic in the UAE, my observations were not affected with patriotic sentiments.

### **Summary**

In order to offer recommendations and insights to the practitioners in the field, two highly pertinent business concepts, QA and LO, were studied in the context of HE in a developing country, namely the UAE. This young country has high economic ambitions and dynamism, and her youngest federal HEI, Zayed University, of which vision and mission are congruent with that of the country, aims to raise the nation's leaders and knowledge workers with Western-style education. The HEI has voluntarily engaged in several US-Based QA activities and passed them successfully. However, to what extent these initiatives have been successful or met expectations of its constituents was found worth examining. Thus, my workplace presented an ideal setting for this practitioner research, so I designed a case study to inquire into how institutional practices have been experienced during accreditation processes, and to what extent characteristics of LOs may be observed as a result of this intervention that may have changed institutional routines.

The upcoming chapters will unfold by presenting a detailed literature review, the research design, data collection and analysis, discussions on the findings and conclusions. For the sake of clarity, working definitions of the concepts that may have different meanings in different contexts are defined below in the way they were used in this research project.

### **Terminology**

Terms and definitions related to QA are mainly based on the glossary developed by Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea (2004). The ones about LOs and organisational learning are working definitions, and a synthesis based on the literature reviewed for this thesis.

**Quality assurance:** A term that encapsulates both accountability and improvement processes in a higher education institution or its units/programmes, a continuous process of evaluating the quality. Depending on the institutional quality culture, the term may include practices such as quality management, quality enhancement, quality monitoring, quality control, and quality assessment to ensure quality.

**External quality assurance:** When quality assurance was conducted by people coming from accrediting bodies outside the institution/unit of which quality is being evaluated.

**Accreditation/US-Model accreditation:** A process of several stages that evaluates whether or not a higher education institution (HEI) or a specific academic programme meets prefixed criteria/standards presented by the (non)governmental or private body.

**Self-study/self-evaluation:** The first major stage of the accreditation process, which is conducted by the internal members of the institution or the programme, the outcome of which is a report written in reference to the prefixed criteria/standards of the respective accrediting body.

**Site-visit/peer-review:** The second major stage of the accreditation process, which is conducted by a group of peers designated by the accrediting body, whose remit is to review the premises to collect evidence and conduct interviews with the members of academic or administrative units and students, and results in a qualitative report in reference to the self-study reports and the criteria/standards.

**Accreditation status:** The formal recognition of an institution or a programme that has met the appropriate criteria/standards prefixed by the regional/national or specialised accrediting body for a predetermined period of time.

**US-Based accreditation:** Regional or specialised accrediting bodies that are originally formed for the US higher education sector that export accreditation services to HEIs in other parts of the world.

**Institutional accreditation:** The process which includes the quality evaluation of the entire institution, its units, premises and overall methods of teaching and learning, but excluding the quality review of specific programmes.

**Disciplinary/specialised accreditation:** The process which includes the quality evaluation process of a specific academic programme/unit conducted by ‘specialised’ accrediting bodies that use prefixed standards for curriculum and course content.

**Organisational learning:** Description of the process of how organisations learn by means of individual and organisational interactions and by utilising internal and external sources. It results in action, change of behaviour, new ways of thinking, reflection, adaptation, and sense-making.

**Learning organisations:** Workplaces where members continuously engage in dynamic processes which help them organically evolve, experiment, adapt, generate knowledge and improve for a shared goal. They do it with the help of systematic inquiry from various sources, self-reflection, and productive debates that take place in psychologically safe workplaces where employees can freely discuss mistakes and alternative views without feeling inhibited.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Elliott and Goh (2013), whose work inspired this study, indicate that the effects of accreditation processes in HEIs on their learning as organisations have not been widely studied, and that this may be because the link between QA processes and organisational learning (OL) has only recently attracted researchers' interest. In a similar vein, Harvey and Newton (2004) claim that there have been few studies that investigated the impact of QA in HEIs, and most of those associate the impact with compliance and accountability, and any kind of improvement seems to be attributed to other interventions rather than external QA (EQA) processes. Harvey and Newton (2004) also state that this is probably because it is rather hard to find cause and effect relationships when it comes to measuring the enhancement of students' learning experience, which may be a consequence of numerous other variables.

On the other hand, there are compelling discussions on how HEIs would benefit from becoming LOs so as to adapt to the turbulent times they have been going through worldwide, as in the case of some forward-thinking corporates. The characteristic practices of LOs such as reflection on practice, teamwork, having a shared vision, and information collection could potentially be experienced during accreditation processes, and skills or habits gained during the processes could become part of organisational procedures. However, ironically several characteristics of HEIs as *teaching* organisations may not allow them to reshape themselves as LOs (Friedman, Friedman, & Pollack, 2005). Those that intend to transform themselves into LOs will need to reinterpret academic isolation, competition or loosely-coupled hierarchical structures.

For clarity, it should be noted that the author used the terms "leadership" and "management" interchangeably, agreeing with the contemporary HE leadership literature, which reiterates that distinguishing leadership from management is futile, as the characteristics of both complement one another (Black, 2015). In particular, while motivating a team to reach a vision of getting accredited or becoming a learning organisation requires effective leadership, planning the resources, monitoring the performance of teams, and evaluating the end results require effective managerial skills.

In 2013, I was employed by a university that has devoted its resources in rigorous US-Based EQA processes in its relatively short history that started in 1998. I was curious to explore how the interventions during these intensive periods may have influenced the learning in the organisation, and whether or not some potentially useful practices have been

sustained. Before elaborating upon the research design and the questions, a literature review that guided the thinking process behind the research design will be presented focusing mainly on US-Based EQA and accreditation in HEIs especially in the Middle East, the concept of LO in HEIs and the relevance of it with QA processes.

### **Assuring Quality and Accreditation in Higher Education Institutions**

Looking back, Van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) state that maintaining quality and adapting to the requirements of their contexts have always been important for HEIs, hence they have survived and stayed relevant over the years. Reiterating these comments, Harvey and Newton (2007) suggest that QA has received considerable attention after the early 80's in the U.S.A., U.K., Canada and France, followed by some other European countries after the mid 90's. Although how it is structured differs from country to country, broadly speaking, QA is usually maintained by means of semi-independent external reviewers that assess HEIs' performance and disseminate public reports (El-Khawas, 2013). Based on the economic, political and technological developments worldwide (Altbach, 2004), various stakeholders of education such as students, parents, employers, governments, have been increasingly demanding HEIs to maintain public accountability and international comparability (Altbach, 2004; Huisman & Currie, 2004). Thus, albeit being compliant with the national frameworks was once sufficient, assuring quality internationally has become one of the global trends for HEIs for the last few decades (Altbach et al., 2010; Campbell, van Damme, & van der Hijden, 2004). In short, QA for HEIs is not a novelty even though issues such as what quality means, how quality as defined in the business world could be applicable in educational settings, and by whom the standards of quality should be determined remain contested. The scope of this thesis does not allow the literature review to address the debates on what quality means or who determines quality standards. Instead, the focus of attention will be given on the potential influence of EQA processes, especially the US-Based ones on HEIs becoming LOs.

Particularly in the U.S.A., and in the West, the need to assure quality mainly emerged from the need to assure the public and taxpayers that the graduates from HEIs have been trained sufficiently enough to serve safely in whatever field they graduated from (CHEA, 2015). Primarily, accreditation agencies claim to ensure quality and promote continuous quality improvement which would enhance students' learning experiences (CHEA, 2015; Elliott & Goh, 2013). However, according to Harvey and Newton (2004; 2007), the

improvement aspect is obscured because of compliance and control issues that QA generated, which associates with the popular concepts of accountability, 'fitting for/of purpose' and deserving 'value for money'. The endeavors and achievements of QA agencies for decades are being acknowledged (El-Khawas, 2013; Harvey & Newton, 2007), and arguably, the standards and the processes gained a fair amount of legitimacy, and HEIs have gradually become accustomed to the procedures (El-Khawas, 2013). Nevertheless, discussions on the political agenda behind the control mechanism and box-ticking schemes presented by QA agencies remain relevant according to many QA authors (see Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001; Harvey, 2004; Harvey & Newton, 2004; El-Khawas, 2013).

### **Emerging Models to Improve QA Processes**

In the West where QA experiences have become ubiquitous since the beginning of 80's and especially after the mid 90's, it may not be too wrong to say that the systems in the HEIs have reached a more mature level of accountability. Thus, currently there seems to be a tendency of seeking ways of eliminating the image of being controlling and prescriptive by focusing on quality enhancement as discussed in Harvey and Newton (2004; 2007). International networks of QA agencies are being established to join forces as a way of cooperating to increase their effectiveness (Woodhouse, 2004). In other words, they seem to be at a stage of revitalising the initially proposed aim of enhancing learners' experiences in HEIs. For example, Harvey and Newton's (2007) framework offers a model for QA agencies that aim to strengthen their position by working on self-regulation, research-informed, improvement-led, and evidence-based approach to QA. Harvey and Newton (2004) acknowledge that arguably their proposed model may only suit well in HEIs where accountability processes have already been established. D'Andrea (2007) argues that most HEIs have not established systematic ways of turning quality review processes into learning opportunities in the organisation. D'Andrea (2007) referring to her earlier work, describes 'an integrated educational development model', which she developed with her colleague (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001), aiming to reinforce the enhancement aspect of quality review processes. This model also highlights the importance of self-evaluation of the practices by the practitioners, and the possibility of the improvement and sustainability of learning and teaching could be achieved by critical debates among the relevant parties in their context. Both models seem to, on the one hand, aim to ensure HEIs reach high standards for extrinsic motivation, on the other, intend to instill these habits intrinsically.

As a HE practitioner for over 14 years in two developing countries, namely Turkey and the UAE, I would argue that before establishing how to self-regulate, or what research or what evidence they need to be informed about, HEIs may not be able to use either Harvey and Newton's (2007) or Gosling and D'Andrea's (2001) models. In fact, Harvey and Newton (2007) have admitted that it is not clear how to operationalise their model. Referring to the Chilean example summarised by Lemaitre (2004), some HEIs in the developing countries were opening without even needing a QA concept, while HEIs in the developed countries had already experienced many QA processes and reached a level to critique its unfavorable sides and to develop more improved options. As mentioned earlier, the concept of 'assuring quality' is imported from the business world that functions significantly differently from academia. According to D'Andrea (2004), quality enhancement approach is more congruent with the transformative, developmental and formative educational values. Arguably, the models these scholars theorised resonate with the LO concepts.

### **Higher Education, Quality and Accreditation Issues in Middle East**

Massive socio-economic changes have been experienced in the developing countries of the Middle East since they gained independence in around the 70's. More recently, they have also been developing their HE systems. The HEIs in the region has reached unprecedented numbers; however, the educational quality they offer has been questionable, especially when one considers international standards (Mohamed, 2005; El Hassan, 2013; Ezzine, 2009). As stated in Arab Nations Human Development Reports (2016) and in Hoel (2014), HE in the Arab nations struggles with serious challenges related to quality because of the demand due to their increasing participation in economy, a huge young population and the booming number of HEIs (see also Wilkens, 2011; El Hassan, 2013). In most cases, the curriculum lacks modern educational content and instructional approaches, the educational backgrounds of both students and teachers rely on rote learning rather than critical thinking, and cultural issues seem to prevent the development of HE systems (El Hassan, 2013; El Amine, 2010; Walters, Kadragic & Walters, 2006). Despite the investment in education and the fact that there have been several achievements such as the increased number of female students in HEIs, it seems that graduate skills and knowledge still fall far short of the market's expectations (World Bank, 2008). Arab CEOs' proclamation on the region's human capital challenges substantiates this report "... there is an insufficient supply or quantity of qualified national labor." (Lootah & Simon, 2009, p.15).

Arab nations have been financing the development of their education systems so as to upskill the youth in order to respond to the demands of the knowledge economy and nationalise their workforce. El Hassan (2013) emphasises how QA or quality enhancement systems are at their infancy and how feedback, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms have been far from the norm. Additionally, the lack of governmental experience in overall management of HEIs strategically with appropriate policies is highlighted as a regional weakness (Lootah & Simon, 2009). However, there have been attempts to assure quality. Lim (1999) claims that developing countries adopted QA because it is "... the fashionable thing to do." (p. 380), and adds that although some HEIs benefitted from the experience in some ways, most HEIs have not made significant and/or lasting improvements.

Regarding QA issues, there has also been an ongoing political debate on who determines global standards for HEIs or whether this is a form of Neo-Medievalism (Noori & Anderson, 2013) or academic imperialism/colonialism (Blanco Ramírez, 2014), or the awkwardness of an institution in an independent country to pursue accreditation from a foreign country (Noori & Anderson, 2013). Despite the criticism, many developing countries have carried on their pursuit in QA from Western and especially US-Based providers (Lim, 1999; Blanco Ramírez & Berger, 2014). Although numerous complexities in relation to governments' control over HEIs, the role of QA agencies in terms of control and improvement of quality, the lack of substantial research on the impact of QA on HEIs, the social and contextual issues in different parts of the world, and academics' frustration about the academic freedom issues, QA will probably exist in some shape or form in the future as conceptualised in Singh (2010). Thus, adapting a similar approach to improve their HE systems as in numerous other developing countries, Arab nations turned to American models (El Hassan, 2013), and some of them structured themselves to get QA from US-Based accrediting bodies with the hope of gaining prestige and reputation while improving their systems (Knight, 2007). Accreditation offered by highly experienced US-Based agencies where regional accreditation has been settled for over a century (CHEA, 2015) is not uncommon in the Middle East (Altbach, 2004). Thus, it is not unusual to see that all the accreditation agencies that ZU has worked with are also US-Based.

### **US-Based Accreditation**

A major form of QA in the U.S.A. has been performed via accreditation that has two idiosyncratic purposes: one to convince external stakeholders that the HEI is functioning in

accordance with its mission, and the other is for the internal accountability to review and improve campus-based practices (El-Khawas, 1998). In the U.S.A., accreditation agencies are non-governmental, and federal and state governments entrust the accreditors' reports while deciding on the funding allocations to HEIs (CHEA, 2015). That is, it has an evidence-based approach to reassure external stakeholders of HEIs by publicising that they are committed to their mission responsibly, and at the same time, by rigorously reviewing their internal practices for continuous improvement (El-Khawas, 1998).

Typically, US-Based external accrediting bodies require HEIs to evaluate their own practices through a self-study process considering the standards based on best practices in HE, they give feedback to the self-study, they conduct site-visits to peer-review and evaluate the claims of the HEI by collecting evidence from different sources. These stages are followed by the evaluation, and the final report followed up by periodic reviews. The process takes a considerable amount of time, and it requires institutional commitment to improvement and continuous learning. During the intervention of accreditation, institutional members and the routines should be influenced, and when the claims of accrediting agencies are taken into consideration, one would hope that the influence should be a positive one.

The US-Based accreditation model, unquestionably, has advocates and critics as well as strengths and weaknesses; however, it seems the model has been adopted not only in developing countries of the Middle East but even in some European HE contexts as evidenced by Stensaker (2011) as "... the best and most suitable evaluation method for higher education." (p.761). This is probably because the aspirational aspects of accreditation models can be associated with both accountability, i.e. control mechanisms, and the establishment of internal, self-regulating and quality-enhancement-focused procedures to meet the needs of changing contexts. These aspects of accreditation as a QA process seem to resonate with the concepts of building LOs as defined by Garvin (1993). This neatly leads to the upcoming discussion on the relevance of LOs in HE contexts.

### **Higher Education Institutions as Learning Organisations**

Constant challenges that HEIs face due to many technical, social and political fluctuations that affect their practices force policy makers to contemplate the relevance of another popular concept borrowed from the business world: learning organisations. Before discussing the relevance of LOs in HE context, it would make sense to overview what the concept entails.

Senge (1990) popularised the concept of LOs using a theoretical foundation primarily based on the works of Donald Schön and Chris Argyris on OL and other scholars whose studies and theories have contributed to it since the late 1950's (Örtenblad, 2013). The development of prevailing concepts such as individual and group learning, experiential learning, systems thinking and behavioral aspects of learning originally belong to other influential scholars such as John Dewey (hands-on learning), Kurt Lewin (change management), David Kolb (reflective learning) and B.F. Skinner (behavioural change). However, almost all the relevant literature credits Senge's (1990) seminal work that has triggered a huge interest in the organisational world, and many conceptual, anecdotal and some empirical studies have rippled ever since initially in the managerial and more recently in many different fields. Nonetheless, similar to the quality concept which is not new for the HEIs, LO concept is not new for the organisations, and it seems it is still relevant (Örtenblad, 2013).

The concept of LOs was developed as a response to the changing external and internal dynamics in organisations and the demands of the customers mainly due to global economic, political changes and technological advances (Marquardt, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Snell & Gherardi, 1998). In other words, those who keep learning will have the competitive power and advantage not only to survive but also to grow in the ever-changing knowledge era, when manufacturing (manual labour) of the industrial age has transformed into 'mentofactoring' (mental labouring) (Marquardt, 2011). Several authors (see Senge, 2000; Moingeon & Edmondson, 1996; Marquardt, 2011) refer to the importance of learning faster and better than others as being the only factor that brings competitive advantage. Similarly, Senge et al. (2012) refer to the fact that many corporates promote the concept of LO and highlight the theme of learning as "..... the only infinitely renewable source." (p. 22).

Arguably, the internal and external challenges that HEIs have been struggling with echo what led the business world to develop the concept of LO as a response. Scholars such as Boyce (2003), Bess and Dee (2008), Bui and Baruch (2012), Friedman et al. (2005) and Senge et al. (2012) advocate that becoming LOs for HEIs is a solution to sustain themselves while they are dealing with the challenges in our era. Senge's normative development of the concept (Edmondson & Moingeon, 2004) combines theory and practice while offering a set of disciplines that should be mastered by the members of organisations which aim to become LOs: *personal mastery*, *team learning*, *shared vision* and *mental models* that are interrelated and interconnected with the fifth and the cornerstone discipline: *systems thinking* as

conceptualised by Senge (1990). In LOs, "... people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together." Senge (1990, p. 3). One would assume that, as idea and knowledge creating centres whose core focus is teaching and learning, universities would be ideal environments to cultivate these skills.

Failure to address the typical characteristics of HEIs that may prevent them from becoming LOs runs the risk of oversimplifying these assertions. Loosely-coupled academic communities usually act slowly to change, and value autonomy, competition and hierarchical structures (White & Whethersby, 2005), which will need to be reformed if they intend to become LOs. Not surprisingly, Senge (2000) criticises most HEIs for keeping their old views based on previous era when change was not so inherent, societies' expectations from HEIs were not as dynamic and the focus was merely on teaching. Arguably, if both adaptive and generative learning is important to stay relevant (Senge, 1990) for HEIs, it is important to become LOs. However, HEIs operate

### **QA Processes and Learning Possibilities for Higher Education Institutions**

As mentioned previously, Knight (2007) suggests that some newly established HEIs hope to benefit from the rigorous accreditation processes. Whether or not their main aim is to gain international reputation or competitive advantage, HEIs may potentially take the opportunity to learn while assuring quality. However, the complexity of the concepts of 'learning' and 'quality' leaves them open to interpretation. Observing them becomes even harder when these multi-dimensional concepts are discussed in the complex environments of HE.

Accrediting bodies encourage continuous improvement while assuring the quality of an institution based on its own institutional self-evaluation (El-Khawas, 1998; Altbach et al., 2010). They examine to what extent the institution/unit acts in accordance with its stated mission and vision. While preparing for the accreditation, HEIs reflect on their current practices intensively and extensively. The opportunity allows the institutional members to (re)evaluate their practices considering their institutional goals. This process seems to be comparable with the *systems thinking* discipline as interpreted by Senge (1990) as the cornerstone principle of LOs. Rather than focusing on parts, seeing the big picture is an essential step when planning for improvement or any kind of long-term change. In most

situations one mistake is to react to the immediate problem without seeing its place in the system. LOs are places where members reach “... a more refined understanding of causal relationships, a more expansive list of critical variables, and a better appreciation of potential difficulties” (Garvin, 2000, p.143). Self-evaluation of practices may potentially help members to appreciate some nuances they have not noticed previously.

Gaining accreditation from a prestigious agency may potentially create a *shared vision*, which is one of the four pillars of LOs (Senge, 1990). Shared vision is vital for an organisation as it helps individuals to focus their energy on a certain goal, as they will work for something that they value personally without feeling coercion. “With a shared vision we are more likely to expose our ways of thinking, give up deeply held views, and recognize personal and organizational shortcomings” (Senge, 2006, p. 195). However, it is important to note that members of the organisation should feel the ownership of the vision that should build on their personal vision (Senge, 1990). As the institutional vision is the binding principle that guides its departments’ and members’ practices, it is important for leaders to create and endorse it first, and then motivate the followers/teams to make sense of it individually and in teams considering their contexts before being committed to it (McCaffery, 2011) to ensure sustainable action towards both individual and institutional goals (Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2016). What accrediting agencies claim to reach is assuring and enhancing HEI’s efficiency so as to improve students’ learning experiences, which are the main goals of academics involved in education. In other words, potentially being accredited or enhancing their institutional academic efficiency should unquestionably be a valuable shared vision for the members of academia.

Another crucial aspect of LOs is the *personal mastery*, i.e. having individuals that are not only competent and skillful, but also committed to continuous learning and recreating themselves to reach their vision because organisations learn thanks to its individuals who learn (Senge, 1990). Senge’s thought echoes Argyris and Schön’s (1978), Huber’s (1991), and Kim’s (1998), who also highlight that individual learning does not transfer the learning directly to the organisational level as the learning may be lost when the individual is no longer available or it may not be shared or effectively institutionalised. Hence, it is essential for leaders to channel the skills and commitment of individuals into a shared vision for becoming LOs. Again, working for accreditation may potentially create a platform for empowering different individuals, promoting dialogue, engaging in constructive debates and building team working skills. This brings us to the next aspect of LOs: *team learning*: Senge

refers to a basketball player's (Bill Russell) comment on how his team performs toward their goal successfully both thanks to the individual talent of the players and how efficiently they play as a team for the goal. This discipline highlights the individual's need to be '... part of something larger than themselves...' (Senge, 1990, p.13) and their readiness to seek meaning of their experiences, being a team player, and making use of their creative power (Senge, 1990). HEIs are structured to work in teams that can potentially learn collectively and with each member's contribution to them, and accreditation processes have the potential to trigger team learning, which leadership could harness for effective organisational learning.

In order to manage all the above, it is important to work on the *mental models*, the fourth pillar, which was described as the "... deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action." (Senge, 1990, p.8). Thus, it is important to identify deeply rooted mental models or assumptions by becoming reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983), i.e. people should have an inward eye on their beliefs and actions and examine them critically, and realise how they could be affecting their choices in workplaces. Each institution possesses stories, and people simply assess their environment through the lenses they create in their minds, which is very powerful (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) raises people's awareness of their assumptions and generalisations. While working on the self-study during the accreditation processes, leaders can create platforms for members of HEIs to defend their position but also inquire into others' views with open mind (Senge, 1990), during which some assumptions may be tested and beliefs may change.

### **The Concept of Learning Organisations: Popular but Vague**

Several scholars such as Örténblad (2004; 2013), Yang, Watkins and Marsick (2004), Garvin (1993), Garvin et al. (2008) highlight the fact that the concept of LOs have created a lot of interest in the organisational studies. The idea attracted so much attention in different fields of studies that a total of 332 studies were produced between the years of 1988 and 2011 (Örténblad, 2013). However, even after decades of its foundation and popularity, there have been debates on its vagueness because of the unclear boundaries of LOs. A recent and extensive review on LOs from a 'good' theory perspective reveals its limitations in terms of definitions and internal consistency of the relations in LO's ontology (Santa, 2015). It is said that its elusiveness may have helped some consultants and propagators to promote the concept probably because "... vague ideas are generally impossible to implement but

excellent to show” (Örtenblad, 2004, p. 130), and because of the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the prominent components of LOs such as learning, experimentation, creativity, teamwork, mental models (Garvin, 1993). Another reason could be the reasonable and undeniable characteristics of LOs (Kezar, 2005a) such as continuous learning, collaboration, working for a shared vision, which could be arguably applicable in most global platforms. Several scholars such as Marsick and Watkins (2003), Garvin (1993) and Garvin et al. (2008) voiced the need for more theory-based measuring tools for the concept to be more practically utilised by organisations, and for it to become more than a consultancy tool (Örtenblad, 2013) or a fad (Kezar, 2005a; Birnbaum, 2000).

To make this highly attractive concept more tangible for both researchers and practitioners, some models or frameworks, which capture the main characteristics of LOs, were developed. Although each model highlights slightly different aspects of LOs, the frameworks have commonalities. For example, the dimensions described by Goh and Richards (1997) emphasise the role of leadership, while Pedler, Boydell and Burgoyne’s (1989) description of a learning company stresses the learning of all the members and continuous transformation of the organisation. Örtenblad (2004; 2013) offers a model that intergrates learning at work, learning climate, learning structure and organisational learning. Marsick and Watkins (2003) hold an observable action perspective, and they developed a tool that aims to measure the learning at an operational level. Garvin et al. (2008) developed a model in order to measure the learning at unit levels in three building blocks; learning environment, practices and leadership. Bui and Baruch (2010) developed a model for HE contexts, which correlates the main principles of LOs to *antecedents* such as motivation, team commitment, leadership, and *outcomes* such as individual performance, success, self-efficacy.

Commonly, the models or frameworks, to a greater or lesser extent, include similar features such as continuous learning, knowledge transfer, team-work, participatory decision-making, i.e. some classify these as main categories others refer to them as sub-categories. For example, while transfer of knowledge is a main category in Goh and Richards (1997), the same concept is a sub-category under learning practices in Garvin et al. (2008). In short, LO concept in itself lacks precision, which is similar to the *quality* concept that does not have clear boundaries. As ideal and relevant as they sound, complexities naturally increase when concepts from the business world are applied in educational settings where the knowledge production is the main asset, yet it is surrounded with its own complications and challenges.

As mentioned previously, it may not be too wrong to say that the Western-based improved models to modify the QA concept such as Harvey and Newton's (2004) and Gosling and D'Andrea's (2001), and the application of LOs in HEIs lack operational details even though both make sense. Both concepts are considered as solutions to the problems that HEIs currently suffer from, they both are based on similar principles such as self-evaluation, commitment to growth, collegial decision-making based on data. Similarly, Dill (1999) also argues that the new policies require HEIs to be accountable while creating new knowledge and revising processes for improvement of teaching and learning, which means universities should become academic LOs.

Having discussed these, a more workable framework was needed to study the case at ZU. At this point, Garvin et al.'s (2008) framework, which was developed to provide more tangible steps for managers to follow was found suitable to investigate the issue in this study. Garvin and his colleagues' (2008) practioner-based framework was founded on extensive OL and LO literature as well as the scholars' own emprical studies, and aimed to offer a starting point for discussions in organisations that opt for becoming LOs, which seemed the most applicable one for the purpose of the study. The framework offers relative specificity that could allow practitioners to assess their contexts considering the building blocks of LOs: learning environment, learning practices and leadership. The authors emphasise that all three blocks are correlated and LOs function with the contribution of all. They also provide a corresponding survey to diagnose the current strengths and weaknesses in an organisation based on the principles of LOs that were translated into statements clustered as sub-constructs under the three main constructs (Garvin et al., 2008). They tested the tool until it reached a level of acceptable reliability and validity (Edmondson & Garvin, unpublished manuscript). Currently the Learning Organization Survey (Garvin et al., n.d.) is accessible on a website allowing respondents to benchmark their perception of the organisation they work in against that of others on the basedata that participated in the study (Garvin et al., 2008).

### **A Practice-Based Learning Organisation Framework**

Garvin et al.'s (2008) LO framework reflects several streams of OL theory: learning as a result of social interaction in practice-based settings (see Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991); the cognitive processes of learning (see Huber, 1991) that may be triggered by the creative insights of individuals when shared (Garvin, 1993; Nanoka, 2007), the amended actions as a result of reflective action-learning as opposed to unreflective

changes (see Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Presence of these activities depends on the quality of the human relationships in the work environment, whereas absence of these suggest that the environment does not support learning of individuals adequately; therefore, learning opportunities in the organisation are lost.

This particular framework was selected for use in this thesis although it was not particularly designed for educational settings. How individuals function in teams in the business world fundamentally resembles how educationists engage in practice-based learning in their professional communities. For example, Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) relate the sustainable improvement of school systems with individual and collective capacity building, which "... is a complex blend of motivation, skill, positive learning, organisational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of support." (p.221). They suggest that the key to reaching sustainable improvement is to develop professional learning communities. These aspects of learning can potentially be (re)activated during the accreditation processes when working in teams utilising different academics' skills and expertise for the mutual goal of enhancing student experience. See Figure 2.1 for a summary of the LO Framework used in the study.

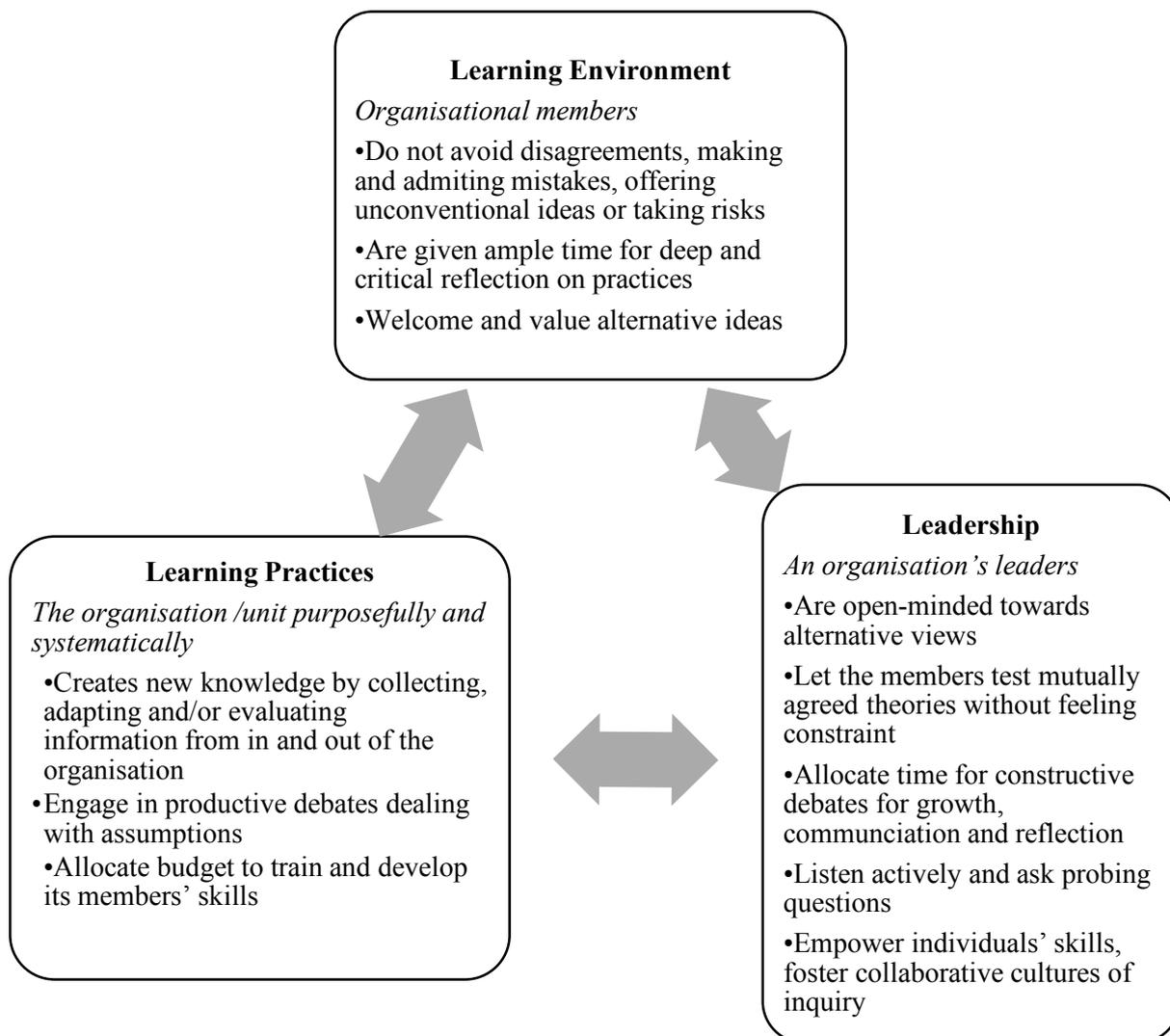


Figure 2.1. Three building blocks of learning organisations (slightly adapted from Garvin, et al., 2008).

### Learning Environment

This main construct was developed considering the value attributed to the context and working atmosphere which could support or hinder individuals' learning in an organisation as there is a correlation between how safe team members feel and how they perform (Argote, 2012; Edmondson, 1999). The time employees allocate for reflection to refer to past experiences, evaluate experiments, learn from mistakes, and benchmark others' practices is also important (Garvin, 1993).

According to Garvin et al. (2008), in LOs, organisational members do not avoid disagreeing with others, making and accepting mistakes or offering unconventional ideas. On the contrary, they know that alternative ideas are valued, and taking risks is encouraged as

growth opportunities. LOs also allocate ample time for reflection to review their practices. Overcoming challenges, making strategic decisions or amending practices are part and parcel of each organisation in a constantly changing world. It is essential for the members of an organisation to reflect deeply and critically, to think freely and offer alternative view points to generate creative and efficient solutions. This means they should not be feeling intimidated when their ideas do not resemble those of the majority of the members in their working environment. They should not feel scared of being ridiculed or ignored when they make mistakes or offer farfetched ideas, which may/may not be useful for all. Most academics work in teams to develop their curricula or assessment rubrics based on the changing needs, and potentially it is possible for them to experiment with new teaching or assessment techniques in teams. In other words, as a faculty member, I could appreciate that members' learning from one another's ideas, experiences and insights increases if they know that their input is valued in a safe environment. Otherwise, the organisation might waste potential growth opportunities. Typically, during the accreditation processes, members of HEIs are encouraged to reflect on their practices and discuss issues to improve these in their own contexts based on their own mission. Hence, free-flowing ideas might help HEIs to enhance their learning opportunity while making connections between their particular experiences and the standards of the EQA agencies.

### **Learning Practices**

The second main construct of the framework is also largely based on previous research on OL as indicated by the developers. The subscales reflect the works of scholars such as Huber (1991), who highlights the process based on experimenting, adaptation, imitation, reflection and/or feedback, Dodgson (1993) and Levitt and March (1988), who refer to the importance of processes and the purposive quest for improvement, and Bapuji and Crossan (2004), who define inter-organisational learning that happens through interactional partnerships between organisations based on the synergy created as a result of their collaboration. As reiterated in the relevant literature (see Garvin, 1993; Senge, 1990; Marquardt, 2011; Marsick & Watkins, 1999a; 2003), without sharing the generated knowledge within the organisation and out of it, it is unlikely for an organisation to survive and thrive in times when change is an inherent aspect of life. LOs constantly evolve in order to adapt to the changes that external pressures demand; however, they tend not to react to them impulsively (Pedler et al., 1989) with limited information or based on assumptions

(Garvin et al., 2008). They collect systematic information and analyse it engaging in productive debates based on systematic feedback and evaluations.

Garvin et al. (2008) suggest that how processes and practices are performed in organisations demonstrate to what extent they operate as LOs. How they collect information from various stakeholders and/or competitors, how much time and budget they allocate for training and education of their members, how they test their assumptions or the efficiency of their new ideas, or the implementation of new products or services, how they engage in productive debates while analysing information to improve practices, and how they transfer the new information they generate both within and outside the institution (Garvin, 1993). All of these practices have clear relevance to the routine activities in HEIs as knowledge generating entities that work in teams. How well or systematically they are done while dealing with many other complexities in academia might depend on various factors. During accreditation processes, potentially these practices may offer learning opportunities to the institutional members and help them systematise these practices. For example, collecting evidence about students' performance and comparing them with other HEIs regularly may offer invaluable insights. Similarly, collecting information from the employees' of the graduates about their skills and knowledge, and evaluating how well these meet the expectations may help the programmes to re-evaluate their course contents. New approaches to teaching or assessing students' learning or any other experimentation for improving other everyday practices such as communication with the public, students, and learning from one another's practices can be experienced during and after the accreditation processes in HEIs.

Although the words and phrases used in Garvin et al.'s (2008) LO framework such as 'product', 'competitor', 'customer', 'prototypes', 'economic/social trends' sounded more suitable to the business world, I interpreted that it is possible to find their counterparts in HE settings. For example, competitors could be interpreted as other colleges within the HEI, or other similar HEIs in the country or in the region. More details on rewording of the concepts in the survey tool will be provided in Chapter 3.

### **Leadership that Reinforces Learning**

Garvin et al. (2008) indicate that "Organizational learning is strongly influenced by the behavior of leaders." (p.5). It is expected from the leaders to model the behavior they would like to observe in the organisation, by being open to alternative views, letting the members test mutually agreed theories without feeling constraint, empowering their skills

and promoting dialogue and constructive debates for growth. The leader behaviour described by Garvin et al. (2008) for the corporates generally corresponds with the expectations of contemporary educational leadership. Especially due to the pressing challenges driven by the market-economy and political agenda, as well as increasing complexities, mirroring corporate sector for academic leaders appears to make sense (McCaffery, 2010). McCaffery (2010) reiterates how leaders in HE should exemplify being ready to improve themselves, being open to disagreements, being prepared to listen actively, being supportive of open communication and discussions, and encouraging leadership of others. For sustainable development of educational institutions, Fullan (2006) advocates it is necessary to foster collaborative cultures of inquiry, self-evaluation and purposeful interaction and communication in and out of the institution with a 'systems thinking' attitude and building capacity of teachers. HEIs are traditionally structured to have multiple leaders, who may potentially display these behaviours, and accreditation processes would allow leaders to exhibit their open-mindedness while leading the debates, allocating resources, creating networks of professionals or empowering various individual's skills for the common goals. Although finding academic leaders equipped with these skills is a challenge in HEIs (Altbach, 2011), the leadership descriptions attributed to LOs were evaluated as suitable to be used in this study.

Two other studies were noted that used Garvin et al.'s (2008) framework in educational settings. One set out to test the validity of the three subscales of the framework in a large urban American school district by pulling out the psychological safety, experimentation and leadership subscales (Higgins, Ishimaru, Holcombe & Fowler, 2012). They modified the subscales by minor rewording or reduction of items. The study concluded that more research is necessary to be more conclusive, and for future research, they recommended holistic approaches to development of schools rather than giving fragmented attention to some aspects of LOs. The second one was a doctoral study which aimed to correlate school leaders' emotional intelligence and their capacity to make the schools function as LOs. The study was conducted in fourteen schools and found that school leaders, who have high levels of emotional intelligence are more likely to create LOs (DeRoberto, 2011). Although these studies were not conducted in HE settings and were more statistically focused, they were considered as attempts to explore the applicability of the framework in educational environments.

Taking the preceding analysis into consideration, the three building blocks of LOs seemed to be more clearly defined and assessable than the elusive LO concept that was mentioned earlier on. Thus, the entire study was guided by Garvin et al.'s (2008) framework. More details on the constructs, subscales and the construct validity of the survey that assesses the elements of this framework will be presented in Chapter 3.

### **Relevant Studies**

Most nations, worldwide, have policies concerning QA in HE, and according to Kezar (2005a) "On many campuses administrators and even faculty are talking about becoming a learning organization ... " (p.7). Even though Kezar said this over ten years ago, I have never been to or heard of any campuses where this is widely discussed. In my case, ZU has gone through many accreditation processes to assure and enhance its quality but it has not aimed to become a learning organisation in its history. Both LO and QA concepts have been widely studied both in the disciplines they originated from, i.e. management, as well as in education and in the other fields where they have been highly popularised.

A great majority of studies focus on the concepts of LO and QA in HE separately. For example, Van Vught and Westerheijden (1994), El-Khawas (2013), Harvey and Newton (2004), Harvey (2004; 2006), Dill (2010), D'Andrea (2007) or Knight (2007) can be seen as frequently cited studies on QA in HEIs. These studies evaluate the negative impacts of QA. For example, Harvey (2004) and Billing (2004) mention that what lies beneath the accreditation of HEIs is control of the sector, of the academics, and of their operations. There are other scholars and researchers who refer to the unfavorable aspects of QA processes, such as the prescriptive nature of them delimiting creativity and leading towards managerialism, control and compliance rather than contribution of it to the development of HEIs (Naidoo, 2013; Lejeune & Vas, 2009). However, studies that underscore these negative aspects also mention the benefits of experiencing QA processes. For example, Harvey (2004; 2006) states that institutions are affected positively thanks to the stages such as self-study, peer-review, feedback and improving performance indicators, which are common in accreditation processes. As a result of his empirical study that investigated the impact of EQA processes on institutional improvements in an Omani institution, Al Maskari (2014) appraises the intervention suggesting that they would not have happened otherwise. In another study that took place in Norway, faculty questioned the cost and benefits of EQA (Stensaker, Langfeldt, Harvey, Huisman & Westerheijden, 2011). Naidoo (2013) refers to the significance of the

relationship between organisational culture and QA, and emphasises that the procedures may lead to transformational changes if they are managed effectively.

As for the studies on LO or OL in the management world, some prominent literature could be attributed to Marquardt (2011), Tsang (1997), Levitt and March (1988), Dodgson (1993), Pedler et al. (1989), Huber (1991), Crossan, Lane and White (1999), Edmondson and Moingeon (2004), Garvin (1993; 2000), Argote (2012), and Nonaka (2007). Broadly speaking, these studies refer to the concepts of OL and LO and what they entail, discuss how learning occurs/does not occur in organisations, complexity of learning in organisations, and why adapting to constant changes is important in organisations. And for the studies on LOs in HEIs, Bui and Baruch (2012), Örtenblad and Koris (2014), Senge (2000) and Bak (2012) could be referred to. Overall, they discuss the relevance of the concept, and attempt to offer ways of increasing effectiveness of HEIs by becoming LOs. They are mainly conceptual and seem to appraise the concept in HEIs although they also acknowledge that many contextual and cultural realities may influence the outcomes.

Dill (1999) analytically evaluates the restructured governance aiming to maintain academic accountability by improving the teaching and learning in twelve HEIs from seven countries using an earlier LO framework (Garvin, 1993). The framework utilised has six components: *systematic problem solving, learning from one's own experience, learning from others' experience, experimentation with new approaches, transferring knowledge, measuring learning*. The HEIs were selected from amongst those that participated in an Institute for Management in Higher Institutions Project, and the analysis is based on the reports provided by the actively-involved internal quality agents from each participating HEI. The HEIs are located mainly in Europe with the exception of three: one from Malaysia and two from Mexico. Although the validity and the objectivity of the cases presented may be disputed, Dill's (1999) paper offers valuable insights in terms of detailed practices that took place while focusing on quality development in these HEIs correlating the findings with Garvin's framework (1993). For example, some accountability practices involve evidence-based approach to solving academic issues, which may cultivate a 'culture of evidence' according to Dill (1999). Also, while HEIs attempt to improve teaching and learning systematically, university-wide coordination, innovative activities and experimentations may take place. Internal knowledge sharing is the least evidenced component in the reports (Dill, 1999), so identifying and arranging platforms to share best-practices in HEIs may be an important managerial manoeuvre in the right direction.

Two empirical studies that brought both accreditation and LO concepts together were identified: Elliott and Goh (2013), conducted their study in four business schools in Canada, and Voolaid and Ehrlich (2013), in 105 business schools in 44 countries from various regions. The former was a qualitative multiple case study, and the latter was quantitative and applied an instrument adapted from Watkins and Marsick's LO questionnaire (2003) to measure the learning rate at business schools (BS). Interestingly, both studies were done in BSs. Elliott and Goh (2013) examined the perceptions of various actors in four Canadian business programmes. Their study suggests that accreditation processes contributed to the OL in three out of the four cases they studied, the positive effects are found to be as a result of the reflective stages such as self assessment of institutional mission, and thanks to the specific focus on improvement of quality based on feedback. This study was conducted qualitatively and collected data from the accreditation related documents and in total 31 interviews from the four BSs. The study primarily focused on the role of the leadership that supports OL in the form of evaluative inquiry, and did not directly utilise the LO framework or a specific diagnostic tool. Voolaid and Ehrlich's (2013) study underlines the correlation between aspects of becoming a learning organisation via accreditation experiences and the GDP of the host nation, which may be a relevant variable. In comparison, it can be said that this study is more extensive than Elliott and Goh's (2013), and it employed a learning organisation survey custom-designed for BSs by the authors. However, the results are based on numerical findings that may disregard contextual nuances. More importantly, the authors were more interested in correlating OL with the GDP of the countries, i.e. the accreditation aspect was much less focused in the paper.

Another relevant study was conducted as a doctoral thesis project in two universities in the U.S.A., and its focus is the self-study stage of the accreditation process. It aims to explore how the knowledge generated during the self-study of the accreditation process could potentially "... lead to systematizing organizational learning structures beyond the context of reaccreditation." (Olson, 2016, p. 1). It is a comparative case study held in one public and one private top-tier large research-intensive universities. One important finding of the study is that once the accreditation period is over, a lack of follow-up procedure was evident other than reactively fixing the problem areas identified by the accreditors. Thus, Olson (2016) concludes that the learning during the self-study process would not be sustainable. When compared to my proposal, the contexts and the identity of the universities are different. As mine is utilising a certain LO framework and attempts to explore the

situation considering the whole accreditation process, it may generate additional operational details.

Correlating the EQA experiences to aspects of LOs and discussing their impact on HEIs are under-researched areas (Kezar, 2005a; Elliott & Goh, 2013; Lejeune & Vas, 2009), and the common agreement seems to be that more studies are needed to enhance understanding in the field. My study may not only generate knowledge to offer more insights to the practitioners in HE who wish to know more about the topic, but also it may contribute to the practices of the accrediting bodies. They may contemplate requiring HEIs to work on additional or complementary standards.

### **Research Significance**

For HEIs, becoming LOs is a rather new concept in the region where ZU operates. In general, the studies that investigate the relationship between the influence of external accreditation processes and the concept of becoming a learning organisation, are scarce. Some studies were conducted in educational settings that explore the relevance and applicability of LO concept. Very few studies were identified that focus on the impact of accreditation on becoming a learning organisation, and they were done in BSs or focused on just one aspect of accreditation. Thus, my study which aims to look at the institution considering all of the aspects of LOs may be considered as an attempt to create a foundational investigation.

The prescriptive aspect of EQA processes may enhance institutional practices via error-corrections, benchmarking, and transactional changes whereas for deeper learning, the institution should experience collective decision-making, collaboration and reflective practices (Kezar, 2005a; Elliott & Goh, 2013). Both kinds of learning may have been experienced through EQA processes at ZU. However, some areas such as the students' educational, familial and social backgrounds, the influence of English medium instruction and the multicultural faculty with various cultural backgrounds should be taken into account for a fairer and deeper understanding of the accreditation process. This approach to it may help ZU to maintain the sustainability of the learning in the institution.

This study could potentially raise awareness of the members and leaders in my workplace, and allow them to reflect on their current perceptions of their environment, practices and leadership issues. When some recommendations have been made as a result of the study, the researcher may be invited to share the findings with the academic leaders at

ZU. Following that, some colleges may consider the recommendations noteworthy and make some amendments. Secondly, when the study becomes a publishable doctoral thesis, it might contribute to the general academic community and the HE literature especially as a study that correlates EQA and LO. This could happen at international, regional and/or local academic conferences where the thesis and possible implications in the field could be presented. As the researcher is an avid conference presenter, disseminating the knowledge this way should be possible. When the research results are disseminated, the knowledge generated may be useful to some institutions that are planning on getting accredited, and who may consider how LO aspect could be activated while going through the QA processes for a more sustainable quality enhancement. Similarly, the results might give insights to the accrediting bodies that might wish to amend their standards to promote becoming a learning organisation as well as assuring quality.

### **Conclusion**

The preceding literature review attempted to argue that accreditation processes could potentially be utilised to instill useful learning habits in HEIs that are also bidding to become accredited. This way, what has been achieved could be more sustainable and HEIs may use the practices when introduced to new challenges. In order to investigate the possibility, ZU presented an ideal platform as an institution that has experienced many rigorous QA processes from several US-Based accrediting agencies. Thus, the main RQ for this thesis was formulated: *“How have US-Based external quality assurance processes influenced Zayed University in becoming a learning organisation?”*

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter starts with an overview of the researcher's ontological and epistemological perspective which has had an impact on the choice of inquiry. However, its main aim is to summarise the research design of the study based on the literature review provided in Chapter 2 to inquire into the main RQ: *How have US-Based external quality assurance processes influenced Zayed University in becoming a learning organisation?*, and four sub-questions, (see below), which directed the methods, and approach to data collection and analysis.

- 1a) What aspects (if any) of the US-Based accreditation criteria relate to the characteristics of LOs as defined in three building blocks (Garvin et al., 2008)?
- 1b) Which of these aspects are addressed in the accreditation-related institutional documents (if any)?
- 2) How do the current perceptions of ZU's college members relate to what is found on the accreditation documents?
- 3) What are the perceptions of people holding different roles in ZU on concepts related to accreditation processes and becoming a learning organisation?
- 4) What are the emergent implications and recommendations that this study could contribute to local, regional and international practitioners and researchers?

### **Researcher's Paradigm**

The practice-based questions created the foundation of the research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Yin, 2008) in my study, and the reason why I wanted to explore this topic reflects my paradigm. To elaborate, as a practitioner researcher, I believe that seeking some kind of 'ultimate truth' in educational settings would not be the best investment of time for researchers since numerous variables and constant changes impact on social practices (Yates, 2004). Qualitative inquiry, which analyses social contexts in-depth resonates better with my beliefs. However, I also commend the methods which utilise quantitative inquiry, allowing researchers to receive data from larger samples in a shorter space of time. Arguably, the ultimate goal of researchers is to contribute to knowledge in their field effectively. Thus, researchers, who hold purist positions disregarding what multiple tools might offer to achieve that aim, may also be ignoring practical solutions to the weaknesses of each paradigm (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Bryman, 2009).

Scholarly practitioners tend to inquire into a problem/issue in their own context based on their professional knowledge, critical reflection and the value they attribute to the focus of interest with the aim of creating a theory for improvement or a change of the practice in question (Fox, Martin, & Green, 2007; Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Although the focus of this study does not directly relate to my role in the context, I decided to do this research because of its significance in HE, the suitability of the context, the availability of the resources and its prospective contribution to my professional career path. I aimed to generate knowledge in my workplace that may contribute to improvements as well as to my professional aims. My intention was to present my overall argument with greater confidence basing it on multiple sources of evidence, which could be derived from mixed-methodology.

### **Researcher's Approach**

The preceding discussion on my viewpoints are associated with pragmatism, which focuses on what works to answer the RQs (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Bryman, 2009; Tedlie & Tashakkori, 2011), and offers practical solutions to real-life problems (Creswell, 2012). My approach in this study resonates well with the major aspects of pragmatism as it is practice-based, action-oriented, and endorses methodological eclecticism (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). However, the conceptual frame of the RQs leads to an interpretive approach because essentially, they aim "... to understand the subjective world of human experience." (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 17). More specifically, while selecting, screening and analysing the accreditation documents, the researcher's interpretation of the LO concept was paramount to correlate it with the aspects of QA. Similarly, recruiting and evaluating various people's perceptions also required a substantial amount of interpretation. The sub-questions were formed with the intention of integrating descriptive, evaluative and perception-based information in order to discuss and comment on the context as comprehensively as possible. This plan associates with the constructivist paradigm, i.e. when researchers co-construct meaning in an actual setting appreciating multiple realities in their social contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 2008).

In summary, while generating knowledge for this research, I attempted to amalgamate my ontological belief of multiple realities while explaining social situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) combined with the responsibility of minimising the potential bias and maximising the rigour of my study by utilising mixed-methodology. I also attempted to address the complexities of the inquiry with a complete and enhanced understanding that I

could not have done with either qualitative or quantitative methods in isolation (Lund, 2012). Methodological pragmatism allowed me to include multiple realities, viewpoints and perceptions, and helped me synthesise and deepen my understanding of the phenomena while generating practice-based knowledge, with increased confidence (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Additionally, triangulating with convergent numerical and verbal data sources (Creswell, 2009) strengthened the rationale behind the interview questions, and helped me to get breadth and depth of viewpoints, which then led me to make stronger arguments as a result of the study. In particular, the social situation in a single institution in relation to its commitment to QA was to be described in-depth as interpreted and constructed in light of the research findings. The prior argument led me to an interpretive single case study design, the suitability of which will be further justified in the following section.

### **Case Study**

Robson and McCartan (2016) state that “Case study is a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence.” (p. 150). Typically, in case studies researchers collect data systematically in order to understand the phenomena in-depth, capturing relevant perceptions of various actors and other details of the case (Yin, 2008). My study was based on the experiences of real people in a certain context, and I intended to examine a phenomenon within clear boundaries seeking answers to *how* and *what* questions (Yin, 2008; Cohen et al., 2011). The study was planned to take place in my workplace as a single unit for three main reasons and they are interconnected: the RQ(s), the accessibility of evidence and the time frame. I intended to look into the influence of institutional accreditation processes on the institution as a whole as the unit of analysis.

As mentioned previously, five of Zayed University’s (ZU) colleges hold US-Based specialised accreditation. In order to intensify my understanding of the phenomena in this single case study, I also looked into the processes in two of these colleges. Mainly because exploring only one college closely would have probably caused apprehension creating inadvertent speculations within and outside the unit due to the political nature of the inquiry, which looks into aspects of leadership, internal environment and practices. Also, focusing on just one college may not have provided sufficient data. However, enquiring into the practices of five colleges would have generated an overwhelming amount of data to handle considering the time frame. While choosing which two colleges to look into, I used only two broad

criteria: a) having completed the accreditation process conducted by a specialised US-Based accrediting body b) the permanency of the college deans. The former was directly related to the RQs, and the latter made it easier to gain necessary permissions and perhaps also reduced the confounding variables caused by changes of leadership.

### **A Specific Learning Organisation Framework**

The study was structured on a specific framework that describes LOs under three building blocks (Garvin et al., 2008). The first building block reflects the ideal environmental characteristics in a work place, which should support individuals' learning. The environment should be conducive for the individual members to express their views, problems, controversial ideas freely without fear of making mistakes, or being intimidated. Taking risks and making explorations for more innovative outcomes should be encouraged and time should be allocated to self-reflection. The second building block lists organisational practices and processes that should take place in LOs. Systematic processes should be instituted to collect and disseminate information, to develop employees' skills, to engage in productive discussions to identify and solve problems or generate new learning. The third building block is associated with leadership that supports learning in the organisation. Allocating time for reflection, promoting active questioning and welcoming diverse opinions, modelling open-mindedness while identifying and solving problems, and generating knowledge are some ideal characteristics of leaders in LOs.

As elaborated in the literature review, this theoretical framework was chosen because of its practice-mindedness that would allow the assessment of the organisational context at ZU, as well as the aspects of accreditation processes that might/might not promote characteristics of LOs. The framework also introduces a diagnostic tool that measures to what extent an organisation is a learning organisation in the form of a survey (Garvin et al., n.d.) that could be taken online. Thus, primarily Garvin et al.'s (2008) LO framework, combined with the insights gained from the prominent LO literature guided the data analysis. This approach resonates with the research literature that states when a researcher's conceptual framework is planned, the analytical pathway that guides the data analysis becomes clearer (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013).

### **Data Collection, Order and Analysis**

The study employed three main data collection methods, in this order: documentary analysis, a survey and semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which offered multiple lenses, and a high level of reliability (Cohen et al., 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011), and the findings were used to respond to the main RQ. Each data collection method intended to generate data with the first three corresponding to sub-questions so as to complement each other, and eventually informed my overall argument. Atkinson and Coffey (2004) warn researchers that documents are not "... transparent representation of organisational routines, decision-making processes, ..." (p. 58) as they are conventionally designed for a specific audience. Thus, forming opinions based entirely upon the analysis of them would have limited my response to the main RQ. Conversely, surveys alone could provide results which would have given merely a general understanding of a larger sample's perceptions, which would have needed further corroboration (Creswell, 2009). For the first two stages, the aim was to gain a full enough understanding, and to identify what would need further exploration during the interview. While interviews are great sources to explore unclear issues in-depth, they may represent subjective viewpoints, unintentional inaccuracies or slips (Yin, 2008; Silverman, 2010). However, synthesising all the findings from these distinct data sources, it was my hope to refine my thoughts and make my knowledge claims more confidently. Therefore, either the survey stage or the documentary analysis could have been the initial stage, or they could have worked simultaneously. However, when the researcher was eligible to collect secure institutional documents, it was nearly the end of the academic year. Thus, the summer of 2016 was allocated to the analysis of the documents, to follow up with the survey when the new academic year started. Following are the further details about the data collection methods used in this study.

### **Documentary Analysis**

Case studies tell a real-life story based on real life evidence, which may be the reason why it is common for case studies to use documentary analysis as one of the major tools for inquiry (Cohen et al., 2011). Data is collected from documents that are not specifically created for or as a product of the study (Yin, 2008), which makes them neutral with respect to the research. The first sub-question of the research aimed to collect evidence on QA processes and the corresponding aspects of the criteria and the characteristics of LOs. Since

none of these documents were produced considering aspects of LOs, they could serve as reliable sources of real-life evidence.

**Document selection.** A strong case study provides evidence in relation to its purpose and the RQ(s) it poses, and it is the researchers' duty to have a solid understanding of the issues they are studying (Yin, 2008). Keeping this principle in mind, both publicly accessible and institutionally kept accreditation documents were scrutinised. Namely, the analysed documents were related with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), i.e. ZU's institutional accrediting body, and with The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC), i.e., the accrediting bodies of the two selected colleges. Documents that were thought to provide evidence of LO characteristics as part of the accreditation processes were grouped as general and specific documents, of which details are described below:

**General accreditation documents.** It is a common practice for accrediting bodies to publicise their mission, policies, guidelines, requirements and accreditation procedures via their websites online. These documents include the missions, values, and other relevant details that characterise the principles of the accrediting bodies for publicising purposes. In order to pinpoint commonalities between the required standards for candidate institutions and the aspects of LOs, the websites of the three accrediting bodies were visited. The ones that summarise the principles of the accrediting bodies, lists of the standards, accreditation procedures, and other relevant information from the links of [MSCHE](#), [NCATE](#) and [ACEJMC's main](#) websites were selected to be analysed (Table 3.1). Documents such as those related to travel costs, fees, complaints, guidelines for degrees and credit hours were excluded from the analysis because they do not directly relate to the main purpose of this analysis. The titles of the selected documents reflect the terminology used by the respective accrediting bodies, hence they may vary. However, the contents of the documents can essentially be grouped in two main categories: a) information on what quality/accreditation means in the context of HE, general mission and principles of the accrediting body, required standards from the candidate institutions and b) procedural information (Table 3.1). The selected documents in this category were named as ACC-General documents.

*Table 3.1*  
Selected Accreditation-General (ACC-General) Documents

Subject of document	Accrediting body		
	MSCHE	NCATE	ACEJMC
Overarching principles of accreditation in HEIs	1. Characteristics of excellence in higher education (MSCHE, 2011)	1. NCATE constitution (NCATE, 2006)	1. The nature of accreditation (ACEJMC, n.d.)
	2. Good practice for Accrediting in Higher Education (MSCHE, 2012a)	2. NCATE mission (NCATE, n.d.)	2. Values, objectives, and purposes of accreditation in journalism and mass communication s
	3. Regional Accreditation and Student Learning: Principles for Good Practices (MSCHE, 2003)	3. NCATE strategic goals and objectives and current issues (NCATE, 2007)	3. (ACEJMC, n.d.)
	4. Policies, guidelines, procedures & best practices (MSCHE, 2005)	4. NCATE policies: Experimentation innovation (NCATE, 2017a)	4. ACEJMC bylaws (ACEJMC, 2017a)
	5. Accreditation Actions (MSCHE, 2016)	5. Board of examiners off-site review: Continuous improvement pathway (NCATE, 2013a)	5. Principles of accreditation (ACEJMC, 2017b)
Procedural Information	1. Cycle and timing of accreditation review (MSCHE, 2012b)	1. Institutional report for first accreditation: continuous improvement pathway (NCATE, 2013b)	1. Eligibility for accreditation (ACEJMC, n.d.)
	2. Institutional responsibilities in the accreditation process (MSCHE, 2014a)	2. Preconditions and documentation (NCATE, 2009)	2. Initiating the process (ACEJMC, 2017c)
	3. Political intervention in education (MSCHE, 2004)	3. The visit template (NCATE, 2017b)	
	4. Public communication in the accrediting process (MSCHE, 2014b)		

*ZU-Specific accreditation documents.* What is publicly available tells one side of the story, whereas documents such as the self-study reports, or institutionally kept evaluation reports received from the accrediting bodies may tell another. Having received the necessary ethical clearance, the second bulk of documents was assessed, which consist mainly of the secure documents kept by the institution and the two colleges. Although the naming of the documents differs based on the terminology used by the respective accrediting body, they could be grouped in two broad areas: a) documents such as self-study reports guided by the standards of the respective accrediting bodies, monitoring and progress reports produced by ZU, and b) evaluation reports produced by the accrediting bodies (Table 3.2). As ZU has completed two cycles of accreditation processes institutionally, documents such as a monitoring report and a progress report are available, whereas the two selected colleges did not have these reports in May 2016 when the documents were obtained, since they had not yet completed a second cycle of accreditation. Documents collected in this category were named as ZU-Specific documents, which were shared by the relevant parties as secure files and saved with password protection. These include the reports kept institutionally and by the relevant colleges' administration and contained confidential information. Securely shared documents were also screened critically keeping the RQ in mind.

Table 3.2  
Selected ZU-Specific Accreditation Documents

Type of documents	Accrediting body		
	MSCHE	NCATE	ACEJMC
Documents produced by Zayed University (Self-study, monitoring, progress reports)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Self-study, Zayed University, (2008)*</li> <li>2. Self-study, Zayed University, (2013)*</li> <li>3. Monitoring report (September 2014)***</li> <li>4. Progress report (April 2016)***</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Self-study (2013)***</li> <li>2. Self-study addendum***</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Standard 1: Mission, governance and administration***</li> <li>2. Standard 2: Curriculum and instruction***</li> <li>3. Standard 3: Diversity and inclusiveness***</li> <li>4. Standard 4: Full-time and part-time faculty***</li> <li>5. Standard 5: Scholarship: research, creative and professional activity***</li> <li>6. Standard 6: Student services***</li> <li>7. Standard 7: Resources, facilities and equipment***</li> <li>8. Standard 8: Professional and public service***</li> <li>9. Standard 9: Assessment of learning outcomes***</li> </ol>
Reports presented by the accrediting bodies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. MSCHE evaluation team report (April 2013)***</li> <li>2. Final team report (September 2014)***</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Off-site report (2013)***</li> <li>2. Board of Examiners' report (2013)***</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 2014-2015 Site team report (ACEJMC, 2015)**</li> </ol>

\*Document is open to public access on the ZU's website.

\*\*Document is open to public access on ACEJMC's website.

\*\*\*Confidentially shared documents.

**Analysis.** The screening and selecting stages of the analysis required reading and re-reading the documents by which familiarisation with the contents of the voluminous documents was reached (Cohen et al., 2011; Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O'Connor, & Barnard, 2013). Following the selection of the documents, NVivo<sup>®</sup> Software, which is designed to support researchers with qualitative data, was used to manage and code the data

and practically store them for retrieval while interpreting and discussing the findings. Because the LO framework forms the backbone of the entire study, the coding of the documentary analysis was based on the framework and sub-constructs used in the survey, which incorporates three main constructs: learning environment, learning practices and leadership. These main constructs were coded as *parent* nodes, and the sub-constructs of each building block were listed as *child* nodes. For example, when learning environment construct was coded as the *parent* node, psychological safety, difference of opinion, openness to alternative ideas, time for reflection were coded as the *child* nodes. Learning practices construct was coded in the same way. The leadership construct did not include sub-constructs in the survey. However, Garvin et al.'s (2008) work outlines that allocating time for listening to the employees, allocating resources for improvement, empowerment of the employees and encouraging alternative ideas before making decisions are the main leader behaviours that support learning in their organisations. Thus, under leadership *parent* node the concepts of empowerment, time for listening, openness to new ideas and allocation of resources were added as *child* nodes. In short, initial node structure was based on the three main building blocks, and their sub-constructs (see Table 3.3). The same nodes were used while analysing both the ACC-General and ZU-Specific accreditation documents.

*Table 3.3*  
Distribution of NVivo© Nodes

<b>Parent Nodes</b>	<b>Child nodes</b>
Learning environment	Psychological safety Difference of opinion Openness to alternative ideas Time for reflection
Learning practices	Experimentation Analysis Information collection Information transfer Education and training
Leadership	Empowerment Allocating resources Openness to new ideas Time to listen

Once the nodes were specified, all the selected documents were transferred into four different NVivo© projects (one for all the ACC-General documents from the three accrediting bodies, and one for each set of ZU-Specific documents per accrediting body).

Following that, with careful reading of the files, I started to analyse and code them electronically. The software also allows one to see what nodes were attributed to any document at any stage, which is very practical for a project that consists of numerous pages of documents. In all cases, more than one sentence was coded to capture the relevance within its context. This technique proved to be helpful later when the codes were revisited node by node to make interpretations. Otherwise, one sentence or a phrase would not have given sufficient clues when interpreting concepts in documents with hundreds of pages.

During the second round of analysis of the documents, some other potentially relevant topics emerged so they were added as *parent* nodes to each Nvivo© project (See Table 3.4).

### The Learning Organization Survey

The aim to incorporate a survey into the study was to generate data about the current

*Table 3.4*

Additional NVivo© Parent Nodes

<b>General accreditation document (ACC-General documents)</b>	<b>(ZU-Specific accreditation documents)</b>
Wholeness/systems thinking	Wholeness/systems thinking
(Continuous) improvement	(Continuous) improvement
Compliance/evidence	Compliance/evidence
	National aims
	U.S./Western norms

perceptions of ZU's college members in relation to it being a learning organisation. Garvin et al.'s (2008) diagnostic tool, which was originally designed for the business world, in order to measure aspects of LOs in a certain organisational unit seemed to be suitable to apply in a HE setting with minor lexical adjustments. As for the validity of the publicly accessible Learning Organization Survey (LOS, Garvin et al., n.d.), the developers, i.e. D.A. Garvin and A. Edmondson were consulted (personal communication, March 10, 2015). The scholars sent their working paper explaining how the items were validated (Gino, Edmondson, & Garvin, unpublished manuscript) on the same day.

LOS (Garvin et al., n.d.) employs a 7-Point rating scale from highly inaccurate (1) to highly accurate (7) for diagnosing the unit's strengths and weaknesses for the first two main constructs, which correlate with the first (learning environment) and second (learning processes) building blocks of LOs. The third building block (leadership) associates with

the third construct, and it uses a 5-point scale from never (1) to always (5). LOS includes 13 reverse score statements in total. Though one needs to be cautious of their limitations, rating scales offer "... a degree of sensitivity and differentiation of response while generating numbers." (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 386) and may lead to greater reliability and the complexity necessary for measuring perceptions, attitudes, and opinions (Cohen et al., 2011; Spector, 1992). These aspects resonate with the aims of the study. It was a validated survey, it used a practice-based LO framework, the developers granted permission to use it, the wording of the survey was applicable in a higher education institution, and it aimed at capturing perceptions, attitudes and opinions of institutional members. Consequently, as this survey met a number of criteria, I implemented the survey and its measurement scale, which are also in the public domain, in my study.

**Survey implementation.** Sending a link to an online survey is a familiar and practical method of collecting data from larger samples (Cohen et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2014). As the population in this study are members of an academic community, and they themselves conduct research, they are aware of the anonymity of online surveys afforded by popular tools such as SurveyMonkey©. The original LOS (Garvin et al., n.d.) has 55 questions in total; block 1 has 18, block 2 has 29 and block 3 has 8 questions. The survey in my study started with two basic required demographic questions, so the numbering had to be 1-57. Table 3.5 summarises the survey information. See Appendix 2 for the survey questions. No other demographic details were asked mainly because the focus of attention was not given to the individuals' perceptions based on the roles they play in their respective units or their professional background in their fields. Rather, the survey aimed to generate data on their overall perceptions on certain aspects of LOs as defined under the constructs and sub-constructs.

Table 3.5  
Summary of Survey Questions

Survey Sections	Questions	Response Choices
<b>Basic Demographics</b>	1- Choose the college you work for during the majority of your time.*	One out of 6 colleges
	2- Workload*	100%, 75%, 50% 25% (one course each term), 10% (one course each term)
Main Constructs	Sub-construct Questions	Rating
Learning environment	3-7: Psychological safety	7-point Likert scale (Highly inaccurate=1 to Highly accurate=7)
	8-11: Appreciation of differences	
	12-15: Openness to new ideas	
Learning practices	16-20: Time for reflection	5-point Likert scale (Never=1 to Always=5)
	21-24: Experimentation	
	25-30: Information collection	
	31-35: Analysis	
Leadership	36-41: Education and training	5-point Likert scale (Never=1 to Always=5)
	42-49: Information transfer	
	50-57	

\*Questions that required answers.  
NOTE: Reverse scored questions: 4, 7, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 33, 35 and 57.

**Survey data collection.** Survey questions from the publicly available platform were re-typed and transferred to SurveyMonkey® in order to collect the responses in an easily accessible online link for the respondents. With the permission of D. A. Garvin (personal conversation, May 26, 2016), I changed the words to make the meaning clearer for educationists: ‘unit’ to ‘college’, ‘customer’ to ‘student’, and I added an example to the word ‘suppliers’ to make the meaning clearer in an educational context. In other words, only minor changes were made to make the instrument more meaningful for people in the context. Nevertheless, as it was modified and planned to use in another field, the survey was piloted (Punch, 2003) with five people from my department, which is excluded from the study, aiming to see whether members of an academic unit could make sense of the questions. Based on their feedback, brief explanations were added referring to some familiar products or concepts in the cover letter sent to the deans, which were forwarded to the college members. For example, when considering the words products or services, colleagues at ZU could refer to the products such

as Blackboard Analytics<sup>®</sup> and CurricuNet<sup>®</sup>, which are commonly used in the context. As for the word ‘competitors’, they were recommended to consider other colleges in and out of our institution, the country, region or in the world, and for the concepts such as economic and technological trends, examples of familiar concepts such as innovation, 21st century skills, employability, Emiratisation were given.

During the first three weeks of Fall 2016 academic year, appointments were made with the (acting)deans of each degree granting college at ZU. At the meetings, the thesis focus was described, the survey was introduced and their endorsement while sending the online link to their colleagues via internal email in order to increase participation was requested. Even though the survey included fairly political and evaluative questions, all the deans supported the research purpose at varying degrees of interest. For example, some thought that the survey would help the college to reflect on their practices, others only checked if the project had the necessary ethical approval. Clear deadlines to complete the survey were given to the colleges, reminders were sent twice before closing the survey in early September. While determining the sample size, due to the political nature of the survey questions, reaching 30-35% response rate seemed to be an acceptable level to make meaningful decisions.

**Survey data analysis.** Data were exported from SurveyMonkey<sup>®</sup> into an excel sheet, then they were converted from excel to Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19.0 (IBM Corp. Released 2010. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 19.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.) with the help of a statistician. Data were formatted in numeric form, labelled and coded in variable view of SPSS<sup>®</sup>. Additional variables were created by recoding the survey items that needed to be reverse scored. Frequency tables were produced and examined to understand the data and to verify accuracy of variable coding. For the three main constructs, three overall summative scales were computed in SPSS<sup>®</sup>. Additionally, for each of the 9 sub-constructs, summative scales were computed and produced in the SPSS<sup>®</sup> project file.

Each summative scale was calculated by totalling all numeric scale responses for each respondent across all items relevant to a particular main construct or sub-construct then dividing by the total number of items for that measure. Furthermore, for each of the 12 total rating scales that were evaluated, Cronbach Alpha reliability measures were produced in SPSS<sup>®</sup>. The results were examined to understand the overall reliability score of each summative scale. That was done to check internal consistency and correlation within items of

a rating scale and to identify any items reducing reliability and any scales that had questionable reliability.

Following this stage of statistical analysis, and in order to further analyse the reliability of the constructs and sub-constructs, normality tests were conducted to check if the scores were normally distributed. Finally, scale scores were calculated as recommended in Garvin et al. (2008), so as to compare them with the benchmarks on the developers' baseline data. As briefly introduced in the literature review, the baseline data is a product of the developers' extensive research conducted in various industries and individual or average scores of units can be uploaded to compare their results with the others to see where their strengths and weaknesses tend to appear (Garvin et al., 2008).

The survey collected data from the six colleges of ZU. Even though the respondents were required to answer what college they are assigned to, the aim was to gather data from the institution as a whole. It also allowed the researcher to have an overall understanding of the perceptions in the two selected colleges. The results were largely interpreted qualitatively with the main purpose of generating interview questions in combination with the findings from the previous stage. This aim is consistent with the designers', who advise that the results should promote dialogue not to compare units and/or appraise or criticise any (Garvin et al., 2008).

### **Semi-structured, In-Depth Interviews**

The findings based on the documentary analysis and the survey results, both served as bases to formulate the questions for the last stage of this case study inquiry. The purpose of this stage was to substantiate and enhance the previous findings with sufficient data gathered from some pertinent individuals' perceptions and opinions on the phenomena, i.e. the hypothesised influence of external international accreditation processes on a higher education institution's becoming a learning organisation. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured in order to allow both the theoretical framework to guide the key topics, and at the same time, give enough flexibility for the interviewees to help generate new knowledge (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003).

**Approach.** Kvale (2007) mentioned it should be sensible to ask individuals about their thoughts and insights if somebody wants to know more about their experiences because "Conversation is a basic mode of human interaction" (p.1). In case study inquiries, interviews are frequently used (Yin, 2008). This must be because most case studies provide thick

descriptions of situations in which human experiences are involved, and the insights about these experiences gained from relevant people seem to be essential (Yin, 2008). Naturally, the conversation for understanding a mutually interesting issue for research could not be the same as in an ordinary exchange of ideas or experiences (Legard et al., 2003). Kvale (2008) uses the *miner* and *traveller* metaphors to describe the role of the interviewer indicating the former as the representative of a positivist approach to knowledge by digging to gather the truth from the minds of the interviewees, and the latter as someone who mutually constructs knowledge socially as perceived by the post-positivists. Silverman (2010) also introduces a similar dualistic description to the role of interviewers. My approach to the interviews I conducted, however, was somewhere in the middle of these approaches. That is, on the one hand, I theoretically framed the structure to enhance my understanding from the previous stages based on the individuals' experiences, and on the other I attempted to let the conversations flow to unearth unexpected insights. This resonates with the *narrative* approach, which treats the interviewer and the interviewee as generators of "... the plausible accounts of the world." (Silverman, 2010, p.225) or their "... narrative versions of the social world" (Miller & Glassner, 2004, p. 132).

A qualitative organisational interview structure was employed to respond to the RQs posed by an insider researcher (Cassell, 2009). Both the interviewer and the interviewees were individuals who have had experiences within the institution, which made the conversations become interactional exchanges of interpreted realities, or "intersubjective" (cited from Liang in Cohen et al., 2011, p. 409). Essentially, LO theory guided the structure of the in-depth interviews, yet they were unavoidably interactional (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004; Legard et al., 2003) and involved interpersonal transactions (Cohen et al., 2011). As a qualitative interview technique in which the interviewee and the interviewer co-construct the meaning, interaction and active inclusion of the researcher should not be unexpected (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004).

**Sampling and recruitment.** Final conclusions related to the main RQ were to be made with the new understanding gathered at this last data collection stage. Therefore, it was important to find respondents who could comment on both past experiences during the accreditation processes and the current practices to comment on the hypothesised influence. Also, people's levels of inclusion and participation in the accreditation processes might affect their perceptions as the literature underscores this (Trullen & Rodríguez, 2013; Elliot & Goh, 2013). Hence, non-probability purposive sampling would be the most suited to my aims, i.e.

interviewees were hand-picked based on the roles they played in their units and in the institution (Cohen et al., 2011). Therefore, I selected and approached a mixture of people. Some of them were thought to be knowledgeable about the past practices related to the accreditation processes, having been fully engaged in them, some were partially engaged in them, and some were recruited after the initial processes had been completed. It was relevant to consult with the people who had undertaken administrative staff member roles during the accreditation processes, and those who have held higher-administrative positions. And for each role, two possible candidates were contacted: two higher-administrators, two faculty members who were recruited after the accreditation processes were completed, two faculty members and two administrators who were heavily involved in the processes, and two faculty members who have been partially involved in them, i.e. in total ten individuals were interviewed.

Deans of the two selected colleges were already informed about the interview stage of the inquiry when approached for the documentary analysis and the survey stages. Since the beginning of the research, being an insider, and regularly seeking support from the deans and the faculty members, helped me establish particular familiarity and rapport within the institution. That was especially the case with those on the Dubai campus where I am employed. Fortunately, most of the people had roles on both campuses. In addition, conducting the inquiry in an academic environment had numerous benefits. For example, 80% of the interviewees do research themselves, and are familiar with the ethical procedures, audio-recording of interviews and the challenges of being a researcher. The other 20% were also familiar with the processes by working in an academic institution. Therefore, all of the people that were contacted agreed to be interviewed without any noteworthy hesitation.

To maintain anonymity, interviewees were designated pseudonyms. Table 3.6 shows the roles of the interviewees and the pseudonyms used while analysing the data.

*Table 3.6*

## Interviewees' Roles and Pseudonyms

<b>Interviewees' roles</b>	<b>Pseudonyms</b>
Faculty (recruited after accreditation)	S1
Faculty (heavily involved)	S2
Higher administrator (heavily involved)	S3
Faculty (recruited after accreditation)	S4
Administrative staff (heavily involved)	S5
Administrative staff (heavily involved)	S6
Faculty (partially involved)	S7
Faculty (partially involved)	S8
Faculty (heavily involved)	S9
Higher administrator (heavily involved)	S10

Eight female and two male interviewees from various academic, cultural and professional backgrounds were interviewed. Their ages range from early 30s to mid 60s. They were from 8 different countries. English was the first language for half of them, the other half spoke English fluently as a second language. Questions were understood clearly apart from the ones about the topic of 'underlying assumptions', then some exemplification had to be offered. The very first interview was conducted with a person who was known more closely than the others. As the flow of the first interview went well and S1's comments on the intelligibility of the questions were positive, no change was implemented to the original questions, and the transcribed data was kept as part of the study. Thanks to this round though, more caution was given to the questions under the 'underlying assumptions' topic.

**Data collection.** Ten individuals holding different but equally relevant perspectives were invited to the interviews in person. The scheduling was arranged based on mutually agreed time slots. Interviews lasted between 24 and 56 minutes. In total 403 minutes of data was audio-recorded, transcribed, and transcripts were given to the interviewees for their confirmation. All the interviewees were held between November 27, and December 14, 2016, except for one that had to be done after the winter break on January 10, 2017. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face except for one, which had to be done on Skype<sup>®</sup> due to the location and availability of the interviewee. All the interviews were conducted in the private offices of the interviewees except for two, one of which was held in my private office and the other one in our separate homes on Skype<sup>®</sup> due to the interviewees' circumstances. All the interviews were transcribed by myself except for four, which were sent to a commercial firm to access the results faster. Data was transcribed near-verbatim, i.e. ignoring pauses, minor repetitions, false starts, sighs, some slips, as these linguistic characteristics

were considered to be insignificant in this study. Those that were transcribed by the firm were also re-listened and revised closely by the researcher as it was difficult for outsiders to understand some institutional abbreviations, or concepts related to accreditation and other relevant wording. That was also done with the purpose of being more familiar with the content of the transcriptions as the experience is different from transcribing one's own data. Each interview was transcribed almost immediately after they were conducted. That is, the initial analysis of the data started almost simultaneously, as recommended in Silverman (2010).

**Data management and analysis.** Silverman (2010) proclaims that “An interview is a researcher-provoked way of gathering data.” (p.245). In order to minimise the possible negative effects of Silverman's warning, it is important to keep thinking about the aims of the inquiry (Cohen et al., 2011) and the analytical process (Spencer, Richie, & O'Connor, 2003). Once all the transcriptions were ready, the iterative journey between the data, the theoretical framework and the RQs started. As in the documentary analysis stage, NVivo<sup>®</sup> was used for managing the data, and each transcribed interview file was saved in an NVivo<sup>®</sup> project. This time, the initial nodes were derived from the topics under which the interview questions were asked. However, as a result of re-reading and revisiting the concepts, some other topics emerged and they were defined as new *parent* nodes and/or listed under the existing *parent* nodes as *child* nodes. Table 3.7 shows the nodes used for the analysis. As may be noted, the topics that have direct relevance to the LO concept were kept almost exactly, but other re-occurring and relevant topics had to be added.

One major topic added was the last one coded as the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), which is poignant mainly because ZU historically did not have to go through any national accreditation as a federal HEI until 2014. All the external international accreditation that they have gone through was voluntary. However, because ZU and its colleges were mandated to be accredited by the CAA for the last few years, it has had a major impact on the institutional practices. This new reality has brought a new dimension to the findings in this case study. Focusing only on the external international accreditation in this study was a deliberate choice despite the awareness of CAA's mandated intervention at the time when the study was proposed with an attempt to avoid adding a new complexity into the study. However, as a recent intervention, it has unavoidably penetrated into the findings. The impacts of this will be elaborated in the discussion section.

*Table 3.7*

NVivo© Nodes used for Interview Data

<b>Parent nodes</b>	<b>Child nodes</b>
Decision-making	Empowerment of skills Involvement Leader behaviour
Collegiality	Shared vision
Experimentation	Risk taking and treatment of mistakes
Information	Information collection Analysis of data Information transfer
Reflection	
Underlying assumptions	
Learning process	
Improvements	
Compliance	
CAA (Commission for Academic Accreditation)	
ZU history	

While attributing parts of the text to a particular node, I applied the same strategy as in the documentary analysis, i.e. highlighted a group of sentences to keep the context in mind, instead of selecting words, phrases or isolated sentences. Computerised software facilitates a researcher's analytical activities while going back and forth with the documents; however, it does not do the sifting, ordering, reordering, i.e. the analysis itself, as reiterated in the literature (for example, Kvale, 2008). It is the researcher's job to think, find the links, make judgements and coordinate the analysis in accordance with the research aims. Having coded the transcribed data with the help of NVivo© nodes, several tables were created to see the relationships, to make decisions on the findings by making meaning and selecting significant quotes that represent the point made. First, what each of the interviewees said was summarised based on the codes and other emergent topics were listed. Then, all the texts that were attributed to each node were gathered separately, and read repeatedly going back and forth to the main texts when needed to refresh memory about the context they were uttered in. Then another table for each pair of interviewees holding similar roles (higher administrator, those who have held administrative roles, etc.) was created, and the coded texts from the transcribed documents for each node were pasted under the corresponding interviewee. This was a painstaking but a useful activity to compare what people who have held similar roles said about the same issues. For example, the shortest conversations were done with the people who have held administrative roles in the colleges (S5-26 minutes and S6-32

minutes), and with those who were recruited after the international accreditation period was over (S1-24 minutes and S4-36 minutes). For the former the reasons behind their shorter accounts may be their limited involvement in the curriculum and assessment decisions, whereas for the latter, the shortness of the conversations may be related to their lack of knowledge about the accreditation period. In short, all these analytical exercises helped me to get more and more familiar with what interviewees said on certain matters, compare and contrast the given opinions on similar matters.

Following that, another table was created with the emergent themes and specific evidence from the texts by means of direct quotes and/or by indicating the interviewees who referred to the same concept. The iterative processes pursued seem to resonate with Spencer et al.'s (2003) suggestions on a structured and continuous analysis of the data that should be carried out until the researcher can conceptualise and make sense of the evidence. See appendices for the interview questions (including the probing questions), NVivo<sup>®</sup> parent and child nodes used and the themes as a result of the final analysis (Table 4.11).

### **Data Collection Sequence**

The sequence of the tools used suggests that an order of qualitative, quantitative and qualitative was followed. However, the overall weighting of the study was on the qualitative side (Creswell, 2009) when the data analysis approach was taken into consideration. This choice was mainly because of the nature of the collected data to respond to the RQs. Documents and the transcripts of the interviews were analysed using content analysis technique (Cohen et al., 2011). Coding was based on the LO theoretical framework which directed the choice of topics. Although content analysis technique suggests a qualitative paradigm, the frequency of the topics in the documents were also taken into consideration. For example, while interpreting the data sometimes numerical wording such as 'concept X was identified only once' or 'concept Y was identified 57 times' was used. The survey results were initially analysed using quantitative techniques considering averages, mean scores, and percentages. However, the results were also interpreted qualitatively. In other words, data typically considered as quantitative was *qualified*, and vice versa. For example, while making sense of the data from the documents and the interviews, the frequency of the topics were taken into consideration. Likewise, while making meaning from the numerical data, qualitative notions such as contextual realities such as leader behaviour and research expectations from faculty were considered. This approach resonates with the strategy

presented in Greene (2007): "... using aspects of the analytical framework of one methodological tradition within the analysis of data from another tradition" (p. 153).

Findings from each of the data collection stage will be elaborated in Chapter 4.

### **Ethical Issues and Access**

My research aimed to explore political and delicate aspects of organisational realities such as leadership and the practices in the working environment, and since I proposed the study, I have been making constant ethical decisions (Oliver, 2003). Before proposing this thesis to the University of Liverpool, provisional approval from ZU was obtained. This was followed by the ethical approval from the University of Liverpool (Appendix 1). Following that, I was granted access to the secure documents such as responses to self-study reports and evaluations after on-site visits that were received from ZU. Secondly, the survey participants were informed about the details of the research purpose and design on the first two pages of the anonymous survey shared online (Appendix 2). Thirdly, the interviewees were presented with the interview protocol and the questions beforehand to give them enough time to read it (Appendix 3). The interviews were conducted after receiving the consent forms (Appendix 4) from each of the interviewees. The data was transcribed mindfully securing the interviewees' identity and roles in the institution, and enough time was given for them to read the transcripts, sign and confirm the accuracy of the representation. The transcribed interviews have been saved on my personal computer in password protected files. The hard copies of the consent forms and the confirmed transcripts have been kept in my locker in my locked office at ZU. All will be destroyed after 5 years.

My insider role at ZU created a lot of advantages in terms of accessing data, familiarity with the individuals and the institutional dynamics (Drake & Heath, 2008). Although I had pre-supposed that being an insider might have influenced the interviewees' responses in various ways, I found them very open and honest about the strengths and weaknesses in the colleges. For example, initially I thought that they would have either boasted about the environment and practices in their respective colleges or been defensive of some unfavourable results from the survey based on certain beliefs and possible job security concerns (Cohen et al., 2011). However, the interviewees were rather confident and comfortable during the interviews. This is probably thanks to the non-threatening and non-confrontational conversation environment as well as the seriousness ensured by how confidentiality measures were taken on the consent forms. In addition, my outsider role being

from a unit that was excluded from the study also gave me several advantages. As predicted, I was able to ask questions about leadership or questions about other practices such as decision-making and data collection in the colleges without feeling intimidated.

### **Conclusion**

I designed and conducted this research as an insider doctoral student on a practice-based issue in my own workplace as an interpretive single-case study employing mixed-methodology. I collected my data in three stages of which findings will be recounted in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section will present the findings from the three data collection stages, analyses of which were predominantly based on Garvin et al.'s (2008) LO framework (see the literature review for details). As stated in Chapter 3, the findings are associated with the respective sub-questions to respond to the main RQ.

### **Documentary Analysis**

As explained in Tables 3.1. and 3.2. in Chapter 3, in total 25 general accreditation documents (ACC-General documents), and 20 documents specifically related to ZU's institutional and specialised accreditation that belong to the selected two accredited colleges (ZU-Specific documents) were analysed to find out to what extent aspects of LOs are embodied in them. All the documents were initially coded using the three building blocks of LOs: environment, practices and leadership (Garvin et al., 2008), as described in Chapters 3, and further analysis of recurrent concepts was conducted. Tables are provided in each section with numerical findings; however, the numbers represent only direct references made to the corresponding sub-construct (child nodes). The number of all the references made to the main constructs i.e. the parent nodes (see Table 3.3) are given as notes in the tables.

### **Findings in Relation to the Learning Environment Construct**

Primarily, all the documents were analysed to identify references made to the psychological safety, differences of opinion, openness to alternative ideas, time for reflection, which are the sub-constructs of the learning environment building block of LOs (Garvin et al., 2008).

The most frequently and overtly made references were in relation to self-reflection in both ACC-General (39 times in 13 different documents) and ZU-Specific documents (124 times in 10 different documents). ACC-General documents that summarise the mission, expectations, and the standards of the accrediting bodies consider self-reflection as a significant part of the process, they also highlight the importance of its continuity as a systematic practice for improvement. Thus, they all require it. For example, the MSCHE emphasises the importance of systematic analysis of strengths and weaknesses and a regular self-examination as an indispensable ongoing activity in HEIs. "An effective institution is one in which growth, development, and change are the result of a thoughtful and rational process of self-examination and planning, and one in which such a process is an inherent part

of ongoing activities.” (MSCHE, 2011, p.4). Correspondingly, the awareness raised thanks to self-study and reflection, and how it has led to institutional and/or departmental improvements were reiterated in all of the ZU-Specific documents. For example, the commitment to improvement, and how ZU appreciated the improvements made as a result of reflection while working on the self-study were mentioned repeatedly in ZU’s reports to the MSCHE. “The knowledge gained from the process of self-study has already led to positive changes in some areas and is contributing to plans for further improvements at Zayed University.” (Zayed University, 2008, p.12). This was confirmed by the MSCHE’s reports in which ZU was praised for these commitments and compliance with the standards.

On the other hand, the other three sub-constructs of LOs are not distinctly stated as part of the requirements in the ACC-General documents. The importance placed on the shared governance and exchanging viewpoints amongst constituents could be indicative of the expected kind of leader behaviour in them; however, documents do not always specifically or as frequently refer to the environment’s psychological safety, or how leaders should seek alternative views actively. One reference, which may be tenuously linked to the psychological safety of the environment appears in only one of the ZU-Specific documents, which is in the recommendations section of a recent team report received from the MSCHE in 2014, indicating the need to reinforce trust between administration and faculty.

Although not overtly expressed, the decision made to be evaluated by an external accrediting body and getting intensive consultations could be indicative of ZU’s readiness to welcome alternative views. Engaging in and responding to peer evaluation may also suggest openness to new ideas. Evidence of collaboration within ZU was presented in all of the relevant ZU-Specific documents as well as with collaborators from other institutions and professionals, which may also be interpreted as openness to new ideas to enhance existing programmes, to develop new programmes, and communication links.

In summary, for the learning environment construct of LOs, both ACC-General and ZU-Specific accreditation documents include references to the vital role of self-reflection on practices for assuring quality and continuous improvement. Specific references to the environment when/if conflicts occur, or how safe individuals feel to introduce conflicting ideas or how contradictory ideas were treated were identified neither in ZU-Specific nor ACC-General documents (Table 4.1).

*Table 4.1*

Breakdown of References for the Learning Environment Construct\*

<b>Learning environment main construct</b>	<b>ACC-General documents</b>		<b>ZU-Specific documents</b>	
	<b>Number of documents</b>	<b>Number of occurrences</b>	<b>Number of documents</b>	<b>Number of occurrences</b>
Psychological safety	0	0	1	1
Difference of opinion	5	10	1	1
Openness to alternative ideas	9	37	2	4
Time for reflection	10	124	13	39

\*In total, 181 references were identified in 45 documents.

### **Findings in Relation to the Learning Practices Construct**

The second LO construct relates with the specific institutional practices, and consists of five complementary sub-constructs: experimentation, analysis, information collection, information transfer, education and training (Table 4.2).

According to the ACC-General document analysis for this construct, references to the concepts of experimentation (18 times), analysis (29 times), information collection (20 times), information transfer (18 times), and education and training (10 times) were identified. In general, accrediting bodies demand that institutions support their claims in their self-study with evidence and data so that institutions realise their own issues and produce their own solutions. Hence, it is also hoped that the institutions are accustomed to this practice and repeat the process periodically for continuous improvement in congruence with their mission and vision. For example, the MSCHE (2011, p.4) highlights: “An accredited institution uses the results of planning and assessment to maintain, support, and improve its programs and services.” Clearly, making use of data for analysis and improvement is encouraged by the accrediting bodies. ACC-General documents include specific references to the importance of institutional missions, innovation and creative educational experimentation, responsiveness to recent research findings as well as systematic data collection, clear communication with the constituents and knowledge transfer in and out of the institution. Another thing accrediting bodies emphasise is the value of professional development, training and education both for

existing and newly hired faculty. Professional development is regarded as a standard showing the quality of the institution in general accreditation documents, as indicated by the principles of accreditation: “Programs seeking accreditation should develop curricula and instruction that educate faculty and prepare students with the multicultural knowledge, values and skills essential for professional practice.” (ACEJMC, 2017b, parag. 4). On the other hand, details such as how underlying assumptions could be dealt with while analysing data, or whether or not the unit conducts productive debates or details about conflict resolution are not specified in any of the ACC-General documents.

Data informed planning was reiterated in the ZU-Specific accreditation documents related with the MSCHE. Even in the first institutional self-study document prepared for the MSCHE in 2008, one notices that ZU had a tradition of regular programme reviews, which allowed “... colleges and departments to review progress and discuss program results, needed adjustments, and new opportunities with the ZU administration (Zayed University, 2008, p. 15). In fact, ZU believed that the planning development is a process, an important component of which is to collect and evaluate data with the help of the Office of Institutional Research, and included analysis of data in the Zayed University Strategic Planning Guidelines constructed even in December 2001. Efforts of ZU to review programmes were acknowledged in the 2013 evaluation team report after the submission of the self-study. Both NCATE and ACEJMC documents also suggest that the respective colleges systematically collect and analyse data, especially as part of their assessment processes: “Prior to ... the initial NCATE efforts, the unit didn't schedule time to review data in a systematic way. It was done as needed ..., faculty came to appreciate the power of information in making data-based decisions ...” as extracted from the unit’s self-study (p.32). This comment from the self-study illustrates the unit’s perception on the value of collecting data, and it could be attributed to LO’s sub-construct about the systematic data collection from various constituents before making decisions.

References made to information collection and transfer were frequently addressed, 34 and 80 times respectively, in ZU-Specific MSCHE documents. All three sets of documents refer to ZU’s activities for collecting information from the national advisory boards, stakeholder perspectives on the effectiveness of graduate education, consultants and field experts and other data to complete the self-study that were collected from “... focus groups with students, electronic surveys of faculty, staff, and students, and individual interviews with administrators, faculty, and staff.” (Zayed University, 2013, p.11). How the university maintains communication with its constituents such as via the website, the student handbook,

the faculty handbook, social media accounts and other publications were mentioned. Also, as an innovation after the feedback received from the MSCHE, how minutes of key committees are internally published to increase open communication and information transfer was stated (Zayed University, 2013).

Education and training sub-construct is also frequently referred in the MSCHE-related ZU-Specific documents (48 times in 12 documents). For example, research and instruction-related workshops given by the library to the faculty included copyright and open access, information literacy, advanced search skills and library resources as mentioned in the monitoring report in 2014. Orientation and induction sessions to the newly hired faculty conducted by the Human Resources (Zayed University, 2008) and the budget allocated for professional development of the faculty demonstrate that education and training are highly valued at ZU. All of the ZU-Specific accreditation documents refer to the professional development of faculty which is supported by the Centre for Educational Innovation. They also refer to the research incentives given to faculty for transferring knowledge in the form of publication and/or participation in national and international conferences.

*Table 4.2*

Breakdown of References for the Learning Practices Construct\*

<b>Learning practices main construct</b>	<b>ACC-General documents</b>		<b>ZU-Specific documents</b>	
<b>Sub-constructs</b>	<b>Number of documents</b>	<b>Number of references</b>	<b>Number of documents</b>	<b>Number of references</b>
Experimentation	7	18	7	17
Analysis	10	29	6	55
Information collection	4	20	7	34
Information transfer	7	18	9	80
Education and training	6	10	12	48

\*In total, 336 references were identified in 45 documents.

Another finding in the ZU-Specific documents is that accrediting committees made specific recommendations on improvements to collecting and communication of information. The following quote from the 2013 evaluation report is an example of the references made to learning practices construct in the ZU-Specific documents: “Student affairs department might also want to consider articulating program goals more clearly and developing program-

specific learning outcomes just as academic program goals are outlined ...”. Clearly, not all the references were identified only in commendations format. Nevertheless, their existence is relevant to the argument made about the correlation between the characteristics of LOs and QA procedures.

ZU-Specific documents include references to ZU’s commitment to innovation and improvements by including untried approaches repeatedly. For example, they implemented various software for assessment documentation such as TracDat©, or web-based electronic portfolios (Zayed University, 2013) to make the practice better and more transparent. Even though the word ‘experimentation’ has not been articulated overtly, the dedication to improvements and seeing it as a process suggest that practices include some experimentation. The monitoring report also mentions ZU’s strategic goals for 2014-2016 referring to their aim to establish a cutting-edge educational environment that promotes creativity and innovation, which may also suggest ZU’s aspiration for innovative practices.

In short, based on this part of the documentary analysis, main principles of accrediting bodies seem to correlate with the key characteristics of the learning practices in LOs, as interpreted in Garvin et al. (2008). However, the systematic approach reiterated in the framework was not equally emphasised in the ZU-Specific accreditation documents. Further, how data were analysed, how findings or underlying assumptions were discussed and how different views were negotiated were not detailed. While collecting information from different sources was mentioned, information collected from competitors was not mentioned in any of the documents. See Table 4.2 for the summary of the findings.

### **Findings in Relation to the Leadership Construct**

How leaders behave during institutional practices might affect the environment, similarly during the practices leaders’ behaviour might support or hinder the institutional members’ growth, the levels of contributions and desire to experiment. In the ACC-General documents, leadership-related references were made 56 times in 25 documents, and in ZU-Specific documents, this topic was identified 300 times in 20 documents, which underpins the importance of leadership in relation to accreditation. Although leadership construct did not clearly define sub-constructs as in the previous two, it was analysed using four self-generated sub-constructs: empowerment, allocating resources, openness to new ideas and time to listen as explained in Chapter 3.

ACC-General documents do not include particular details related to how leadership should occur in a unit explicitly. For example, how leaders should be actively listening to the

members of the institution, whether they ask probing questions, or empower the individuals are not defined. Presumably, going through accreditation processes requires effective leadership, as it necessitates (re)allocation of resources and time for the preparations and the management of necessary changes. In addition, the MSCHE expects the institution to have a clear mission, goals, and a fair governance structure, which specifies clear roles and responsibilities as well as transparent selection criteria. Candidate HEIs are expected to provide evidence of practices in accordance with the institutional goals and missions, which are based on collegial contribution of various constituents (MSCHE, 2011). The congruence of the goals and the actions to reach them collegially could be correlated with the aspects of LOs presented by the cornerstone of its conceptual framework, i.e. systems thinking (Senge, 1990). Specialised accrediting agencies also emphasise that the units' missions should correspond with the overall mission and goals of the institution. Similarly, evidence of a collegial governance model that promotes insights gained from relevant parties while making decisions is also required.

*Table 4.3*  
Breakdown of References for the Leadership Construct\*

<b>Leadership main construct</b>	<b>ACC-General documents</b>		<b>ZU-Specific documents</b>	
	<b>Number of documents</b>	<b>Number of references</b>	<b>Number of documents</b>	<b>Number of references</b>
<i>Sub-constructs</i>				
Empowerment	1	4	8	22
Resource allocation	1	8	10	29
Openness to new ideas	4	6	12	61
Time to listen	1	1	5	7

\* In total, 356 references were identified in 45 documents.

As for ZU-Specific MSCHE documents, in total 167 items were coded that are found relevant to leadership construct. First of all, the fundamental values of the ZU and its organisational structure that allows constituents to voice their opinions and become part of the decision-making processes were deliberated extensively in ZU's self-study documents. They reiterate ZU's commitment to continuous improvement seeking input while developing strategic plans. Measures taken to increase communication, involvement of the members in the standing committees, and the other initiatives to comply with the MSCHE standards were

also detailed. When the evaluation reports are scrutinised, one notices that ZU was commended for being committed to its mission and goals even though it has gone through major leadership changes and experienced rapid growth and change at national level. The team report of 2016 attributes the success: "... to its leadership, passionate belief and drive for quality exhibited at all levels of the University (administration, faculty, and staff), and a focused institutional dedication to its core vision and mission." (p.6). While commending ZU on the improvements made to enhance its governance practices, evaluation reports also include recommendations and suggestions such as the need to clarify the final decision-making processes, and "... to further develop a culture of shared governance that reinforces trust between administration and faculty" as stated in the team report in 2014. in order to achieve its mission. It is important to note that these suggestions were made based on the interviews conducted with over forty members of the institution representing different disciplines as mentioned in the report.

As for the specialised accrediting bodies, in 14 ZU-Specific documents, references to leadership construct were identified 133 times in total. In the unit's self-study report, many references were made to the faculty engagement in the development of the unit's conceptual framework, and that the college uses a consensus model creating communication between two campuses. These claims were substantiated in NCATE examiners' report, which refers to the unit's "... move towards greater transparency, inclusion of more faculty, opportunities for wider use of monies, and the creation of a decision-making partnership with the college administration." The dean's efforts to develop a model which aims to broaden participation of the faculty in the governance process was also commended in the same report. As for resources, the same document reports that "Numerous sources of funding are made available to support research initiatives, and presentations at conferences are encouraged", (p. 25) and mentions the dean's efforts to support faculty with their needs. ACEJMC team report also clearly and repeatedly praises the effectiveness of the dean and the leadership team for creating collaborative governance, and commends the college for making use of the resources to meet its objectives.

Overall, both ACC-General and ZU-Specific documents promote the collegial governance model for academic leadership, reiterating the need to have clear guidelines for roles and responsibilities congruent to their goals and missions. Therefore, presumably, the expected leader behaviour should entail characteristics that endorse collegiality. However, because essential details about leader behaviour lacked clarity in the documents, further

investigation of it is necessary to reach a better understanding of the case. See Table 4.3 for the summary.

### **Findings in Relation to the Other Relevant Topics**

While scrutinising the documents, some other repeated and significant topics emerged (see Table 4.4). For example, the concept of continuous improvement that is important in LOs was recurrent in the ACC-General documents (47 times in 18 documents). Documents reiterated that the processes are voluntary, and aim to help institutions that pursue quality assessment and quality enhancement as well as to support them to maintain their status. They indicate accreditation is a long, cyclical and collegial process for public accountability and improvement of academic quality. When ZU-Specific documents are analysed, self-study documents repeatedly articulate the dedication of ZU to continuous improvement and professional development substantiating the efforts with evidence (73 times in 9 documents). The reports presented to ZU by the accrediting bodies confirm and commend the achievements, acknowledging the work in progress toward the right direction in some cases. One example of this is the statement from the NCATE examiners' evaluation report, "An area of strength is the professional development component. In many ways it is still a work in progress, but the seriousness that has been given to it is impressive." (p.22).

Another repeated concept (18 times in 8 documents) that may be associated with the systems thinking principle of LOs is that accreditation agencies advise candidate HEIs to consider the standards and requirements as complimentary parts of the whole, rather than separate checklist items to be ticked (MSCHE, 2011). There are other references in that account such as the invitation to monitor the entire degree programmes while making curricular decisions, and indication of how "... plans should be interrelated to ensure that they work synergistically to advance the institution, assessments should also be interrelated." (MSCHE, 2011, p.26). ZU-Specific documents also refer to this concept (7 times in 7 documents); when underlining how curricular coherence was maintained or how ZU's mission and vision steered the activities in the colleges (MSCHE, 2008), and how the practices of ZU are guided considering its cultural, social or religious context, as well as its goals and resources. In other words, accreditation documents invite the HEIs to constantly see the big picture, which is a similar concept to the systems thinking discipline of LOs.

The concept of 'compliance', which has a slightly negative connotation, was repeated in both ACC-General and ZU-Specific documents. Accrediting bodies specifically ask institutions to conform with their predetermined standards and requirements by

demonstrating compelling evidence of relevant practices. ZU-Specific documents underline how ZU appreciates the guidance provided by the MSCHE standards, which assisted the institution during its progress over the years, as in year 2016 progress report. Documents suggest that complying with the standards of the accrediting bodies have given ZU and the respective colleges confidence and guidance rather than being perceived negatively.

On the other hand, ZU-Specific documents refer to the dedication of ZU to provide ‘world-class’ education (Zayed University, 2013, p.8), and 76 references were identified referring to the Western norms. This proclamation was evidenced by the organisational structure and governance systems, outcome-based programmes and assessment structure reinforcing bilingual communication and critical thinking skills that are comparable to international counterparts, faculty and academic leaders with Western experience and background, modern libraries and other technological and physical resources. That is, it seems that ZU has attempted to align the national needs and cultural realities with mainly Western and more specifically American educational values, which was another frequently encountered topic in ZU-Specific documents, i.e. national aims. It may be important to note that US-Based accrediting agencies are founded to serve regionally in the U.S.A., i.e. they were not originally designed to evaluate HEIs internationally. While ZU acknowledges its core role as building the nation’s future leaders equipped with necessary skills and knowledge, it also repeatedly mentions how it was built based on the standards of American accrediting agencies. This may be an interesting point for the US-Based accrediting agencies to evaluate an institution, which modelled their standards in a context in the Arabian Gulf. An interesting comment of a faculty member which was included in the on-site evaluation report (ACEJMC, 2015) may support this viewpoint:

We teach our students to accept other points of view because we see the madness in the region. We are opening their eyes. We are helping them see things that they cannot see elsewhere. We are teaching them objectivity. If this college does not move forward and get the support we need, it will affect the U.A.E. because we are making a huge difference here. (p.12).

*Table 4.4*  
Breakdown of References for Other Relevant Topics\*

<b>Other relevant topics</b>	<b>ACC-General Documents</b>		<b>ZU-Specific Documents</b>	
	<b>Number of documents</b>	<b>Number of references</b>	<b>Number of documents</b>	<b>Number of references</b>
Continuous improvement/quality	18	47	9	73
Systems thinking	8	18	7	7
Compliance	8	19	7	43
Dedication to Western norms	N/A	N/A	11	76
National aims	N/A	N/A	10	66

In total, 349 references were identified in 45 documents.

### Summary

These findings created a sufficient background about what references to typical characteristics of LOs could be traced in ACC-General and ZU-Specific documents before comparing them with the current perceptions of the individuals received from the survey results in the next stage. This analysis also suggested some key areas, such as the psychological safety of the environment, or leader behaviour during decision-making processes, that could be explored further at the interview stage of the research. Additional inquiry will also be useful to capture some important nuances that the documented accounts might not include due to the story they tell their direct audience (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004).

### The Learning Organization Survey

The second set of data for this study was collected by applying an online survey in order to diagnose the current perceptions of ZU's members in relation to the aspects of LOs. The details of the survey (Appendix 2) and how it was applied and analysed were given in chapter 3. Below are the results of the analysis.

### Survey Results

An online link to the survey was sent to 300 potential respondents, and it was responded to by 103 individuals from six different colleges (i.e. 34% response rate, which was considered to be acceptable). In order to measure the reliability of the three main constructs and nine sub-constructs, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to measure the internal

consistency of the survey. Reliability is interpreted between 0.0 and 1.00, and a measure of at least .70 and higher is considered to indicate an acceptable and strong reliability for a summative scale, i.e. the closer a scale is to 1.00 the stronger it is (Cohen et al., 2011; Ravid, 2014). The three overall constructs had very strong reliability (Table 4.5). Eight of the nine sub-constructs had also strong reliability (ranging from .778 to .939): however, the analysis sub-construct had weak reliability (see Table 4.6). The issue may be due to the wording of the questions in this sub-construct. The word ‘dissenting’ in Question 32 and the concept of ‘underlying assumptions’ in question 34 may not have been clearly understood. This assumption derives from the experience during the interviews when the question was asked about underlying assumptions, which needed to be elaborated with examples. Despite its weak score, analysis sub-construct was not discarded for completeness of the scores, and more importantly as the results did not affect the reliability of the composite score of the learning practices construct. Questions 3 to 57 did not require answers in order to let the respondents feel free to respond to the ones they are comfortable with. As what questions were not responded to by which specific individuals was not within the scope of the study and has not affected the reliability of the results, I disregarded these.

Based on my personal conversations with the administrative staff about the survey stage, I gathered that almost all of the respondents were academics rather than the administrative members of the units as I was told that they thought they did not have enough knowledge or authority to answer the survey questions appropriately. Thus, seemingly, the survey results predominantly represent the perceptions of the academics. Even though hard copies of the survey were made-available, 98% of the respondents preferred to take it online. It may also be important to note that 90% of the respondents were full-time employees at ZU, while the rest were adjunct faculty, which shows the same proportion of faculty members who work in the colleges in a full-time or adjunct capacity (90/10%).

*Table 4.5*

Reliability of the Learning Organization Survey Main Constructs

<b>LOS main constructs</b>	<b>Survey questions</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
Learning environment	3-20	.909
Learning practices	21-49	.951
Leadership	50-57	.915

Normality tests revealed that the scores were normally distributed and that there was a reasonable fit, within the ranges of +/-0.5 for all sub-constructs. Hence, while making meaning from the data, considering the mean and the range of scores was thought to be appropriate. The summary of the statistical results is shown in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6  
Statistical Learning Organization Survey Results

Main constructs	Sub-constructs	N		Ms**	SDs**	Cronbach's alpha
		Valid	Missing			
<b>Learning environment (average mean 4.03)</b>	Psychological safety (5 items).	85	18	4.49	1.34	.778
	Appreciating differences (4 items).	86	17	4.10	1.40	.755
	Openness to new ideas (4 items).	82	21	4.40	1.46	.812
	Time for reflection (5 items).	84	19	3.14	1.38	.845
<b>Learning practices (average mean 3.88)</b>	Experimentation (4 items).	77	26	3.68	1.37	.844
	Information collection (6 items).	77	26	3.82	1.53	.919
	Analysis (5 items).	73	30	4.06	1.29	.316*
	Education and training (6 items).	78	25	4.02	1.37	.873
	Information transfer (8 items).	70	33	3.80	1.50	.939
<b>Leadership (average mean 3.30)</b>	Leadership (8 items).	72	31	3.30	.98	.915

Note: \*indicates the construct with weak reliability  
\*\* Ms stands for Means, SDs stands for Standard Deviations

Following this stage, ZU's scaled scores of each sub-construct and the composite scores of the main constructs were calculated "... by multiplying each row on the seven-point scale by 100 and dividing it by 7. For learning leadership, which was based on a five-point scale, the divisor was five." (Garvin et al., 2008, p.8). This was done to compare ZU's scaled scores with the developer's original benchmarking baseline data (see Figure 4.1). Accordingly, ZU's scaled scores and which quartiles they were matched with are shown in Table 4.7. For example, organisations that scored between 87-100 from the questions diagnosing the psychological safety of their institution, i.e. questions 3-7 of the survey, are

placed in the top quartile, which means they experience the highest expected level from a LO in terms of psychological safety. Regarding the same sub-construct, ZU scored 64.2, which places it in the bottom quartile, i.e. the level of psychological safety at ZU is quite low according to Garvin et al.'s (2008) diagnostic test.

Building Blocks and Their Subcomponents	Scaled Scores				
	Bottom quartile	Second quartile	Median	Third quartile	Top quartile
<b>Supportive Learning Environment</b>					
• Psychological safety	31–66	67–75	76	77–86	87–100
• Appreciation of differences	14–56	57–63	64	65–79	80–100
• Openness to new ideas	38–80	81–89	90	91–95	96–100
• Time for reflection	14–35	36–49	50	51–64	65–100
Learning environment composite	31–61	62–70	71	72–79	80–90
<b>Concrete Learning Processes and Practices</b>					
• Experimentation	18–53	54–70	71	72–82	83–100
• Information collection	23–70	71–79	80	81–89	90–100
• Analysis	19–56	57–70	71	72–86	87–100
• Education and training	26–68	69–79	80	81–89	90–100
• Information transfer	34–60	61–70	71	72–84	85–100
Learning processes composite	31–62	63–73	74	75–82	83–97
<b>Leadership That Reinforces Learning</b>					
Composite for this block	33–66	67–75	76	77–82	83–100

Figure 4.1 Developers scaled scores retrieved from the public domain of the Learning Organization Survey (Garvin et al., n.d.).

*Table 4.7*  
Zayed University's Learning Organization Survey Scaled Scores

<b>Building blocks and their sub-constructs</b>		
<b>Learning environment</b>	ZU's scaled scores	Quartile
Psychological safety	64.2	Bottom
Appreciation of differences	58.6	Second
Openness to new ideas	62.9	Bottom
Time for reflection	44.8	Second
<b>Learning environment composite</b>	57.6	Bottom
<b>Learning practices</b>	ZU's scaled scores	Quartile
Experimentation	52.6	Bottom
Information collection	54.6	Bottom
Analysis	58	Second
Education and training	57.4	Bottom
Information transfer	54.2	Bottom
<b>Learning practices composite</b>	55.3	Bottom

When ZU's scaled scores are compared with the baseline data, all the composite scores of the main constructs as well as the sub-constructs are considerably below the median benchmark scores (Table 4.7 and Figure 4.1). As for the learning environment construct, time for reflection and appreciation of differences sub-constructs, although ZU's scores are still below the median benchmark scores, the results show that it is placed in the second quartile. Similarly, only analysis (58) sub-construct under the learning practices construct barely matched with the lowest score of the second quartile. All the other scores place ZU in the bottom quartile. leadership construct did not have any sub-constructs in the survey, and the composite result according to ZU's scaled scores (66) places it just below the second quartile.

### **How Survey Analysis Informed the Study**

The numerical findings (see Tables 4.7) indicate that none of ZU's scaled scores are at the lowest end of the bottom quartile, in fact almost all of them approach the higher end of the band. With an optimistic view, one could say that there are tendencies at ZU towards the right direction. However, current perceptions of ZU's members suggest that considerable amount of efforts should be shown to reach higher quartile scores of LOs in all of these areas.

When college-based results were compared per construct separately as shown in Tables 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10, no college stands out as very different from the others (all confidence intervals overlap with the overall confidence interval for that construct, except for College 2 in leadership construct). Realistically, the sample sizes are too small for the inferential statistics to be meaningful. However, that was not considered as a weakness of the study, as rather than comparing the performance of colleges as LOs, finding out the current perceptions of ZU's (degree granting) college members in general was the primary aim of this stage. The secondary, yet equally important, aim was to generate questions for the interview stage of the research. It is expected that people's perceptions are idiosyncratic in social settings, and they may depend on their mood, the kind of day(s) they have been recently experiencing or based on their personal opinions.

*Table 4.8*

College-by-College Descriptive Results of the Learning Environment Construct (Questions 3-20).

	<b>n</b>	<b>Ms</b>	<b>SDs</b>	<b>SEs</b>	<b>95% confidence interval for mean</b>		<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>
					<b>Lower bound</b>	<b>Upper bound</b>		
College 1	7	4.02	.978	.369	3.11	4.92	2.67	5.72
College 2	13	3.34	1.001	.277	2.74	3.95	1.28	5.83
College 3	18	3.91	1.371	.323	3.23	4.60	1.67	6.06
College 4	10	4.59	.876	.277	3.96	5.22	3.17	6.06
College 5	10	3.93	1.182	.373	3.09	4.78	2.06	5.78
College 6	21	4.15	1.130	.246	3.63	4.66	1.56	6.94
Total	79	3.98	1.157	.130	3.72	4.24	1.28	6.94

*Table 4.9*

College-by-College Descriptive Results of the Learning Practices Construct (Qs 21-49).

	<b>n</b>	<b>Ms</b>	<b>SDs</b>	<b>SEs</b>	<b>95% confidence interval for mean</b>		<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>
					<b>Lower Bound</b>	<b>Upper bound</b>		
College 1	6	4.04	.802	.327	3.19	4.88	2.71	4.93
College 2	7	3.66	1.26	.476	2.50	4.83	2.11	5.18
College 3	15	3.55	1.196	.308	2.89	4.22	1.46	5.61
College 4	11	4.95	1.061	.320	4.23	5.66	2.64	6.32
College 5	9	4.05	1.094	.364	3.21	4.89	2.57	5.46
College 6	16	4.13	1.183	.295	3.50	4.76	2.57	7.04
Total	64	4.06	1.184	.148	3.77	4.36	1.46	7.04

*Table 4.10*

College-by-College Descriptive Results of the Leadership Construct (Qs 50-57).

	n	Ms	SDs	SEs	95% confidence interval for		Minimum	Maximum
					Ms			
					Lower bound	Upper bound		
College 1	7	3.51	.805	.304	2.77	4.26	2.13	4.38
College 2	12	2.06	1.02	.296	1.41	2.71	1.00	4.75
College 3	17	3.42	.866	.210	2.98	3.87	1.75	4.50
College 4	15	3.82	.631	.163	3.47	4.17	3.00	5.00
College 5	7	3.41	.885	.334	2.59	4.23	2.38	5.00
College 6	14	3.49	.736	.196	3.06	3.91	2.38	5.00
Total	72	3.30	.982	.115	3.07	3.53	1.00	5.00

In order to further understand the influence of accreditation processes on the current perceptions of ZU's members on aspects of LOs, both historically referring to the external QA processes and current institutional practices, it was necessary to search for areas from these results to dig deeper. First of all, finding time for reflection was chosen as an area to explore further as the respondents rated the statements in this construct on average as 3.14 (Table 4.6), which indicates that it is not so easy to spare time for reflection as the members seem to be overly stressed or pressurised by schedule-related commitments. However, accreditation processes require considerable amount of time for the colleges to reflect on their practices. How they managed to do rigorous self-reflections then, and how they currently are not able to do this was an area to investigate further. Similarly, accreditation documents show evidence of experimentation, collecting data and critically analysing results before making decisions although the perceptions of the members do not indicate that these are practised systematically as the mean average for these subconstructs are 3.68 (Experimentation), 3.82 (Information Collection) and 4.06 (Analysis) (Table 4.6.). Therefore, they needed to be explored further during the interviews. Last but not least, to receive higher scores from the first two constructs, leader behaviour should have a critical role both during and following the accreditation processes. Similarly, empowering individuals by providing resources for educational and/or on-the-job training are also usually the responsibility of the leaders in most environments (see Kember, 2000). Thus, I decided to ask questions to reveal more about the reflection, experimentation, data collection and analysis and overarching leader behaviour concerning these areas during the interviews. Further information on interview questions will be presented in the next section.

### **Semi-Structured, In-Depth Interviews**

The previous two sections described the findings based on the documentary analysis and the survey stages. Having interpreted these findings and designated what areas need more exploration, interview questions were formed to collect sufficient qualitative data to create a stronger argument for the thesis. Utilising Garvin et al.'s (2008) LO framework that guided the inquiry and the knowledge gained from the previous findings assisted me while seeking data from the interview stage, which informed the overall study significantly. This approach probably also helped with the internal validity, and the open-ended questions gave the interviewees enough liberty to make various and additional comments.

### **Theoretical Framework, Previous Findings and the Interview Questions**

In order to answer the main RQ appropriately, the findings from the first two stages were interpreted, merged and reordered cohesively, i.e. by structuring them thematically to specify the questions for this stage, and linking them to the accreditation processes. In total, I identified seven topics under which my questions were formulated based on my interpretations of the previous findings, LO literature and the main RQ: decision-making environment, shared vision and collegiality, experimentation and treatment of mistakes, systematic data collection, evaluation and information collection, reflection on practices, underlying assumptions, empowerment of skills. Reiterative analysis of the transcripts generated eight different sets of NVivo© codes, and in total, eight preliminarily constructed themes. The questions, codes and themes are presented in Table 4.11.

I will explain how I conceptualised and formulated the interview questions first, then will present the themes in the next section.

**Decision-making environment.** Leader behaviour in relation to both current and accreditation processes was one of the areas to be enquired. However, asking direct questions about the leadership might have been challenging as half of the interviewees were either currently or previously holding leadership positions. Thus, the first cluster of questions was formed to ask about the issue, indirectly associating it with the decision-making during the accreditation processes and current practices by letting the interviewees describe the participation of the institutional members in meetings.

**Collegiality and shared vision.** Before the research started, it was hypothesised that going through an accreditation process might have created a sense of shared vision and triggered collegiality, which are essential elements of LOs (Senge, 1990). Although it was clear that immense amount of efforts was shown by the ZU's members especially during the MSCHE accreditation processes, collegiality aspect was not clearly identified, neither in the documentary analysis nor by means of the survey. Additionally, flexibility or being adaptive to change is another important component of LOs (Senge, 1990; Garvin et al., 2008). In order to get insights about the general attitude regarding changes that accreditation processes might have necessitated, a question about how changes have been treated was added.

**Experimentation and treatment of mistakes.** Accreditation bodies encourage innovation and experimentation from HEIs as the documents revealed. However, the survey results did not clearly indicate individuals' perceptions on these matters. One assumes that while making changes, for example, while implementing new rubrics for marking common

exams, there must have been things that needed to be amended and re-implemented. The questions that were formed in this group also had an indirect goal of collecting data in relation to both psychological safety of the environment when mistakes occur and how experimentation has been included in the institutional processes.

**Systematic data collection, evaluation, information transfer.** Documentary analysis in this study revealed that systematic data collection, analysis and data-driven decision-making have been an expected component of accreditation processes (see MSCHE, 2011), which are also practised in LOs. Evidently, these practices have been established at ZU. However, how systematically or efficiently they have been implemented, tested, evaluated or communicated were not clearly identified in the earlier stages of the study. Thus, the second cluster of questions in this group aimed to gain more insights about these areas.

**Reflection on practices.** Self-evaluation experience during accreditation periods is meant to help institutions to systematise this practice to maintain and sustain quality by continuously improving (MSCHE, 2011). However, whether reflection has become a systematic institutional practice was thought to be relevant to investigate further.

**Underlying assumptions.** It is important not to act based on assumptions in LOs, and accrediting bodies promote an evidence-based approach; however, neither the documentary analysis nor the responses to the survey questions revealed sufficient information to make judgements on how ZU deals with assumptions. Considering this is an important sub-construct based on my insider's opinion, I composed the sixth cluster of questions to know more about this topic by consulting the interviewees.

**Empowerment of skills.** The last question of the interview was formed to understand the interviewees' perceptions on how leaders have empowered the members of ZU during and after the accreditation processes. I intended to gain insights about the leader behaviour indirectly via this question as well.

Table 4.11

Interview Questions, Codes and Emergent Themes

Interview questions (including probing questions)	NVivo <sup>®</sup> codes	Themes
<p><b>Decision-making environment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could you describe the atmosphere/environment while discussions were actually happening? Were the participants comfortable expressing their opinions and offering alternative or conflicting ideas during and after the accreditation processes?</li> <li>• Did the leaders actively seek alternative ideas? Did the leaders actively listen to different opinions? Can you describe their attitude while listening to opposing ideas? How was consensus reached in standing committees?</li> </ul>	<p><b>1. Decision-making environment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement</li> <li>• Leader behaviour towards opposing ideas</li> <li>• Skills empowerment</li> </ul>	<p>1. Major decisions are made top-down but, in most cases, all others are discussed among members who are willing to contribute; however, psychological safety and trust issues should be addressed.</p>
<p><b>Collegiality and shared vision</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It seems that a lot of people contributed to the accreditation processes while working well together. How do you think they reached this collegiality? Were they ready for this challenge from Day 1 or were they slowly convinced as things evolved? How did they reach the shared vision (of gaining accreditation)? Are new ideas valued or do people resist new approaches? When you had to implement changes during the accreditation period, how was the general attitude? Has it changed in time?</li> </ul>	<p><b>2. Collegiality and shared vision</b></p> <p><b>3. Experimentation taking risk, mistakes</b></p>	<p>2. Accreditation could potentially be seen as a shared vision to improve institution despite hard work, leadership changes, and unequal job share.</p> <p>3. There's not much room to improve experimentation – either due to the philosophical and cultural tendencies at ZU or the perception of prescriptive standards presented by accreditation agencies.</p>
<p><b>Experimentation and treatment of mistakes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documents suggest that there were several occasions when taking risks, innovation, and/or experimentation were promoted. How were failures treated? How was success treated? Did you have time to critically reflect on both failures and success?</li> </ul>		

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**Systematic data collection, evaluation, and information collection**

- When new ideas were tested during the accreditation process how were they conducted and evaluated? Was it systematic or more ad-hoc? Have these processes become part of your daily practices in the college?
- Can you elaborate on systematic information collection from competitors, best-in-class institutions, students, the general public, etc. considering current practices? How about information transfer in and out of the institution? What challenges may members be facing?

**Reflection on practices**

- There are many references to the reflective aspect of the self-studies, and how they contributed to improvements. Tell me more about how you reflected on past performances to make improvements in the accreditation processes. Can you comment on your experiences during problem identification, especially regarding dialogue and debates on possible solutions? How was time created for this during the accreditation processes? What about reflection on performance at other times?

**Underlying assumptions**

- While making decisions, solving problems, or dealing with institutional challenges do you allow time to deal with underlying assumptions and different viewpoints? How did your college manage these during the accreditation processes?

**Empowerment of skills**

- How were people's different skills and expertise utilised during the accreditation processes?

**4. Information**

- Collection
- Transfer
- Analysis

**5. Reflection****6. Underlying assumptions****7. Leader behaviour****8. History of ZU, accreditation dictates, learning process, CAA**

4. Generating, gathering, sharing, and transferring information are experienced in ZU at different levels, however, these practices are not systematically utilised and/or could be enhanced.

5. Accreditation allowed for institutional reflection and some self-reflection has become part of everyday practices; however, reflective practices could benefit from better allocation of time.

6. Underlying assumptions exist at ZU and they could be from every way, but none are directly dealt with.

7. Leadership at ZU has suffered from inconsistency, which may have affected the environment and practices in the units and in the institution as a whole, even though interim leaders have overall done their best.

8. There have been many changes at ZU: in the beginning, accreditation processes contributed to on-going organisational learning processes, even though they were prescriptive and culturally irrelevant at times. However, recently internal and external demands and the contextual changes have impacted on the organisational dynamics and enthusiasm of the members.

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### Interviews, Findings and Constructed Themes

Some of the interview questions required interviewees to recall past experiences. Thus, their answers probably included personal bias and unintended mistakes (Yin, 2008; Silverman, 2010). That was probably the case even when some questions were about the current events. The interviewees' perceptions might also be coming through the lenses of their present-day experiences on the institutional issues. These are all expected possibilities of a qualitative interview method, and were taken into consideration while analysing the data. All ten of the interviewees were asked the same questions (or questions to the same effect) under the abovementioned topics. Despite each person's subjective comments on these specific questions, it was my hope to reach a pattern that would enrich the story I have constructed about this case thus far.

It may be important to note that even though questions are listed in clusters (Table 4.11), they were used as probes in stages as part of the conversations, i.e. interviewees were not bombarded by all of them at one round. Also, some comments made while answering a particular cluster of questions were conveniently correlated with another theme. For example, some of the points made when the interviewees were asked whether going through accreditation has created a shared vision and collegiality were more related with the concept of accreditation bringing improvements while being prescriptive, so they were tied to the more relevant theme. Table 4.12 was included here as a reminder of the interviewees' roles and pseudonyms used (see also Chapter 3, Table 3.6).

*Table 4.12*

Interviewees' Roles and Pseudonyms (Duplicate)

<b>Interviewees' roles</b>	<b>Pseudonyms</b>
Faculty (recruited after accreditation)	S1
Faculty (heavily involved)	S2
Higher administrator (heavily involved)	S3
Faculty (recruited after accreditation)	S4
Administrative staff (heavily involved)	S5
Administrative staff (heavily involved)	S6
Faculty (partially involved)	S7
Faculty (partially involved)	S8
Faculty (heavily involved)	S9
Higher administrator (heavily involved)	S10

**Decision-making environment.** As for the decisions related to the accreditation processes, the interviewees who had witnessed the period recounted that it was ZU's foundational principle as seen in the documentary analysis, and it was not open to discussion, i.e. pursuing external international accreditation was a top-down decision (S3, S10, S2). In fact, all the deans were recruited based on their background from some US-Accredited institutions, and all the faculty members were informed that the unit would be going for accreditation at the time of their recruitment (S2, S5, S7). Since ZU is a federal HEI funded by the UAE government, some decisions seem to be accepted to be top-down of which chain starts from the government level (S3, S7, S8, S10), and as S1 stated "... some decisions are not for us to make ..." when she was asked about how the conflicting ideas are treated in her college suggesting that top-down decisions are almost always accepted as a norm.

While the big decision was top-down, members of ZU seem to be comfortable with offering ideas and making decisions by reaching consensus after discussions most of the time as stated by S1, S2, S3, S5, S6, S8 and S9. Both at the intensive accreditation preparation periods and during regular academic year, colleges have been meeting in 'retreats', which are meetings when all the members of the college from both campuses participate. These retreats are organised to review curriculum issues, discuss the data, and make decisions after discussions. When the interviewees were probed about how conflicts were treated during these meetings, S1, S2, S5 and S6 proclaimed that 'they found a way' confirming the consensus idea. For the same question, S5 and S7 indicated that members of their colleges are not intimidated when they offer alternative views unless the issues involve a kind of sensitivity that may create a risk for job security. S7 added the personality of the leader as a possible reason for people's refraining from making controversial comments as the leader might be avoiding conflicts. This is actually the opposite of the perception of another interviewee from the same department who affirmed that the leader actively sought alternative ideas during meetings (S1). On the other hand, S4 and S8 indicated that conflicting ideas are not offered overtly not because they are afraid of talking but because of believing that nothing would change. To respond to the same question, S10 stated:

... people are willing to listen to diverse views. That doesn't necessary mean that those making the decisions will always proactively reach out and encourage [alternative] comments, [this is] partly because people are so busy and moving so quickly.... It's sometimes easier not to get comments, not because you're opposed to consultation but just because the quickest way of doing things is just to do it. (S10).

There seem to be a few issues related to the fear factor such as job insecurity issues on some matters, and the fact that some members seem pessimistic about the fact that their alternative ideas would not matter. However, overall it was interpreted that faculty members have been enthusiastic about the improvements at ZU despite the fact that they also seemed to have understood the limitations based on some top-down decisions. Thus, as a result of the first two questions, a theme was formed: Major decisions are made top-down but, in most cases, all others are discussed among members who are willing to contribute; however, psychological safety and trust issues should be addressed.

**Collegiality and shared vision.** Almost all the interviewees agreed that preparation for an external international accreditation created motivation, and a lot of people were willing and proud to be part of it, mainly because it was an opportunity to showcase what they have been doing internationally (S1, S3, S5, S6, S9, S10). Similarly, to get accredited has still been found worthwhile, as it brings prestige and respect (S4, S5, S8, S9, S10). The comment on the period of the first MSCHE accreditation in 2008 was interesting: “At the time when the decision was taken ZU was only 10 years old, I think just the audaciousness of the goal helped keep enthusiasm going.” (S10).

Only one of the interviewees thought that there was no buy-in and people did it as they thought they had to (S7). While the rest of the interviewees said once accreditation was gained (institutional or otherwise) everyone was so proud and happy, again that same person (S7) said nobody talked about it even when they successfully got it. Two interviewees (S3, S10) mentioned that faculty engagement in the accreditation processes was found exemplary, and ZU was praised for it by the MSCHE. Task distribution was found adequate by the interviewees; however, S3, S5, S6, S7 and S9 added that some people worked more than the others indicating that collegiality may not have been experienced in the same way by every member. S2 and S10 suggested that the reasons behind this attitude may be because some members do not tend to see the big picture, or they are too busy with their own academic work.

As for the changes, S3, S2 and S9 referred to some specific things faculty members had to learn during the accreditation period, e.g. constructing rubrics, designing learning outcomes and their assessments admitting that it was a huge learning curve. S6 mentioned that the changes made were based on the faculty members’ own decisions, indicating that the college decided to make the changes as they wanted to be accredited, so they found a way of adapting to them.

When it comes to how the colleges operate normally, S1 thinks that the environment is collegial, friendly and everyone gets along well, whereas S7 from the same college thinks that their team is not a good one. The other two members of this college, find the unit operating well without commenting on it at either end. However, based on her previous comments, one gets the impression that S7 might have had some negative experiences in her college. Personal perspectives also showed some contrast in the other college. For example, the leader was found supportive and approachable by S4, whereas her colleague compares the same leader with the previous dean who acted in a pivotal role in the accreditation process by saying “I think a lot of it (decision-making environment) depends on the dean. The atmosphere was more collaborative, a little bit more open when we had a dean, now we have an acting dean, who I think doesn’t feel confident when making decisions.” (S8).

This comment may be significant in that currently all of ZU’s deans are acting except for one who was appointed just at the beginning of January 2017, and this situation was also mentioned in the 2014 MSCHE evaluation report. Considering the comments made in this cluster of questions, the following theme emerged: Accreditation could potentially be seen as a shared vision to improve institution despite hard work, leadership changes, and unequal job share.

**Experimentation and treatment of mistakes.** Interviewees’ comments on the questions varied but some had clear references to regional and institutional culture, and the rigidity of some accreditation-related demands that must have affected the experiences. One interviewee commented that making mistakes was not so possible because there was always support provided, and professional development opportunities were provided (S1). Another one said that ZU gained experience when they were going through the second round of accreditation in 2013 so there were much fewer mistakes (S3). Clearly, according to these two interviewees mistakes implied something negative and should be avoided. S5 and S6 could not give any answers to this question as they could not remember witnessing experimentation or treatment of mistakes, this may be partially due to their administrative roles in their colleges. S1, S3, S7 and S9 reiterated that working on accreditation and practices that have followed is a learning process. S9 considered a lot of accreditation matters related with compliance and left not much room for individuality; however, she also added that it pushed them to look into their practices more closely, which they would not have done otherwise. S4 thought that there is no room for experimentation as everything is too controlled so some faculty members do experimentation to help their students more ‘off-the-record’, finding their own ways, which may suggest that some valuable experience is not

being shared with others who might benefit from it. S8 mentioned that she suggested a few ideas but she did not get any responses although when probed she confessed that she did not pursue to see what happened to her suggestions. I found the comments of S10 and S7 most interesting. S10 made a comment on the institutional perception of experimentation saying:

I don't think we have been as an institution or as an organisation as ready to embrace useful failure as we could be, and so you can see an organisation is either advancing by experimenting, learning what might be gained from what you have just tried and moving ahead ... I think because in our minds as an institution the cost of failure is high so we are sort of allergic to [mistakes] even though we do it all the time because not everything works. (S10).

S7, on the other hand, commented on the concept of making mistakes or failure in an Arab nation as an Arab herself:

... to solve a problem you'll have to be willing to face ... the weakness, and many people aren't willing. ... there is a lot that has been achieved, but at the same time ... Reflecting on a weakness is still taken to be a negative impression of the whole. (S7).

The comments on the topic of experimentation and treatment of mistakes were interpreted and thematised: There's not much room to improve experimentation – either due to the philosophical and cultural tendencies at ZU or the perception of prescriptive standards presented by accreditation agencies.

**Systematic data collection, evaluation, information transfer.** It seems that there are several systems in place at ZU to gather input from professionals and experts outside the institution. For example, each college has a national advisory board that provides information and consultation representing the views of the external experts within the respective field and communicating the possible needs of the society from ZU. Also, colleges have relationships with the relevant governmental offices. There are references to student focus groups, and gatherings with internal and external experts to learn from as revealed in documentary analyses. However, interviewees mentioned the need to have more formal and systematic feedback gathering and information collection. S9 referred to the fact that community involvement is low. S3, S7, S9 and S10 stated that information is collected, but not in a systematic way, it is usually needed when a certain decision is to be given, or on ad-hoc

bases. This echoes with the criticisms about the lack of effective use of faculty input and/or feedback revealed in another study conducted at ZU (Schoepp & Tezcan-Unal, 2016). S2, S5, S7, S8 and S9 gave examples of collecting information from the internship programmes; however, they also emphasised that the reports gathered from these programmes could be used more systematically. S2 and S9 mentioned that the information collection is frequently on numerical data, i.e. quantitative, and they suggested that educational environments may benefit more from qualitative data as numbers may not represent nuances and subtle details and result in misjudgements.

As for the question about collecting information from the competitors, a feeling of confusion was detected. The interviewees were not clear about the meaning of competitors in their context. S3, S4 and S10 thought that the other federal HEIs could be regarded as competitors. S10 indicated that the information gathered from the other federal institutions is barely more than benchmarking their ranking-related activities, and this was not even done by ZU itself, i.e. ZU gets the information from the statistics provided by the government or other sources. When interviewees were probed about the possibility of comparing ZU's practices with other similar institutions, there were references again to the fact that ZU found it hard to find a good match to benchmark itself with. S3 and S4 mentioned that there have been attempts to compare ZU with another small-scale US-Based HEI, namely University of Oklahoma, but both interviewees mentioned how cultural and educational backgrounds, and the future orientation of students were different, and highlighted the need to compare like with like.

Faculty members are supported to publish and present in national and international platforms, which seem to be the two major ways of sharing information with the general academic world. Both documents and interviews affirmed that faculty members were supported quite generously to disseminate information with these activities. As for transferring knowledge internally, S10 stated that sharing expertise within the university, and breaking down the silos between colleges are some areas ZU could enhance, and referred also to the need for better communication; "Even though there's a lot of information exchanged at the level of dean and above, exchanging information with each other doesn't always get filtered down to the faculty in the colleges." (S10).

As a summary of the interviewees' responses to this cluster of questions, the emergent theme is: Generating, gathering, sharing, and transferring information are experienced in ZU

at different levels, however, these practices are not systematically utilised and/or could be enhanced.

**Reflection on practices.** Several interviewees restated how self-study practice helped them to look into institutional weaknesses and strengths, and that this would not have been done if it was not required (S6, S7, S9, S10), and S5 summed up the reasons behind the reflective practices “You have to look back sometimes to go forward.” Referring to the current practices, S1 indicated that reflection is expected, and time is allocated for it especially during the retreats:

We have had discussions on the blended learning because we do the full day retreat at the twice a semester, and (four times a year we have) a full day retreat ... we just meet all day faculty from both campuses ... We do these open discussions and then small group discussions, and then per program, this is where most things happen.” (S1).

Historically and currently, ZU has organised retreat days when all the college members from both campuses gather to discuss, and give decisions based on these discussions. Before 2008, when the primary goal was to gain the first institutional international accreditation, ZU used these opportunities to gather groups responsible for compiling evidence for the standards they particularly focused on, at the time approximately sixty people worked for the 14 MSCHE standards (Zayed University, 2008.). Although the excitement of the early days has currently worn off, retreats still go on and reflection is a part of faculty members’ course evaluation processes. However, reflecting on matters of importance, practices, failures and successes as a team does not seem to be regular or systematic. Two interviewees showed discontent with the quality of discussions due to the limited time allocated for them:

... in the spring, there'll be a full week of professional development (activities), and three days that are mandated for university related activities, two days are left for the college. We have to get our course, our actual syllabi and things, up and running... Where do we meet to actually sit and reflect? This is the bit that worries me, that we don't reflect properly. We're just on this treadmill that just seems to get faster and faster. (S9).

S9's words represented the current realities at ZU. S10, agreeing with the time limitations, stated:

The biggest time deficit we have is in the ability to reflect on what we're doing. Having finished something, and that something might be a semester, having finished the semester, delivered the courses, done the grades, taken the student feedback, we don't take the time to take a step back and reflect on that experience that the university just went through, to think about what went well, what didn't go well. (S10).

On the other hand, S2 referred to times when some faculty members have not done their due diligence by reading the emails or the shared documents to prepare for the meeting before the retreats about some major decisions. She said that sometimes this caused unintended stress but by reallocating time for the major decision to be given in consensus, the college dean solved the problem.

Even though there seems to be some opportunities to reflect, some interviewees said that time is never enough for making quality decisions especially because at the end of the semesters people are ready to start their holidays, and when the new semester starts they focus on their new assignments (S3, S8, S9, S10). When interviewees were asked how time and motivation were created for self-reflection during the accreditation processes, S3's response was noteworthy "[Accreditation] was a novelty back then ... [It was] easy to get enthused then ... things have changed so much," referring to how several other accreditation practices that the HEI has had to deal with, such as specialised accreditation for the colleges and the recently mandated national accreditation. It seems that previously accreditation processes were novel, but presently they have become an overwhelming part of many people's everyday practices. Thus, earlier on, they found quality time and enough enthusiasm to reflect "... people wanted to be in one of only places in the region with US regional accreditation. So, it fired the university up." (S3).

As a result of this analysis the emergent theme is: Accreditation allowed for institutional reflection and some self-reflection has become part of everyday practices; however, reflective practices could benefit from better allocation of time.

**Underlying assumptions.** Starting with the first interviewee giving examples to help interviewees understand the concept of underlying assumptions was necessary, which was in

itself interesting. While some interviewees could not give solid answers to these questions even after exemplifications, some others came up with very interesting comments.

Various interviewees gave examples of various kinds of assumptions at ZU even though they were proven wrong many times. First of all, S3 and S8 mentioned that some faculty members assumed that ZU would never be able to gain accreditation from US-Based accrediting bodies. Obviously, ZU and its colleges gained accreditation several times. S4 and S8 referred to some faculty members' assumptions on the higher administration at ZU, i.e. even if they spoke their mind, nobody would listen to them or nothing would change. Also, assumptions towards students' level of English and the learning outcomes are believed to be a total mismatch by a lot of faculty as mentioned by S4, S5, S7 and S8. On the other hand, S3 said that students' level of English being low is a fact, thus other precautions should be taken by the faculty members instead of having a defeatist attitude. S6 also mentioned how their college attends this issue of low levels of English.

S10 mentioned some deans' assumptions on faculty members saying, 'Faculty will hate this' or 'they will never answer that survey', S9 mentioned a totally different dimension referring to the CAA, the UAE's federal accrediting body, which assumes that teachers are not to be trusted, and apply far more prescriptive standards in all the HEIs in the country regardless of their (previously gained or otherwise) credibility. S10 also mentioned that higher administrators have assumptions too, for example, they assume that faculty members are aware of the tight deadlines they need to meet, or the budget cuts, top-down demands or other external challenges they have to deal with. S10 also talked about the assumptions related to the research output target that was found impossible to reach. However, ZU members have managed to exceed expectations. These comments might suggest that during the accreditation periods some or all of these were also experienced.

It may be noteworthy to indicate that most of these assumptions are made in informal settings creating anecdotal institutional stories. For example, S8 did not pursue what happened to her proposed idea when she could not hear from her manager but assumed or judged that the administrators are closed to innovative ideas. In summary, responses to this cluster of questions helped form a theme: Underlying assumptions exist at ZU and they could be from every way, but none are directly dealt with.

**Leader behaviour.** Some questions were formed to gain insights about the leader behaviour indirectly, and during the interviews, there were moments when the interviewees referred to the leader behaviour even though the question was not meant to ask about that

topic. Thus, it seemed appropriate to combine relevant comments under the topic of leader behaviour.

First of all, there were references to the leadership challenges at ZU: colleges have been led by acting deans (e.g. currently six out of seven college deans are in acting positions) and the historical turnover of provosts (over 7 provosts in less than 20 years, not including several interim posts). While some interviewees mentioned the same leader's personality as supportive and positive (S1, S6, S9), another one from the same college criticised the same leader for not showing effective leadership (S7). The expectations from a leader obviously vary from person to person, and perceptions of different people differ. While S1, S2, S5 and S4 have described their leaders as people who listen actively, S7 and S8 commented that the quality of their leaders' listening depends on who they are listening to and their relationship with that person, suggesting discrimination or favouritism. In terms of listening to alternative ideas, S1 and S10 perceived this as a waste of time and seemed to support the leaders who do not actively pursue opposing views or dismiss them kindly. S2 suggested that when conflicting ideas occur, their leader bring them to the same direction.

Overall, most of the interviewees agreed that people are empowered and different skills are activated both during and after the accreditation periods (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S8, S9,) although S2, S7 and S8 added that empowerment of skills sometimes depends on the person and the personality, suggesting both the individual and their leader.

The emergent theme was formed based on leader behaviour: Leadership at ZU has suffered from inconsistency, which may have affected the environment and practices in the units and in the institution as a whole, even though interim leaders have overall done their best.

**Relevant data-driven findings.** Utilising Garvin et al.'s (2008) LO framework helped the researcher with transparency and clarity. As presumed, however, interviews also revealed unexpected topics. As a result of careful thinking and evaluation of the interviewees' comments considering the main RQ, the most relevant topics were collated under specific NVivo© nodes (Table 4.11): the history of ZU, the prescriptive demands of accreditation, learning processes and ZU's most recent national accreditation challenge, the CAA.

**History of ZU and accreditation issues.** A chain of events that occurred between 1997 to date affected ZU's performance in relation to many issues but the focus of attention will be given to those that are directly related to the accreditation issues. ZU started off as an outcome-based, US-model HEI founded by a federal decree with a top-down decision on

heading for US-Based accreditation from the MSCHE. Thus, to begin with it could freely focus on gaining international accreditation. Since the day it was founded in 1998 until 2013, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan was the minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the UAE and the president of ZU (UAE, 2017). Things changed in 2013, and the president was appointed to another role in the UAE Cabinet (Swan, March 14, 2013). Before this incident, ZU seemed to have enjoyed his tenure and the privileges its president's governmental role has brought as suggested by S3 and S10. In addition, at the beginning, ZU was a teaching university, but it recently shifted its focus on ranking, and it aims to become a research intensive HEI. Thus, peoples' research responsibilities increased, and their research activities were linked with their contract renewal and less time is now devoted to other issues (S3, S10). Another factor that relates with the changes is the impact of it on the HEI's organisational dynamics:

[ZU] was a different university... If ZU were to start the process today, it would be very different ... because the culture shifted. I think that back then (before 2008) it was pretty collegial, having a co-chair being just a regular faculty person- that carries a lot of weight. ZU is in transition now and more top-down driven, but back then I would say it was less so." (S3).

In other words, major structural changes and new external demands seem to have influenced the current context at ZU, and perhaps recent perceptions of ZU's members indicate some uneasiness because of these changes in this transition period.

Looking back, all the interviewees agreed that the changes made during the accreditation processes contributed to major improvements in their units in regards to being more organised and clearer in their requirements from the students, protecting them with common exams, with better ways of assessing learning and with the implementation of common marking rubrics. Some interviewees made references to cultural differences between the American context for which these accreditation requirements were essentially designed and the context of the UAE, indicating some incongruity between the accreditation requirements and ZU students' orientations, cultural and educational backgrounds. Nevertheless, ZU gained experience, expertise and confidence by passing through external international accreditation periods successfully.

On the other hand, the whole HEI and its units have been recently mandated to go through a national accreditation period, which seems to be less flexible and based more on

compliance (S2, S7, S9, S10). According to S3, S5, S9 and S10, the new situation created frustration, and some confusion. For example, S4 stated that when the college is discussing accreditation related issues, she is not sure if it is related to the CAA, or the MSCHE or their own specialised accreditation. CAA accreditation period also gave a halt to the ongoing planned improvements based on the feedback received from the international accrediting bodies (S2, S5). In other words, while trying to comply with the CAA's standards, some activities that were evaluated by another accrediting body had to be stopped. Especially S1, S5, S6, and S9 reiterated that uniformity gained thanks to the requirements of accreditation boards was positive, whereas S5 and S9 found the demands too prescriptive. However, continuous learning imposed by accreditation has been found positive by S1, S3 and S7. It was interesting to hear S7's comment as she criticised the accreditation period earlier on: "I have to say that with all the concerns, all the annoyances, all the frustrations we are a much better college because of the specialised accreditation and CAA accreditation. We're a much better college than we were before."

Looking forward, ZU has to live with new realities as it gradually became more influenced by external challenges (S3, S7, S10). ZU was enjoying a time period with major support from the UAE government in terms of accreditation related decisions, and was free from having to go through national accreditation (CAA) until 2014. At the beginning, as a relatively young university, external validation of its practices by US-Based accrediting agencies seemed to have created major positive impact on the members' level of enthusiasm. In time, the excitement might have died down, the newly imposed demands such as becoming a research intensive HEI, going through another major accreditation period with its quantitative and more prescriptive nature might have created burnout, and demotivated the members of ZU. This may be an indication that ZU has not become a learning organisation in its true sense because arguably LOs should be well-equipped to combat newly introduced external and internal challenges (Senge, 1990; Garvin et al., 2008; Marquardt, 2011). So the final theme based on the interviewees' emerged: There have been many changes at ZU: in the beginning, accreditation processes contributed to on-going organisational learning processes, even though they were prescriptive and culturally irrelevant at times. However, recently internal and external demands and the contextual changes have impacted on the organisational dynamics and enthusiasm of the members.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to summarise the main findings based on the analysis of the data collected in this study, which employed mixed-methodology. The three data collection stages were associated with the three sub-questions formed to respond to the main RQ. The first two stages were used as bases for the interview stage, as a result of which, more opinions on the different constructs of LOs and the influence of external international accreditation processes were formed. The interviews helped to portray ZU's previous periods in relation to the accreditation processes, as well as how some practices such as self-reflection, making data-driven decisions, collegiality that are relevant to LOs have been currently experienced in the HEI. Accreditation processes have had some positive impacts on the development of ZU as a whole while contributing to some aspects of LOs. However, in terms of the learning environment, learning practices and leadership perspectives, which are the main constructs of LOs, there seems to be a lot of room for improvement.

Consequently, the main argument of the study was developed: accreditation periods may potentially be utilised to become a LO. However, institutional realities, external demands, and other contextual factors might enhance or hinder the possibilities. This conclusion will be discussed in the upcoming chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

By investigating the correlation between the concepts of LO and QA, I designed an empirical study in order to generate practice-based knowledge on how to best invest resources to turn the external quality assurance (EQA) periods into a sustainable growth opportunity for HEIs. Although neither the HEI where this study took place aimed for becoming a learning organisation, nor its accrediting bodies proposed that it would also become one, the commonalities between the aims and objectives of these globally significant and debated concepts were found worth exploring. The study employed a specific LO framework that was originally developed for corporate leaders, and it allows diagnosis of aspects of LOs in units of organisations to promote dialogue for improvements (Garvin et al., 2008). The use of the framework has provided a reasonably clear and transparent approach while analysing the data to minimise the insider researcher's bias, and bias due to the conceptual frame of the RQs that were open to subjective interpretations.

This chapter has three distinct sections. First, it provides a summary of the findings and the response to the main RQ that was designed to be answered having analysed the three sets of data. Secondly, as a response to the 4<sup>th</sup> sub-question, it discusses the findings in light of the broader goal of the study, which is how EQA could be utilised effectively to promote becoming LOs in HEIs. Finally, it introduces a quality-focused academic leadership model for learning HEIs that I developed as a result of this case study.

### **Summary of the Main Findings**

The main RQ of this case study was “How have US-Based external quality assurance processes influenced Zayed University in becoming a learning organisation?”. I made interpretations based on the findings from three main sources of data to answer the first three corresponding sub-questions. Below are the questions and the findings in relation to each:

*1a) What aspects (if any) of the US-Based accreditation criteria relate to the characteristics of LOs as defined in three building blocks (Garvin et al., 2008)?*

*1b) Which of these aspects are addressed in the accreditation-related institutional documents (if any)?*

The documentary analysis of the study revealed that a lot of major characteristics of LOs could potentially be practised during the US-Based EQA processes, and ZU-Specific accreditation documents revealed that a lot of them have been experienced at ZU. For example, self-reflection on mission, vision and the congruence of the activities and

instructional practices is a pre-requisite in the accreditation criteria, and this experience has taught ZU to implement reflective practices during and following the EQA processes. The main concepts in LOs such as team-work, allocating budget for professional development of the employers, collegial and systematic data-driven decision-making are also expected to be evidenced by the accreditation bodies. Similarly, collaborating with stakeholders and/or community in general was encouraged by the accreditation bodies. Collecting systematic information from best-in-class institutions or competitors was not specifically included in the criteria, hence, ZU-Specific documents do not include such details. Additionally, accrediting bodies do not seem to require evidence of specific leader behaviour or the psychological safety of the environment, which are vital while building LOs. However, it may be inferred that democratic engagement of the members in institutional decisions is expected because accrediting bodies require shared governance from the HEIs, which might be interpreted as their covert description of the leader behaviour and the psychological safety of the environment. Perhaps since accreditation institutions claim that they do not attempt to provide specific methodology but just guidelines for assuring quality, they do not intend to prescribe details of how data should be treated or how debates should take place (See Table 5.1 for a summary.)

*2) How do the current perceptions of ZU's college members relate to what is found on the accreditation documents?*

The results from the survey demonstrated that almost all of the sub-constructs of the main constructs of LOs, i.e. learning environment, learning practices and leadership that supports learning were measured in the lower end of the survey designer's baseline scores. That means even though based on the documentary analysis and ZU's success at meeting the standards of the US-Based EQA bodies, which largely correlate with the expectations in LOs, ZU's environment, practices and leadership are not currently perceived to be as described in LOs by ZU's college members. However, because the survey provided limited understanding on the issues in question, semi-structured interview questions were created to investigate some areas further by combining the analysis of the findings from the first two stages. (See Table 5.1 for a summary.)

Table 5.1

Response to Sub-Question 1 and 2\*

LO framework	US-Based External QA (EQA) Criteria and Aspects of Learning Organisations (LO) in Accreditation Documents			Perceptions on LO aspects
	Clearly included LO aspects	Inferred but not specifically included LO aspects	Non-existent LO aspects	ZU members' current perceptions
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-reflection on vision, mission, and practices for continuous improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Psychological safety</li> <li>Appreciation of differences</li> <li>Openness to new ideas</li> </ul>		Current perceptions are that all the aspects of LO framework need major improvements.
Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experimentation, innovation</li> <li>Systematic, data-driven decision-making</li> <li>Professional development</li> <li>Collaboration</li> <li>Internal and external information collection</li> <li>Information transfer/Communication</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How mistakes should be treated</li> <li>Information collection from best-in-class institutions and competitors</li> <li>Dealing with underlying assumptions during discussions</li> <li>Asking probing questions</li> </ul>	
Leadership	Shared governance model	Leader behaviour (respects for opinions, is open to alternative views, empowers, etc.)		

Note: 1. Collegial decision-making was not highlighted in the framework.

2. ZU presented evidence of all the clearly defined criteria.

*3) What are the perceptions of people holding different roles in ZU on concepts related to accreditation processes and becoming a learning organisation?*

Findings from this stage of the study shed light on the chronological developments at ZU and the influence of EQA processes. I extended my knowledge on how the institutional practices such as self-reflection, making data-driven decisions to improve assessment practices and programmes collegially were enhanced thanks to the steps followed to meet the EQA criteria. The interviews gave insights about how these useful habits have still been kept although the efficiency of them could be contested.

The interviews substantiated that gaining accreditation from prestigious US-Based accrediting bodies created a shared vision and helped the members feel a sense of achievement. ZU developed some distinguishing habits that LOs are known to practise although that was not its intention. However, the contextual changes experienced since 2012-2013 have had a negative impact on ZU's potential growth as a learning organisation. For example, it experienced a major leadership change, following which it was mandated to comply with the national accreditation requirement. In addition, not having established leadership in the colleges has influenced the working environment and practices. In short, all these have created significant unrest. Despite these challenges, ZU still reflects, generates, gathers, shares and transfers information, yet it seems that it is necessary to systematise these practices, add more systematic experimentation and deal with underlying assumptions with a stronger leadership that is committed to learning. The interviews revealed that current leaders do not actively seek alternative viewpoints or deal with assumptions although ZU's members do not find it too difficult to express their viewpoints in most institutional discussions. Top-down decision-making starting from the government level seemed to have been accepted and this may sometimes cause the members to feel insecure (because of risking their jobs) or demotivated (because of the belief that nothing will change).

The interviewees also mentioned some cultural and contextual realities that may have an impact on ZU's development as a learning organisation during and following EQA processes. For example, mistakes are seen as weaknesses and are not clearly articulated or identified although LOs consider them as part of the process. Another culture-related issue that was mentioned by some of the interviewees is that the students' orientation is very different from their American peers, and that their educational and linguistic backgrounds are perceived as weak, which leads some faculty members to believe that US-Based accreditation standards cannot be realistically met. (Table 5.2 is a summary).

Table 5.2  
Response to Sub-Question 3\*

	1998- 2008	2008	2008-2015	2015-Ongoing
Main ZU experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded to gain MSCHE accreditation with a federal decree</li> <li>• Opened only for female students in two main cities, Abu Dhabi and Dubai</li> <li>• Preparation for the voluntary MSCHE accreditation</li> <li>• Worked with consultants mainly from the U.S.</li> </ul>	<p>Gained MSCHE accreditation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colleges prepare for specialised accreditation</li> <li>• ZU prepares for re-accreditation from the MSCHE</li> <li>• Increased student numbers</li> <li>• Opened a brand-new campus in Abu Dhabi</li> <li>• Opened male campuses both in Abu Dhabi and in Dubai</li> <li>• Huge presidential level leadership change (2012)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic leadership inconsistencies</li> <li>• Decision to become a research-based university (2013)</li> <li>• National accreditation (CAA) is mandated (2014)</li> <li>• Continual academic leadership inconsistencies</li> <li>• 5/6 colleges have gained specialised accreditation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adaptation to the new status</li> <li>• Preparing for growing number of accreditation processes (MSCHE, CAA, specialised accreditation) each with varying demands</li> </ul>
<b>LO concepts</b>		<b>Extent of practice of the concepts during ZU’s EQA processes</b>		
Shared vision	√√√**	The foundation gained during accreditation helped ZU survive huge undertakings and contextual changes, and a lot of the habits gained during this time remained.		√
Collegiality	√√√	However, pressures have gradually increased, EQA expectations have been varied and overwhelming, leadership challenges have been experienced and faculty morale has been negatively affected.		√
Reflection	√√√√√	Continuous improvement is still a repeated value.		√ (treatment of mistakes to be improved.)
Experimentation	√√	Budget is allocated for professional development and research.		√ (needs to be more systematised, extensive and purposeful.)
Information collection	√√√√			√ (underlying assumptions should be dealt with efficiently.)
Analysis	√			√ (internal and external information transfer should be enhanced.)
Information transfer	√√			√ (individuals’ skills should be empowered.)
Education and Training	√√√√			√ (trust must be established.)
Leadership that supports learning	√√√√			

\*Sub-question 3: What are the perceptions of people holding different roles in ZU on concepts related to accreditation processes and becoming a learning organisation?  
 \*\*The number of √s indicates to what extent the LO concepts have been incorporated: the more √s, the more extensive the practice. They are based on the researcher’s interpretation of the overall study.

4) *What are the emergent implications and recommendations that this study could contribute to local, regional and international practitioners and researchers?* This section will now respond to Sub-question 4, which aims to address the broader goal of the study referring to the emergent findings.

### **Zayed University's External QA Journey and Becoming a Learning Organisation**

ZU seems to have experienced three main phases so far: approximately the ten-year period from the foundation to the first institutional accreditation in 2008, the challenging period from 2008-2015 while dealing with the unprecedented increase in student numbers, opening a brand new campus, preparations for college-based accreditation and institutional re-accreditation, leadership inconsistencies that challenged what has been established, and the recovery and adaptation period since 2015, which has been ongoing.

Looking back, as a federally-funded university established by UAE governmental decree with an aim to be accredited by a US-Based accrediting body, namely, the Middle States Commission of Higher Education (MSCHE), resource and human capital allocation to prepare for accreditation at ZU was seamless. ZU's voluntary attempt to gain accreditation indicates its willingness to take risks, openness to experimentations, external consultancy and feedback, which are consistent with what LOs do. The initial self-study period (2004-2008) played a pivotal role for ZU to reflect on its first nine years' practices with an evaluative inquiry approach. This experience could be comparable with the aspects of evaluative inquiry as framed in Cousins, Goh, Clark and Lee (2004), which could potentially allow an organisation to build its learning capacity since the practice makes the participants skilled at building "... shared representations of knowledge and structures, predisposed to generate new knowledge, inclined to capture and interpret external information, and apt to question basic assumptions about the organisation, its goals, and strategies for achieving them." (p.101). Patton (2008) discusses how the evaluative way of thinking is not always a natural activity for many, and that evaluation processes present a clear focus and opportunities to question assumptions with the help of systematic evidence and fact-finding methods. These descriptions echo how evaluative thinking during the intentional intervention via accreditation triggered learning at ZU because "Learning how to think evaluatively is learning how to learn." (Patton, 2008, p. 153).

Extensive EQA processes allowed ZU to self-evaluate the congruence of its academic and administrative activities with its mission and vision, which required it to make certain curricular amendments, assessment-related improvements and several other enhancements with the administrative services. This activity may be concomitant with what Senge (1990) asserts about seeing the big picture, i.e. systems thinking. The momentum was maintained with the leadership support, all-inclusive retreats, frequently communicated updates and the collegial endeavours of 14 communities of practices, members of which represent diverse backgrounds and roles within ZU. That is, people's personal mastery was utilised to reach a common goal activating team-learning skills with a systems-thinking approach when they could also work on their mental models during the self-study, i.e. ZU has practised all the theorised disciplines of LOs by Senge (1990).

What was experienced in the initial period seems to echo Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas's (2006) extensive literature review on how learning occurs in professional learning communities (PLC) of educationists, which resonates well with the team learning principles in LOs. For example, the effectiveness of PLCs depends on the shared vision, reflective dialogues promoting professional inquiry based on professional practice, collaborative engagement in developmental activities for shared purposes, creating knowledge collectively while being exposed to diverse opinions and data during the processes (Stoll et al., 2006). Similarly, according to Hussein, Omar, Noordin and Ishak's (2016) recent study in a HEI, "Collaboration and team learning; and inquiry and dialogue were found to be the top two variables that correlate with organizational effectiveness." (p. 517). This case study at ZU reveals that going through external accreditation processes created a platform where members of a higher education institution developed these skills to a certain extent.

### **Contextual Changes may Impact Team Learning**

Despite the challenges faced, when the university was accredited by the MSCHE in 2008, ZU's members gained experience and confidence, which was followed by the specialised accreditation processes for the colleges. Between 2008 and 2015, while dealing with unprecedented expansion, five of ZU's six colleges (since increased to seven) gained specialised accreditation, and simultaneously prepared for and passed the institutional re-accreditation that took place in 2013. Additionally, although ZU previously had the privilege of being exempt from the national accreditation, since 2014, the national accrediting board, the CAA, has been charged to assure its institutional and college-based programme quality.

ZU was also challenged by a presidential level leadership change in 2013, which disturbed its government-level privileges and faculty morale. Considering these huge undertakings and other challenges, ZU's survival and growth could be associated with the foundational skills, learned through the accreditation periods that resemble those of LOs.

It is important to note that the learning in organisations occur only via the people that learn (Senge, 1990). Individuals' past experiences and future goals could impact on their present choices of their actions and motivation to learn as they are all interconnected although they may change in time (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Conversely, the positive habits gained during the accreditation processes in HEIs may be lost due to new realities. Clearly, ZU established the habit of self-reflection on practices and data-driven decision-making as a result of going through the accreditation periods, considering the ongoing retreats that allow all the college members to discuss unit-based issues, program-related improvements and other reflective activities. However, currently, as indicated by some of the interviewees and the survey results, there seem to be issues related with the allocation of quality and systematic time for reflection. It seems that ZU's colleges could benefit from programme reviews by gathering data from different sources and in-depth analyses of them. Probably, due to the new contextual realities such as increased accreditation-related procedures, leadership issues, and other changes, the efficiency of these processes is currently debatable (See Table 5.2). This may mean that ZU has never become a learning organisation in its true sense because LOs are not believed to be affected by the contextual changes (Senge, 1990; Garvin et al., 2008; Marquardt, 2011). Arguably, redefining the shared vision that suits the present realities, and managing the mental models shaped by their past experiences and future possible selves of the individuals may be a way forward for ZU.

### **Mental Models that may Inhibit Learning**

ZU reiterates its commitment to continuous improvement and creates opportunities for and/or encourages its members to learn, which means the very first action imperative of individual's learning is in place according to Watkins & Marsick (1999a), who propose a model for *sculpting* the learning community in schools. For example, at ZU, considerable amount of budget has been allocated to professional development. However, to what extent the learning opportunities given to the individuals have transferred into organisational learning is not clear.

Garvin (1993) argues that learning should lead to new understandings, which initiates changes, otherwise learning remains at a potential level. In order to say that learning has happened in an organisation, there needs to be cognition and action or a kind of adaptation, which eventually gets embedded in organisational routines (Garvin, 1993). However, what plays an important role behind the actions and development of organisational routines is the mental models of the individuals that could be reconciled to reach organisational effectiveness (Senge, 1990; Edmondson & Moingeon, 2004). Because people form what they see based on their mental models, which may also delimit their vision (Bess & Dee, 2008), it is important to deal with this issue.

Going through accreditation processes may be a catalyst in HEIs to modify the baggage individuals carry from the past and enthuse them for their future orientations because in essence people in organisations do not only work for money. In general, “If the individual finds satisfaction and meaning in work, the organisation profits from effective use of individual talent and energy” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p.156). In particular, academics are not primarily motivated by their salaries (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002), and are usually dedicated to contribute to the greater good such as their altruistic passion for teaching and research. This study at ZU revealed that not all the members have participated in the accreditation processes equally. Trullen and Rodríguez (2013) indicate that some faculty members initially approach quality assessment sceptically, i.e. their mental model implies that HEIs opt for it for instrumental reasons such as to meet governmental expectations, and not for genuine improvement. According to Trullen and Rodríguez’s (2013) study, when faculty members participate in the activities, their distrust decreases. Thus, it is important to work on mental models and make sure accreditation becomes a shared vision for all the members, for it is normal for academics to question because they are trained to do so (Gordon, 1999). Due to each individual’s personal orientation and for practical reasons, it may not be possible to involve every single person in the process. However, frequent updates, as ZU conducted historically, would allow the members to keep the shared vision relevant and the institutional enthusiasm going.

### **Psychological Safety Issues and Team Learning**

While evaluating individuals’ learning in organisations, attending only to cognition and behaviour, but neglecting the emotions, creativity and interpersonal needs would be a mistake (Kezar, 2005b). Edmondson (1999) states that “... seeking feedback, sharing

information, asking for help, talking about errors, and experimenting ...” (p.351) are ways of learning in teams; however, if admitting mistakes or asking for help from colleagues are associated with losing face in an organisation, potential learning opportunities are lost (Edmondson, 1999). Anticipating that their ideas, actions or questions may carry the risk of vulnerability, people feel the need to protect themselves, and the opposite of this indicates that there is psychological safety in the environment (Edmondson, 2004). Edmondson (1999) argues that trust in work teams is a distinct yet complementary aspect of teams’ psychological safety.

In ZU’s case, currently, there are several factors that inhibit learning in teams regarding interpersonal interactions. First of all, although during the discussions and debates, offering alternative ideas does not seem to be a huge problem, it seems that some members of ZU do not believe that conflicting ideas will be listened to or they tend to discuss these privately in off-the-record environments. Although it is understandable why every single person’s recommendation cannot be incorporated in an institution, it is also reasonable for the faculty members to hear the rationale behind the final decisions made. When these needs are not addressed, faculty members may feel reluctant to share opinions, to pursue what happened to their suggestions or to read emails or reports that may be significant to their academic roles as revealed in some of the interviews. Approximately two decades ago, Preskill and Torres (1999) predicted that the employees of the future would require being heard and open communication to get things done, and this would necessitate organisations to build structures that enable diverse groups to commit and accomplish their goals collegially. It is fairly clear that it is time to establish better ways of meeting the needs of academics.

Secondly, one notices a kind of ‘fear’ factor in relation to job insecurity while discussing how decision-making occurs in their respective teams. Some members of ZU seem to believe that they will be vulnerable if they offer ideas about some topics, and this belief is probably based on shared experiences, organisational stories or assumptions (Johnson, 1992). Another reason for this may be the fact that the great majority of the faculty members are expatriates whose jobs and existence in the country are interdependent as stated by S10 during the interview when he was asked about the issues of ‘fear’ and ‘trust’. The ‘trust’ issue was identified only once in the documentary analysis of this study in the form of a recommendation in the 2014 team report, suggesting that the evidence collected by the evaluation team implied the lack of it. Even though trust is only one aspect of psychological safety according to Edmondson (1999), the lack of it may impact people’s confidence

because of the possibility of experiencing negative consequences. Eventually, the learning in the teams, hence in the institution, suffers. A study conducted by Chapman, Austin, Farah, Wilson and Ridge (2014) in the UAE revealed that short-term contracts offered to expatriate academics in the country have a negative impact on their ownership and commitment as they perceive themselves as easily dispensable, which could have a negative long-term effect in the country. Thus, it is important to note that this issue may not be specific to ZU.

### **The Roles of Institutional Practices in Team Learning**

**Experimentation, systematic data collection and analysis.** Garvin (2000) suggests that most organisations confuse applying change with carefully planned experimentation, which is a common practice in science. According to Garvin, without deliberate planning on multiple trials and collecting data, managers can only see a superficial picture of the truth. Working on accreditation has allowed most members of ZU to acknowledge that it is a learning process while they were working on new curricula, and how they were pushed to think about better ways of assessment to increase their reliability and validity. Because of the students' low English proficiency, various ways have been tried in different colleges to support students to cope with the course content and delivery in English. All these could be considered as experiments, and based on hypotheses to be tested as Garvin recommends, and could be considered that there is a lot of potential and desire to improve practices at ZU.

I acknowledge that expecting the same scientific level of precision when developing a commercial product to be replicated in an educational setting may be unrealistic. However, it is important to remember that relevant educational literature reiterates how academics could benefit from experimentation, feeding forward, making adjustments based on professional debates and work-based learning (see Ramdsen, 1998; Boud & Solomon, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Gosling, 2014). For example, Gosling highlights how a collaborative peer review framework could be utilised as an effective model to promote collegial dialogues to improve teaching, learning, course design and assignments. Action research, which is a self-reflective model of systematic inquiry conducted by practitioners in their own contexts to improve their practices (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014), is another well-regarded approach that educational contexts have been benefiting from. That is, what the corporate world achieves by means of scientific ways of thinking and experimentation should not be an unfamiliar practice for academics. Therefore, HEIs may enhance institutional members' team learning by embedding well-planned experimentations with systematic data-collection methods and

in-depth analyses. However, current weaknesses in these areas at ZU seem to be preventing institutional learning opportunities.

**Systematic information collection and transfer.** For an optimal impact and the sustainability of the generated knowledge in the organisation, Garvin et al. (2008) emphasise the importance of internal and external knowledge sharing in a systematic way. In ZU's case, although there seems to be abundance of data, they are not always systematically collected or well-analysed and/or communicated to the relevant parties appropriately. For example, a few of the interviewees mentioned how internship data could be more systematically collected and analysed, which could enhance programme efficiency and students' experiences.

Not only internship data could provide valuable information, but also data could be collected from employers of ZU's graduates more systematically. For example, as a social and economic trend, Emiratisation, which is a government policy, and related research could be studied well and insights gained could be incorporated during course revisions. To illustrate, Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner's (2014) study on the perceptions of the CEOs/managers from different nationalities including Emiratis revealed that the managers complain about Emirati employees' lack of skills, experience and commitment to work, which result in reluctance to hire them. Required reflections of each teacher at the end of each semester could also feed into the course developments. It seems that this data is stored somewhere but how they were analysed and what conclusions were drawn from them were not communicated or changes based on the insights have not been implemented. Additionally, learning from the best practices of other institutions or competitors seems to be another neglected area at ZU. Most of the interviewees could not identify another HEI that could be benchmarked against ZU either in the country or abroad. Many data collection opportunities are not actively sought or the collected data have not been efficiently analysed or utilised in this case. That is, learning opportunities are lost once more even though this could be preventable.

In summary, what links individual learning to organisational learning has three crucial elements a) the mental models of the individuals based on their past and present experiences and future goals, which determines whether or not they are willing and/or able to engage in institutional practices and/or initiate innovative ideas in the context, b) the team learning opportunities based on the safe interaction between the colleagues that enhance the learning, c) information transfer within and outside the whole institution for the learning to be established. This conceptualisation echoes Crossan, Lane and White's (1999) 4i (*intuition*,

*interpretation, integration, institutionalisation*) organisational learning model. In ZU's case, the opportunity of learning may sometimes be lost due to some members' reluctance to offer opinions, experiment or initiate innovative ideas, and because of some existing assumptions that do not seem to be addressed effectively, i.e. *intuition* cannot be activated. When some new ideas are implemented, other challenges such as the psychological safety issues may inhibit ZU's members' critical reflection-on-action, giving feedback or sharing mistakes that occur during experimentations, i.e. *interpretation* and *integration* do not take place properly. Even when these challenges are somehow overcome, because of the barriers that prevent internal exchange of ideas, some useful practices in a unit that could be emulated in other units, i.e. *institutionalisation* opportunities, are lost. Thus, it is important to invest in the individuals' and groups' mental models and groups' emotional dynamics as "Teams that have learned to work effectively together are worth much more than their individual components." (Argote, 2012, p.115).

What has been discussed so far relates with Garvin et al.'s (2008) LO framework used for the entire study, and substantiates that the EQA processes could potentially be executed to enhance the learning environment and learning practices at HEIs. This, it seems, is easier said than done. Some scholars such as Gordon (2002) and Brennan (1999) mention how achieving quality is desirable for academics but their idiosyncratic professional values and scepticism of the agenda behind the motives have an impact on the implementation of an effective quality culture. In addition, tenure related issues and increasingly managerial hierarchy in HEIs prevent democratic engagement of academics in shared governance (Kezar, Hartley & Maxey, 2012). In almost all fields, it is commonplace to correlate success and failure of many practices to leadership. As a practitioner with nearly thirty years of experience, I will not disagree with the importance of leader behaviour in the creation and sustainability of learning organisations during EQA processes. It is not surprising for Garvin et al. (2008) to include leadership that supports learning in an organisation as the third building block in the LO framework used for this study.

### **Leadership Matters**

Improving leadership for organisational development has been a concern in HE contexts, hence several studies have been commissioned as reported in Kok & McDonald (2017), who conducted a study to investigate leadership, governance and management behaviours in HEIs and their relationship with academic performance in the U.K. On the one hand, according to the eight interrelated themes generated as a result of this recent study, top

and high-performing HEIs are those that are committed to improve, are dynamic, have a proactive but planned approach based on shared values and enjoy a collegial departmental environment with hands-on and clearly guided leadership that infuses trust and reinforces open communication (Kok & McDonald, 2017). On the other hand, in lower tier academic departments, although the members aspire to reach a higher level of performance, and their leaders are supportive, it seems that the sense of goal clarity is less obvious, communication is informal, less frequent and not so transparent, and the collegial efforts are missing. Kok and McDonald (2017) claim that high performance necessitates a clear sense of purpose with credible leadership that models expected behaviour. That is, this comprehensive and recent research on expected leadership, governance and management behaviour in HEIs could be associated with many characteristics of LO leadership.

Garvin et al. (2008) assert that all the components of the three building blocks of LOs complement each other, and also state that “Organisational learning is strongly influenced by the behaviour of the leader.” (p.5). Consistent with this claim, the findings in this study suggest the impact of leadership behaviour that has enhanced and/or hindered institutional environment and practices at ZU since its foundation to date. During the initial phase, the leadership that supported EQA was evident. There may be multiple reasons why the past leadership managed the EQA processes in a way that created a shared vision and a collegial environment at ZU. For example, its being a new, smaller size and a more teaching-oriented university in the past could have positively influenced people’s time-management and enthusiasm. However, meeting the expectations of the accreditation criteria does not necessarily mean that the institution has really advanced its practices in all the relevant areas and created sustainable quality-oriented institutional practices. When the focus moves to the present day, this study revealed that ZU specifically needs to work on building trust and creating a safer working environment. Otherwise, the aim of enhancing students’ educational experiences at the HEI when going through EQA as reiterated in the documents cannot be realised. HEIs that do not have space for ‘learning’ leaders (Knight & Trowler, 2000) and academics, are unlikely to equip students with the necessary skills to become ‘learning’ individuals. Hence, redefining a shared vision collectively and rebuilding trust, motivation and collegiality should be a priority at ZU.

### **Contexts Shape Experiences**

Commonly, shared governance (SG) model is the kind of leadership expected in EQA standards. Tierney and Minor (2003) introduce the concept of SG as an abiding tradition in

American HE system whereby faculty involvement in decision-making processes is assumed to take place in some form. Interestingly, even though participatory democracy is a far more familiar social practice in the context of U.S., Tierney and Minor's (2003) report indicates that the SG model was defined differently by different academics and administrators.

Expecting such a complex concept to be well-understood and established in contexts where the social and political climate may not be fully prepared to grasp the meaning of it, let alone the enactment of it, without guidance, may not be realistic. Even with guidance, to expect a fixed form of SG may be unrealistic. It should also be noted that SG has been critiqued widely (see Kezar & Eckel, 2004), and new ways of increasing effectiveness of governance in HEIs are being sought after focusing on the 'soft stuff' as McCaffery (2010) puts it or "... the intangibles of human interaction, such as trust." as Kezar (2004) indicates (p. 45). Instead of expecting SG from institutions in other cultures, the EQA experts could guide the HEIs to develop operational governance models that would best fit their own contexts. Otherwise, the attempts tend to remain on a superficial level as in ZU's case where sudden top-down decisions have become an expected reality.

Collegiality cannot be established when 'hard' managerialism is practised; what is experienced can only be called 'contrived collegiality' (Hargreaves, 1994). Culture and context may have an impact on the adaptation to expected behaviour, so an incremental process accompanied by very clear guidance may be necessary especially in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance (Lagrosen, 2003), such as the UAE. Considering ZU's members come from 50 different countries from all regions of the world, making meaning of concepts becomes even more complex. Once collegiality is a mutually grasped concept, it may produce solutions to another context-related concern which is associated with the academic, linguistic, motivational and socio-cultural background of the students that does not seem to sufficiently allow them to perform at internationally-accepted high levels. When the vision is redefined and contextual realities have been well understood and assumptions are dealt with, focus of attention could be given to how to incorporate effective instructional methods to enhance students' learning in an English-medium HEI. Multiple action research cycles, peer observation for instructional improvements and other collaborative activities could be experimented with. Currently, it seems that majority of ZU's members choose to complain about the situation, feel frustrated, and blame the students, rather than working on improvements.

Seeing mistakes as part of the learning process, being open about them and discussing aspects for improvement is crucial in LOs. When experimenting with new things, which is

also encouraged by the accreditation bodies, it is normal to experience mistakes. However, the meaning of mistakes may also be culturally sensitive. For example, in Arabic cultural context, admitting mistakes seems to be often considered as a weakness (Noffsinger, 1995), which has also been stated by one of the interviewees, who is originally from an Arabic country. Because the host country is Arabic, seeing mistakes as a weakness may have influenced ZU's members' perceptions even though a great majority of them come from a variety of different cultures. That may be a reason why 'not rocking the boat' is chosen instead of taking risks for growth. Therefore, properly defining what mistakes mean in context and how it relates with learning should be another point to consider.

One major criticism about QA processes in HEIs is associated with its prescribed standards that are perceived by academics as controlling and leading to a stronger managerial culture in the institutions (see Newton, 2000; Harvey, 2006; Huisman & Currie, 2004). In ZU's context, however, the study revealed that ZU's academics did not feel so negatively about EQA processes especially during the first phase of ZU's engagement with EQA. However, when they were also mandated to be accredited by the CAA, with more rigid, numerical and bureaucratic standards, the attitude towards accreditation seems to have turned negative. Having successfully passed the US-Based accreditation, some ZU's members tend to believe that they should not have been categorised as other HEIs in the country that have not experienced EQA previously. That is, people's perceptions may change based on contextual realities.

### **A Quality-Focused Academic Leadership Model for Learning Higher Education Institutions**

This study's main argument is that assuring quality through EQA processes presents a developmental opportunity to the HEIs as in the case of ZU, which has unintentionally developed many characteristics of LOs, especially at the first phase of its relatively short history (between 1998-2008). Based on the extensive literature review and the findings in the study, I developed a quality-focused academic leadership model for learning HEIs that could use EQA processes as a catalyst to become LOs. Before introducing the model, I will summarise some essential background information on the commonalities between the QA and LO concepts, the characteristics of HEIs that may hinder or support the possibility of becoming LOs and the common aspects of (team) learning in LOs and educationists' learning.

### **Commonalities Between the QA and Learning Organisation Concepts**

For HEIs to borrow concepts from the business world is not uncommon (Ewell, 1999; Birnbaum, 2000). Although the idiosyncratic characteristics of academic and the corporate worlds need to be taken into consideration, QA (especially the US-Based accreditation) and LOs have commonalities as elaborated in Chapter 2 and as summarised in Table 5.3. First, like *strategic planning, knowledge management, reengineering*, both QA and LO are offspring of the business world that were adopted by HEIs (Birnbaum, 2000). Both concepts emerged as responses to economic challenges in order to gain competitive advantage in their respective markets. In a world that is constantly changing, continuous learning and improvement is the key espoused value in both (Senge, 1990; Harvey & Newton, 2004). Accountability and responsibility based on shared values, and goals that are aligned with practices via self-reflection and self-evaluation are highlighted in both concepts (Garvin, 2000; Eaton, 2011). Basing decisions on evidence, dialogue and in a participatory manner are also encouraged practices in both (Garvin et al., 2008; Garvin, 2000; El-Khawas, 1998).

*Table 5.3*

#### Commonalities Between Quality Assurance and Learning Organisations

- 
- Borrowed from the business world (Kezar, 2005a; Birnbaum, 2000).
  - Derived from financial constraints and economy-related developments (Altbach, 2004; Senge, 1990).
  - Aim to respond to the major changes of the era via continuous learning (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Marquardt, 2011; Senge, 1990).
  - Advocate shared vision and goals, accountability, and responsibility (Eaton, 2011; CHEA, 2015; Edmondson & Moingeon, 2004).
  - Highlight self-evaluation, self-reflection of the context, aims, and practices (Senge, 1990; Garvin et al., 2008; El-Khawas, 1998; Eaton, 2011).
  - Emphasise continuous improvement, experimentation, evidence-based, systematic and shared decision-making (Garvin, 2000; El-Khawas, 1998).
-

### **Higher Education Institutions and Becoming Learning Organisations During External QA Processes: Supporting and Hindering Characteristics**

While HEIs seem to have unique characteristics that may hinder their becoming LOs during EQA processes, they also have several features that might potentially support the concept. First of all, academics' perceptions on EQA vary. Some academics tend to consider EQA processes as a box-ticking and controlling exercise (see Trowler, 1998; D'Andrea, 2007; Harvey, 2004; Harvey & Newton, 2004; El-Khawas, 2013), which is associated with bureaucracy, managerial monitoring and compliance (see Newton, 2000; Harvey, 2006; Huisman & Currie, 2004). Others reported that self-evaluation during EQA was a useful practice as it could lead to self-regulation (Harvey, 2006; Lamaitre, 2004) and improved teaching quality (Al-Maskari, 2014). Some academics perceive that EQA brings institutional reputation (Stensaker, Langfeldt, Harvey, Huisman, & Westerheijden, 2011) and clarity to structure and policies (Wahlén, 2004). These kinds of assumptions and beliefs should be acknowledged and a strategy to align academics' views should be developed while/before considering EQA as an opportunity to grow as a learning organisation.

Not only academics' approach to EQA but also structural, political and philosophical characteristics of HEIs may hinder their becoming LOs. First, the hierarchical structure and decentralisation of institutional units (Kezar & Lester, 2009; Dill, 1999) do not organically lead to collegiality or to facilitate communication. Similarly, academics' specialisation in their disciplines tends to make them act individually and independently (Dill, 2005; Mintzberg, 1979), and once they get used to working individually for years, they may lack necessary skills for working in teams (Kezar & Lester, 2009). Further, Senge (2000) claims that HEIs still tend to value teaching over learning, see learning to flow vertically from the expert to the novice and are also slow to change. Another point to consider is that current environments at HEIs seem to foster academic individuality and competition for rewards, which prevent collaboration (Kezar & Lester, 2009) and team learning. Limited internal knowledge sharing in HEIs (Dill, 1999) and academics' loyalty to their discipline rather than the whole institution (Knight & Trowler, 2000; Kezar & Lester, 2009; Kok & McDonald, 2017) can also be seen as hindering characteristics of HEIs that are not conducive to (team) learning. To my knowledge, HEIs are not fully familiar with the concept or operational details of LOs (at least in the HEIs I have worked for). Perhaps, this is because I only worked in HEIs in two developing countries. Nevertheless, I assert that comprehensive understanding of LOs and its applicability in HE contexts should also be studied by the leaders.

On the other hand, HEIs have certain characteristics that could be nurtured to become LOs. For example, academics could easily choose to be members of multiple communities of practice (White & Weathersby, 2005) in HEIs if they are motivated and/or trained (Kezar & Lester, 2009) to do so. Academics inherently learn while teaching and researching especially because HEIs are centres for generating knowledge (Bui & Baruch, 2013). Kolsaker (2008) suggests that academics show eagerness to improve their professional practices. Likewise, being critical thinkers that value evidence and inquiry-based approaches, academics' "... altruistic concern for students' educational experience ..." (Kolsaker, 2008, p. 516), and their interest in experimenting could be utilised to reach more systematic outcomes. HEIs (could) have faculty development centres that could facilitate relevant training and education. That is, academics keep learning during professional development schemes and appraisals (Knight & Trowler, 2000) and in other internal and external professional engagements. Additionally, Ambrose, Huston and Norman's (2005) study indicates that, when supported, academics are ready to get engaged in institutional goals. Although it has been a recent development since 2005, HEIs seem to be incorporating systems for collecting data by means of academic analytics and data mining (Baepler & Murdoch, 2010), which could systematise purposeful data collection.

In short, it would not be too wrong to say that while some academics prefer to work in isolation and/or prioritise their own focus area, there are others who are willing to contribute more than their fair share, lead or collaborate in teams, and they could be identified as 'internal networkers' (Senge, 2000), and HEIs have systems that could be (re)activated for shared goals. Hence, 'if there is a will there is a way': however, being aware of these features and dealing with them consciously is necessary if HEIs would like to establish sustainable quality-focused academic environments which are also LOs. (See Table 5.4 for a summary).

*Table 5.4*

Summary of Hindering and Supporting Aspects of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), on Issues Related with External Quality Assurance (EQA) and Becoming Learning Organisation (LO)

Hindering aspects of HEIs	Supporting aspects of HEIs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative/sceptical faculty perceptions of EQA (managerialism, bureaucracy, compliance, does not really enhance students' experiences, instrumental)</li> <li>• Loosely-coupled systems, internal knowledge transfer/communication is limited or non-existent</li> <li>• Slow to change, still focuses on teaching rather than learning</li> <li>• Academic competition</li> <li>• Values autonomy and being the expert</li> <li>• Hierarchical structure</li> <li>• Lack of awareness of the concept of LOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive faculty perceptions of EQA (brings institutional reputation, makes HEIs more organised, opportunity for self-reflection)</li> <li>• Familiar with systematic and scientific ways of thinking</li> <li>• Communities of practice for shared goals</li> <li>• (Can easily) institute systems for faculty improvement</li> <li>• (Can easily) institute systems to collect data</li> <li>• Academics aspire to be engaged when supported</li> </ul>

### **Common Aspects of (Team) Learning in Learning Organisations and Educationists' Learning**

The common aspects of learning in organisations and professional learning of educationists, and what might prevent this opportunity in HEIs, and the potential role of EQA processes were discussed in the preceding section (see table 5.5 for a summary). Those who endorse the concept of becoming a learning organisation during EQA processes need to be aware of how mental models could affect individuals' learning, which influence institutional learning. Table 5.5 also lists the conditions in a HEI that foster an environment which is conducive to institutional learning.

Table 5.5

Summary of Common Aspects of (Team) Learning in Learning Organisations (LO) and Educationists' Learning, External QA and Quality-Oriented Higher Education Institutions (HEI)

Main principles*	Rationale	What hinders or supports individual learning **	What supports professionals' learning in teams***	Potential impact of EQA	Conditions for creating sustainable quality-oriented HEIs ****
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shared vision/purposes</li> <li>- Reflective professional dialogues on practices</li> <li>- Collective generation of knowledge</li> <li>- Collaborative engagement in developmental activities</li> <li>- Collecting data</li> <li>- Being open to diverse opinions</li> <li>- Work-based learning</li> </ul>	<p>“Organisations learn only through individuals who learn.” (Senge, 1990, p.124)</p>	<p>Baggage (past experiences, background)</p> <p>Future possible selves/ professional goals and orientation</p> <p>Mental models</p> <p>Affective aspects of the learning environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• seeking feedback</li> <li>• sharing information</li> <li>• asking for help</li> <li>• talking about errors</li> <li>• experimenting</li> <li>• not being afraid of admitting mistakes</li> <li>• discussing alternative views</li> <li>• experimentation</li> <li>• feeding forward</li> <li>• evaluative inquiry</li> <li>• finding satisfaction and meaning</li> </ul>	<p>EQA processes could be a catalyst to enhance team learning in HEIs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The vision is collectively (re)defined and shared.</li> <li>• Individuals are heard.</li> <li>• Communication is open and frequent.</li> <li>• Goals are clear.</li> <li>• Trust is built.</li> <li>• Assumptions are dealt with.</li> <li>• Learning is not only associated with cognition.</li> <li>• Learning is associated with emotions, affective factors, and interpersonal needs.</li> <li>• Institution is committed to learning and continuous improvement, allows budget for it.</li> <li>• Leaders admit that it is not easy, requires patience, commitment, and involvement and that they model the expected behaviour</li> </ul>

\* (Senge, 1990; Garvin, 2000; Stoll et al., 2006).

\*\* (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Senge, 1990).

\*\*\* (Edmondson, 2004; Kezar & Lester, 2009).

\*\*\*\* (Garvin et al., 2008; Kezar, 2005b; Edmondson, 1999; Gordon, 1999).

### **The Conceptualised Leadership Model**

When older or more recent studies are reviewed, one notices that not only LO literature but also educational leadership literature repeatedly emphasises three things in particular: a) studying the local and external context of the HEI well (see Ramsden, 1998, McCaffery, 2010), b) investing time in human resources, trust and other emotional needs (Kezar, 2004; Hargreaves, 1994; Knight and Trowler, 2000; Middlehurst, 2004; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2014), and c) becoming a leader who is dedicated to learning and models the expected behaviour (see Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008; Fullan, 2005; Ramsden, 1998; Knight & Trowler, 2000; McCaffery, 2010). Amalgamating my insights with the findings of the current study and the literature review, I developed a quality-focused academic leadership model for learning HEIs that would like to use EQA processes as a catalyst to become LOs (See Figure 5.1). I should highlight that this model has two main presuppositions that are noteworthy: a) an academic leader should already be equipped with sound knowledge of pedagogy, curriculum design, assessment of learning as well as relevant university policies, budgetary and fiscal procedures, and b) the term ‘academic leader’ is used for all levels of institutional leaders who are responsible for both managing and leading. A brief explanation of the model will follow Figure 5.1.

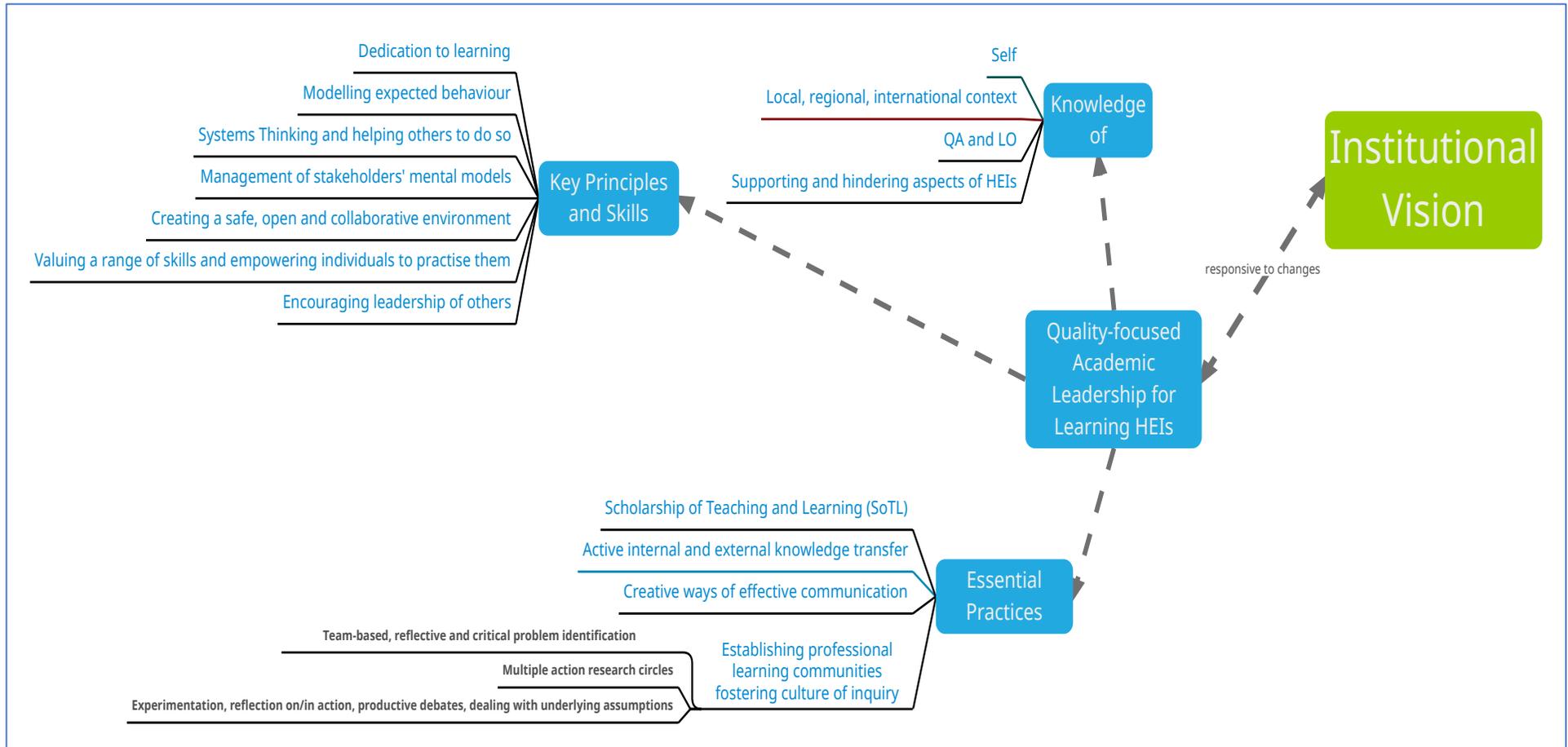


Figure 5.1 A leadership model to utilise external QA processes to become learning organisations in higher education institutions.

First and foremost, this model highlights the crucial role academic leaders play in enacting institutional vision, and ensuring that it becomes a shared vision by motivating and empowering individuals to work for it collectively (Kezar & Carducci, 2009; Senge, 1990). This is essential because institutional practices need to be congruent with institutional vision and mission, as highlighted repeatedly in both QA and LO literature. The dashed lines are used to leave room for contingencies suggesting that the vision could be revised due to external and internal changes. The line between the leadership and vision also suggests that the leaders' knowledge, skills and the practices, which they would be instituting, associate with the institutional vision. Otherwise, a mismatch could not produce harmonious outcomes. To exemplify, if the institutional vision is to use external QA processes to become a learning organisation, and the leaders do not fully support the idea, or do not know how to work with the supporting and hindering aspects of HEIs, neither the institutional environment nor the practices could lead to the vision. More details about the model are explained below.

Common sense suggests that it is very important to know one's strengths and weaknesses, and to understand what can be changed and what should be accepted. Leadership in HEIs has many complexities, and requires leaders to know themselves and their local, regional and international contexts well (McCaffery, 2010). Academic leaders face numerous pressures, which include sustaining quality with decreasing resources (Ramsden, 1998), budget constraints introduced by government policies, internal political issues and balancing their own personal and professional lives (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008; McCaffery, 2010). Therefore, it is important to control one's emotions, be adaptable when sudden changes are introduced, and keep calm (Ramsden, 1998), which requires self-awareness (McCaffery, 2010). Literature also reiterates that academic leadership is contextually shaped, which necessitates a mindful approach to dealing with issues (see McCaffery, 2010; Ramsden, 1998; Bryman, 2007). Concomitant with the context, it is also essential for leaders to be aware of the positive and negative perceptions of EQA processes as well as the idiosyncrasies of academia within the institution that may impede or support their institution in becoming a learning organisation (see Table 5.4 for a summary).

Being willing to know oneself and the contextual knowledge arguably indicates that one is also willing to be a learning leader. This includes one's awareness of learning in the new era, which is not any more flowing from the expert to the novice (Senge, 2000), which is a huge paradigm shift for many in academia. However, learning leaders admit this, and see the big picture of the institution's vision. Another thing that is crucial to accept is that the

journey to become a learning organisation during EQA is not easy, requiring skilful steering to attain changes that take time to emerge (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008). As Gordon (2002) suggests, quality-focused leadership necessitates "... patience, commitment, and widespread involvement." (p.103).

While studying the contextual realities, learning leaders need to give special attention to understand the mental models that shape the individuals' perceptions, level of motivation to learn and the quality of interaction in the environment (Stoll et al., 2006). However, it would not be wise to hope that solely studying the mental models will be sufficient. Leaders need to instil the desired behaviour by being committed to 'walk the talk' (see McCaffery, 2010; Waters & Cameron, 2007). For example, if they want people to be open to alternative views, or admit mistakes and learn from them in teams, leaders should embody these behaviours without being defensive. This comment is also consistent with what is argued in most of the leadership literature (see Ramsden, 1998; Bryman, 2007) probably as "... leaders are instrumental in setting a tone for the types of relationships that will develop." (Kezar, 2004, p.43).

When people feel that the environment is psychologically safe, and trust is built, it is easier to expect collaborative activities to take place (Kezar & Lester, 2009), because as Yukl (2008) summarises "Relations-oriented behaviors can reduce stress, build mutual trust and cooperation, increase collective identification with the team or organization, and facilitate performance by individuals and teams" (p.712). People experiment with ideas, engage in productive dialogues and debates, share information and practices unreservedly. Leadership literature also indicates that followers expect leaders to provide clear directions, guidance and structure (see Bryman, 2007; Ramsden, 1998; McCaffery, 2010). In a psychologically safe environment, it would be easier for leaders to develop clear goals based on the mutually agreed shared vision to improve practices such as instructional effectiveness, assessment of learning and other educational activities. These goals entail systematic experimentation, data collection and analysis, and internal and external information transfer, which are typical practices in LOs.

It is also important to mention how empowering different people's various skills is essential - another reiterated recommendation for leaders (Scott et al., 2008; McCaffery, 2010). While some people are more research-oriented, others may be more teaching-oriented. Skills, interests, experience and expertise of both parties could be utilised to reach shared goals collegially. Acknowledging that some people will always be more committed to

institutional matters than others, academic leaders could enhance institutional learning by noticing ‘local line leaders’ or ‘resourceful internal networkers’ (Senge, 2000) and encouraging them to lead, which is another expected leadership skill that can influence organisational effectiveness (Yukl, 2008).

Scott et al. (2008) refer to the scarcity of the studies (being less than 30), which investigates the relationship between the role of leadership and student outcomes, and claim that it is a sign of detachment from the fundamental responsibility of the job. This is especially striking when one considers the number of books on leadership being 25,784 in the same year, as reported in Middlehurst (2008). The abundance of the rhetorical and the lack of practical and well-researched resources is an issue (Scott et al., 2008). Many aspects of the leadership model presented here are consistent with a practice-based study that was conducted in Australia by Scott et al. (2008) as well as aspects of relevant HE leadership models from previous work. It also resonates well with a recent study called “What makes a school a learning organisation?” funded by OECD, highlighting how an integrative approach to learning is necessary to meet the demands of the new era. I also agree with Ramsden (1998) who compares good leadership with good teaching, which requires good planning and managing the classroom with engaging activities in a safe and collaborative environment that would allow learners to construct knowledge based on the learning goal and effective formative feedback.

To be more specific, I will list what concrete practices could be implemented once the leadership is equipped with self and contextual knowledge, and geared for enacting the institutional vision in collaboration with their colleagues:

- 1- Establishing professional learning communities to foster culture of inquiry by
  - a) Team-based, reflective and critical problem identification
  - b) Multiple action research circles to improve mutually specified focus points to establish a collaborative culture of inquiry.
  - c) Experimentation, reflection in/on action, productive debates, and dealing with underlying assumptions.
- 2- Incorporating scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) that may also include peer observations and collaborative interdisciplinary research.
- 3- Effective internal and external knowledge transfer of individually or collaboratively generated knowledge.

- 4- Creative ways of communicating institutional decisions, activities, collaboration opportunities, research activities and success stories.
- 5- Ensuring that all the above are done formally and systematically.

Admittedly, what is described here may sound rhetorical and aspirational. However, ‘a new generation of leadership’ is necessary in HEIs as described in Scott et al. (2008), who state that “There is ample evidence of how critical the presence of effective and capable leaders is to workplace productivity, morale and making essential change work in our universities.” (Scott et al., 2008, p. vii). This is also consistent with what Ramsden (1998) claimed two decades ago. Altbach (2011) states that “Modern academic leadership is an increasingly complex and multifaceted task, and finding talented leaders is difficult.” (p.68) and highlights how the traditional election of leaders for short terms based on their seniority and research productivity increasingly becomes impractical in the new era when countless skills are expected of academic leaders. In other words, the idealistic nature of the model I developed shares its elusiveness with its guiding LO theory. It also shares many idealistic aspects of modern academic leadership models in the researched-informed relevant literature (see Clark, 2015; Stoll et al., 2008; Kok & McDonald, 2017; McCaffery, 2011). How to increase the number of talented quality-focused academic leaders in HEIs is certainly a clear need and challenge, which is beyond the scope of this study. However, some ideas that could support (future) academic leaders based on the insights gained from the literature may be as follows:

- 1) Electing academic leaders based on their motivation, skills and personalities rather than their research productivity may be considered, mainly because someone whose primary interest lies in their research may not fully commit themselves to the demands of quality-focused leadership model.
- 2) Ensuring leadership of others such as ‘resourceful internal networkers’ (Senge, 2000), who are committed to learning, institutional vision and continuous improvement.
- 3) Shadowing academic leaders on-the-job (Ramsden, 1998) may help candidates to learn the context and evaluate what they could or could not do. Considering how teachers’ professional learning benefits from mentoring programmes and they are encouraged to continuously learn to stay relevant and effective, it makes sense for people leading teams in HE settings that involve numerous complexities and conflicts to be committed to continuous learning and mentoring prospective

leaders, as when they “... take on more senior level responsibilities and ensure sustainable leadership through succession.” (Kools and Stoll, 2016, p.60).

- 4) Leaders can benefit from leadership training and development programmes that incorporate activities to “... foster, trust, communication, mutual respect, creative problem solving, and conflict resolution abilities within campus teams and work groups (Kezar & Carducci, 2009) as well as best practices in different contexts.
- 5) Frequent critical self-reflection based on received feedback from peers and colleagues as well as making use of available leadership resources (See Kezar & Carducci, 2009; Mintzberg, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

This study focused on the QA experience that interests almost all of the HEIs globally as presented in the literature review. Judging by its global prominence, it may not be too wrong to presuppose that QA will remain relevant in HEI contexts in the foreseeable future. Given that, despite its omnipresence, there are contested arguments on its value for sustainable quality enhancement of students' experiences in HEIs (Harvey and Newton 2004; Dill, 1999), the current research investigated whether HEIs could use the occasion for institutional growth by becoming LOs for mainly two interconnected reasons. One, espoused aims of both QA and LOs are found to be very similar, and two, while HEIs are working on the QA standards, they could build a collegial environment that is committed to learning in order to face future challenges, which are the key principles of LOs. Both QA and LO concepts come from the business world, however unique characteristics of academia and the educational contexts require utmost attention to be paid by the leadership in HEIs. More importantly, specific institutional dynamics of the HEI in question and its context should be carefully studied preferably before implementing the QA processes, which require committed and well-trained leadership at all levels.

Acknowledging that what is proposed here does include many complexities, and putting the theoretical ideas into action is challenging, I hope the knowledge generated in this practice-based study would offer some recommendations for HE practitioners; more specifically for the ones who hold leadership positions.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

This case study explored the possibility of making use of a globally significant practice in higher education, namely external quality assurance (EQA), as a means for institutions to establish and/or strengthen essential learning environments and practices supported by the kind of leadership that is observed in learning organisations (LO). Several authors have argued convincingly that HEIs should become LOs to sustain themselves and stimulate growth (Dill, 1999; Boyce, 2003; Bess & Dee, 2008; Bui & Baruch, 2012; White & Weathersby, 2005). Although policy-makers are criticised because compliance and control may be perceived to overshadow the quality aspect (Hodson & Thomas, 2003), QA (or its variations) is likely to continue to be a part of institutional practice in the foreseeable future (Singh, 2010; Altbach et al., 2010). In response to these criticisms and in order to establish sustainable growth and have a positive impact on students' academic experiences in HEIs, improved models focusing on quality enhancement have been designed (see Harvey and Newton, 2004; Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001). When these models are reviewed, one notices many aspects of LOs in them. The emergent results of my study suggest that sustainable growth in HEIs could potentially be experienced by utilising EQA processes: nevertheless, quality-focused leadership matters and context shapes HEIs' experiences.

The following section will start with the limitations of the study, and will go on with some specific recommendations for the HEI in which this study took place, for the accrediting bodies and for future researchers. The chapter will conclude with a brief reflection on the thesis journey.

### **Limitations**

Even though mixed methodology incorporating multiple sources of evidence was employed to gain a greater level of confidence in results, this case study was conducted in one single institution and has certain limitations. They could be summarised in four groups: limitations related to the level of participation, to the expatriate status and diverse cultural background of the institutional members coming from over 50 different countries working for the national aims of a federal HEI in a Muslim country, to the selected LO framework that guided the study and to the researcher's role.

To begin with, administrative units such as Human Capital, Finances or Student Affairs, and the units that have not been accredited were excluded from the study as mentioned in Chapter 3. Thus, the findings mainly represent the views of academic units

rather than that of the whole institution, bearing in mind that a limited number of individuals (34%) responded even from the units included. Although this may seem to be a satisfactory response rate to form some opinions about the perceptions of the institutional members, it does not fully represent the rest of the institution. Additionally, due to its scope, the study did not include the perceptions of other stakeholders such as the students, graduates, community, parents, target employers, and other possible constituents. Despite the richness of the content of the interviews, a relatively small number of people's input were taken into consideration.

Another limitation of the study could be the cultural and social context of its setting. The perceptions of the faculty members with diverse cultural backgrounds may have had an impact on their comments, which might have affected the results. While diversity could be considered as a strength, in an institution functioning in a traditional society with very modern aspirations and achievements, this might have caused additional complexities. For example, certain concepts such as leadership, open-mindedness, experimentation or collegial decision-making may imply different things to different individuals especially if they are also coming from different cultures. Because the majority of the institutional members are expatriates in the UAE, their residency and livelihood depends on their employability in the HEI. This might have resulted in certain censorship while they were answering survey or interview questions.

Due to the elusive nature of LO concept (See Örténblad, 2004; 2013; Garvin, 1993; Marsick & Watkins, 2003), it was necessary to use a practice-based LO framework, which guided the study analytically. This specific framework was chosen mainly because it aimed to diagnose certain strengths and weaknesses in organisational units of any number to stimulate dialogue for development (Garvin et al., 2008), and the framework made clear sense to the researcher, who was looking for practical guidance for implementation. However, the developers designed it bearing the corporate world in mind, and it has not been widely used in the educational context. As the scope of the study was not to test its validity, only a few words were adapted to fit better in an educational context. While working on aspects of it during the data analysis stages, the researcher noticed that the survey tool did not include specific questions to assess the shared vision, teamwork, collegial decision-making, or continuous improvement. The scholars must have interpreted that if the certain practices suggested by the statements of the survey tool (See Appendix 2) are enacted, the unit must be experiencing these concepts. Santa (2015) critiqued LO concept from a 'good' theory perspective concluding that despite it being "... a truly global event." (p.254), it still needs more empirical research and better measurement instruments to improve its validity and

statistical significance. This suggests that none of the measuring tools have yet matured. Thus, the tool I used is another limitation of this study.

Last but certainly not least, the study was conducted by a novice insider researcher, who is still learning to become a practitioner researcher. Her design, her approach to the different stages of the data collection and her interpretation of the data could have been more efficient. For example, more units and more interviews could have been conducted. More people could have been convinced to respond to the survey, perhaps by introducing the survey to the potential participants in faculty meetings. The researcher's statistical knowledge is also limited. That is, despite her hard work and efforts, many aspects of this research could have been handled differently. Additionally, she might have not been able to capture some nuances in the institutional dynamics as she is comparatively new in the context, and is not an Arabic speaker. Finally, as the researcher has not held a position during any of the accreditation processes, some of her comments may be less practice, but more theory-based.

Despite the preceding limitations, the findings of the study are consistent with the literature (as discussed in Chapter 5), which gave confidence to the researcher to develop a quality-focused learning leadership model (See Chapter 5, Figure 5.1). The study also allowed her to identify specific recommendations, which will be listed in the next section.

## **Recommendations**

### **For Zayed University**

When one overviews Zayed University's website for its mission, vision, values and objectives (Zayed University, 2016), one notices many concepts that highlight how it pledges offering quality education at high international standards, creating environments that are conducive to creativity, innovation, collaboration and transparent communication, and ensuring leadership that respects, that is open to diversity and collaboration with constituents within and outside the university. The university has had many achievements in its short history. It has high aspirations for the future and great potential with qualified faculty, cutting-edge educational environments and budget to enact its espoused values.

Recently, many initiatives have been undertaken. For example, in order to enhance educational effectiveness, ZU has built partnership with U.K.'s Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2015). In addition to the 50 members who were supported in 2016-2017 academic year, another 50 faculty members will be supported by the Center for Educational Innovation in 2017-2018 academic year to build their claims for the fellowship through this partnership. On January 10, 2017, a campus-wide collaborative SWOT analysis activity, which was

initiated by the provost, brought together 650 ZU members in randomly distributed groups of 25 to (re)establish the concept of shared governance at ZU. Each group discussed and presented their SWOT analysis regarding shared governance. Overall results were shared with the ZU members in the biannual Town Hall meeting that took place in May 2017. Amongst the threats and weaknesses to shared governance mentioned more than five times were lack of trust, faculty morale and communication issues, which are consistent with my findings. That is, at a time period when ZU has been working on improving the environment and the practices, the emergent recommendations from my study that are listed below could offer insights to the decision makers and contribute to the institutional improvements.

- Developing a (renewed) shared vision considering the new context, which would shift the accountability aspect of quality assurance towards quality enhancement focusing on enhancing students' academic experiences.
- Ensuring consistency, efficiency and development of leadership at all levels.
- Redefining the meaning of experimentation institutionally, so that taking risks and honestly and critically analysing mistakes become part of institutional practices.
- Implementing more purposeful and systematic ways of data collection, which involves collaborative debates, analysis of underlying assumptions (for example, via conducting multiple action research cycles on certain areas such as developing effective rubrics, or creative ways of teaching and assessment of learning, or developing students' employability skills, or dealing with students' linguistic limitations both in academic Arabic and English languages). These could be undertaken by several communities of practice with big picture, i.e. the renewed shared vision in mind. Such initiatives could encourage some interdisciplinary and collaborative research, which may lead to effective collaborative learning.
- Transferring internal best-practices effectively so that what has been found useful could be emulated in other units. The innovators of good ideas could be empowered as facilitators to inspire others.
- Clearly identifying competitors or best-in-class institutions to benchmark against as learning may also occur from others' experiences (Garvin, 1993). However, as Garvin (1993) indicates, systematising this practice by planning what to investigate, how to do that, and how to implement the new learning rather than merely imitating something without analysing it is essential.

- Implementing better and innovative platforms for communication (of decisions, instructional ideas, collaborative research opportunities, updated institutional and academic achievements, and the like.) perhaps by developing user-friendly mobile applications and/or other online platforms.
- Valuing and investing in the research and teaching strands as well as empowering a range of individuals' skills so as to strengthen the strands may be considered. Current tendency is to expect the same commitment for research and teaching from faculty whose interests and skills may not be equally distributed. This causes stress and may result in weak performance in both areas.

### **For External Quality Assurance Policy Makers**

Seemingly, QA agencies worldwide have been seeking ways to improve their impact and effectiveness globally by emphasising self-regulation and sustainable quality enhancement (Altbach et al., 2010; El-Khawas, 2013; Billing, 2004). Some recommendations emerging from this study may give insights to EQA policy makers.

First of all, institutions should be guided to define their own shared governance concept based on their own contexts because not everybody in every culture has similar understanding of the concept or could operationalise it due to contextual realities. Many HEIs try to comply with what is prescribed by the QA agencies even though they sometimes complain about their requirements. Criteria could be redesigned in such a way that HEIs could give clearer evidence of some expected practices. For example, leader behaviour could be detailed (i.e. inviting alternative viewpoints, resolving conflicts, treating mistakes, digging into underlying assumptions, encouraging experimentation and taking risks). Meeting minutes could be redesigned to evidence these activities. Similarly, information collection and learning from the competitors and best-in-class institutions for benchmarking purposes could be added to the criteria. Some guidelines on how to plan, investigate, process and implement the gathered information should also be added while expecting evidence of activities as such. Additional ideas are as follows:

- A scale could be developed for those HEIs which would also like to utilise EQA to become LOs (for example, satisfactory- passed the accreditation, exemplary- used the processes to excel into becoming a learning organisation).
- Follow up procedures could be extended, reinforcing effective self-regulatory mechanisms and guidance should be provided at all times.

As for the local QA providers, it may be an idea to coordinate with the international QA agency that the institution has been working and apply some flexibility for the HEI that has already established a QA mechanism.

### **For Future Research**

As policy makers have become increasingly aware of the need to foster educational institutions as LOs for 21<sup>st</sup> century learners (OECD, 2016), the need for measuring tools to assess strengths and weaknesses of an institution as a learning organization, and to create dialogue and debates for improvements becomes pressing. This study has demonstrated the potential value of Garvin et al.'s (2008) framework. Thus, a next step would be to collaborate with the framework developers to contribute to its validation in educational settings. This could be achieved by replication of the current study in other contexts I have access to, either to those that have similarities to ZU or the ones in different cultural contexts. In addition, the leadership model discussed in this thesis is at an early stage of development. Further empirical and theoretical work to test the ideas is needed. There is a small body of literature on the impact of QA in HEIs to enhance learners' educational experiences, and on leadership issues in HEIs to which this study has a contribution to make (Stoll et al. 2008; Stensaker, 2011; Stensaker & Lieber, 2014; Mårtensson, Roxå, & Stensaker 2014; Blanco Ramírez & Berger, 2014). Collaborating with colleagues whose work resonates with the current study could expand the impact of this study as part of a wider endeavour. Future research could also include input from other stakeholders such as students, community, employers, and the excluded units of the institution. Last but not least, another **research** idea could be focusing on **only** one aspect of the LO framework to scrutinise. For example, only the institutional practices could be chosen to investigate further and relevant data could be collected to diagnose what specific experimentation or data collection practices could be improved.

### **Final thoughts**

This study enabled me to formulate and conduct a practice-based inquiry in my workplace. I worked very hard to avoid insider bias by incorporating a clear analytical framework, mixing methods and working with a critical friend, who previously had an active role in this institution's accreditation processes. I found the interview stage of the research the most interesting and fulfilling, as it was an opportunity to exchange ideas between two intellectuals focusing on a certain topic of mutual interest that are also concerned with improving their working environment. Interviews also offered an opportunity for me to share

the main characteristics of LOs with ten people who were less informed about the concept and principles of LOs in an intensive, thought-provoking and dialogic setting. How the interview questions helped the interviewees to self-reflect on pertinent institutional management issues was another positive outcome of the experience.

Bearing in mind that learning is a continuous journey, which can be a goal in itself rather than a destination to reach, institutions that opt for becoming LOs should consider it as vision not a panacea (Marsick & Watkins, 1999b). Thus, the specific recommendations made for the host institution, for the accrediting bodies and the leadership model that have emerged as a result of this study may be found relevant by the local, regional and international practitioners.

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## Appendix 1

## Ethical Approval Form

Dear Burcu Tezcan Unal		
I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.		
Sub-Committee:	EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)	
Review type:	Expedited	
PI:		
School:	Lifelong Learning	
Title:	External international quality assurance at a higher education institution and becoming a Learning Organisation: A Case study in the United Arab Emirates	
First Reviewer:	Dr. Marco Ferreira	
Second Reviewer:	Dr. Michael Watts	
Other members of the Committee	Dr. Lucilla Crosta (co-chair), Martin Gough, Janet Hanson.	
Date of Approval:	28 <sup>th</sup> June 2016	
The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:		
Conditions		
1	Mandatory	M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD Thesis Primary Supervisor.
<p>This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at <a href="http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc">http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc</a>.</p> <p>Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher's behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).</p>		
Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.		

Kind regards,

Marco Ferreira

Co-Chair, EdD. VPREC

## Appendix 2

## Participant Information Sheet and Survey Questions

**Title of the Study:** External international quality assurance at a higher education institution and becoming a learning organisation: A Case study in the United Arab Emirates

**Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore how external accreditation quality assurance processes, which Zayed University has been going through for over ten years, influenced the institution as an organisation that learns.

**Permission Granted**

Both Zayed University and the University of Liverpool have given ethical approval for this study.

**Risks and Benefits**

Your participation will remain anonymous. I will send to your ZU email inboxes a link to an anonymous online version of the survey (via SurveyMonkey) for you to complete. If you prefer, you can choose to use the hard copy, which will not require any identification details. You can send it back to me via ZU's internal mailing system without signing your names, thus ensuring complete anonymity.

Other than the first two questions, you can skip any question(s) that you feel uncomfortable answering.

All the participating members of ZU may benefit from reflecting on their practices, working environment and leadership issues and by reviewing the findings of this study, which would potentially offer recommendations. Benefits to participation are purely altruistic in nature as no other compensation is provided. Risk is minimal and no more than encountered in daily life.

**Name of Researcher, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Burcu Tezcan-Unal

Instructor, Academic Bridge Program, Zayed University

Doctoral Student , *Leadership in Higher Education*, the University of Liverpool (Online EdD programme)

056 1486067, 04021392 [Burcu.Tezcan-Unal@zu.ac.ae/](mailto:Burcu.Tezcan-Unal@zu.ac.ae/)

[burcu.tezcanunal@online.liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:burcu.tezcanunal@online.liverpool.ac.uk)

**Questions/Concerns**



### **The Learning Organisation Survey**

developed by David Garvin, Amy Edmondson, Francesca Gino (2008).

#### **Basic Demographics**

This research includes the degree-granting colleges. Therefore, members of ABP, UC and other units are excluded from it.

1- Choose the college you work for the majority of your time. (This question requires answer.)

- College of Arts and Creative Enterprises
- College of Business
- College of Communication & Media Sciences
- College of Education
- College of Technological Innovation
- College of Sustainability Sciences and Humanities

2- Choose the best option that describes your workload (in one academic year) in the college you are answering these questions for.

(This question requires answer.)

- 100% (Full time)
- 75%
- 50%
- 25% (one course each term)
- 10% (one course a term)





24. This college frequently employs prototypes or simulations when trying out new ideas.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
25. This college systematically collects information on competitors.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
26. This college systematically collects information on students.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
27. This college systematically collects information on economic and social trends.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
28. This college systematically collects information on technological trends.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
29. This college frequently compares its performance to competitors.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
30. This college frequently compares its performance to best-in-class organisations.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
31. This college engages in productive conflict and debate during discussions.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
32. This college seeks out dissenting views during discussions.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
33. This college never revisits well-established perspectives during discussions.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
34. In this college, we frequently identify and discuss underlying assumptions that might affect key decisions.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
35. This college never pays attention to different views during discussions.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
36. Newly hired members in this college receive adequate training.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

37. Experienced members in this college receive periodic training and training updates.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
38. Experienced members in this college receive training when switching to a new position.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
39. Experienced members in this college receive training when new initiatives are launched.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
40. In this college, training is valued.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
41. In this college, time is made available for education and training activities.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
42. This college has forums for meeting with and learning from experts from other departments/ teams/ divisions.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
43. This college has forums for meeting with and learning from experts from outside the organisation.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
44. This college has forums for meeting with and learning from customers/clients/students.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
45. This college has forums for meeting with and learning from suppliers (such as feeding high school, federal and private funders, etc.)	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
46. This college regularly shares information with networks of experts within the organisation.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
47. This college regularly shares information with networks of experts outside the organisation.	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

48. This college quickly and accurately conveys new knowledge to key decision makers.	<input type="radio"/>						
49. This college regularly conducts post-audits and after-action reviews.	<input type="radio"/>						

<b>Please respond to each item in terms of how descriptive it is of your work college.</b>					
<b>III- Leadership that supports learning</b>	Never	Infrequently	Sometimes	Often	Always
50. My manager(s) invite(s) input from others in discussions.	<input type="radio"/>				
51. My manager(s) acknowledge(s) his/her own limitations with respect to knowledge, information, or expertise.	<input type="radio"/>				
52. My manager(s) ask(s) probing questions.	<input type="radio"/>				
53. My manager(s) listen(s) attentively.	<input type="radio"/>				
54. My manager(s) encourage(s) multiple points of view.	<input type="radio"/>				
55. My manager(s) establish(es) forums for and provide(s) time and resources for identifying problems and organisational challenges.	<input type="radio"/>				
56. My manager(s) establish(es) forums for and provide(s) time and resources for reflecting and improving on past performance.	<input type="radio"/>				
57. My manager(s) criticize(s) views different from his/her own.	<input type="radio"/>				

## Appendix 3

## Interview Protocol

**Name of Researcher, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Burcu Tezcan-Unal

Instructor, Academic Bridge Program, Zayed University

Doctoral Student, *Leadership in Higher Education*, the University of Liverpool (Online EdD programme)

056 1486067, 04021392 [Burcu.Tezcan-Unal@zu.ac.ae/](mailto:Burcu.Tezcan-Unal@zu.ac.ae/)

[burcu.tezcanunal@online.liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:burcu.tezcanunal@online.liverpool.ac.uk)

**Title of the Study:**

External international quality assurance at a higher education institution and becoming a learning organisation: A Case study in the United Arab Emirates

**Invitation Paragraph**

You are being invited to voluntarily participate in a research study. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask me if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand.

*Thank you for reading this.*

**Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore how external accreditation quality assurance processes, which Zayed University has been going through for over ten years, influenced the institution as an organisation that learns.

**Your participation**

Having played a key role during or after the quality assurance processes at ZU as an institution or in your college, your participation in this part of the research will enhance my understanding of the influence of external international quality assurance processes. My questions to you will be based on my interpretation of the documentary analysis and the Learning Organisation Survey survey results.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at anytime without explanation and without experiencing a disadvantage. Your identity and your job title will remain strictly confidential and no identifying characteristics will appear on any written or oral forms when the findings are reported.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview of which questions are based on the first two stages of the thesis project, i.e. documentary analysis and LOS survey

results. The interview will take approximately 40 minutes and will be audio recorded. The questions will aim to widen my understanding of the influence of external international quality assurance processes at ZU, both at institutional and college level, on becoming a learning organisation.

If you agree to participate I will:

- ask you to read this consent form giving you 5 days to ask for clarification before signing it,
- make one interview appointment with you in your office that will take about 40 minutes,
- ask you to comment on some questions that would enhance my understanding of the research question,
- audio-record the interview,
- transcribe it as soon as possible,
- ask you to read and confirm the transcribed version of our conversation

### **Permission Granted**

Both Zayed University and the University of Liverpool have given ethical approval for this study.

### **Risks and Benefits**

All the participating members of ZU may benefit from reflecting on their practices, working environment and leadership issues and by reviewing the findings of this study, which would potentially offer recommendations. Benefits to participation are purely altruistic in nature as no other compensation is provided. Risks are no more than encountered in ordinary daily practice. In other words, the potential benefits that ZU and your college will gain as a result of this research will outweigh the potential uneasiness it may cause at times.

### **Confidentiality**

In all cases, participants' identity information will be anonymised, and the privacy of the interviewee and their job title will be safeguarded. Data will be stored for at least 5 years with adequate provisions to maintain confidentiality.

### **Results of the study**

Successful completion of this study will result in a publishable doctoral thesis. The findings from this study may be used for submissions to relevant journals and conferences. Zayed University has approved this research study.

### **Withdrawal from the study**

You can withdraw at anytime, without explanation. Results up to the period of withdrawal may be used, if you are happy for this to be done. Otherwise you may request that they are destroyed and no further use is made of them. However, please note that, as the results

will be anonymised, your withdrawal should be prior to anonymisation for your data to be removed.

### **Questions/Concerns**

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let me know by contacting burcu.tezcanunal@online.liverpool.ac.uk and I will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to me with then you could contact my supervisor whose details can be seen below or contact the Research Governance Officer at ethics@liv.ac.uk. When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher(s) involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

### **Contact Details**

#### **My contact details are:**

Burcu Tezcan-Unal

0561486067

[z9685@zu.ac.ae](mailto:z9685@zu.ac.ae) / [Burcu.tezcanunal@online.liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:Burcu.tezcanunal@online.liverpool.ac.uk)

Zayed Univeristy, Academic City, PO.Box 19282, Dubai, UAE

#### **My Supervisor's contact details are:**

Dr. Kalman Winston

[kalman.winston@online.liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:kalman.winston@online.liverpool.ac.uk)

### **The contact details of the Research Participant Advocate at the University of Liverpool are:**

001-612-312-1210 (USA number)

Email address [liverpoolethics@ohecampus.com](mailto:liverpoolethics@ohecampus.com)

Please keep/print a copy of the Participant Information Sheet for your reference. Please contact me and/or the Research Participant Advocate at the University of Liverpool with any question or concerns you may have.

F. Burcu Tezcan-Unal

---

Researcher

---

Date

---

Signature

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Decision-making environment**

- Could you describe the atmosphere/environment while discussions were actually happening? Were the participants comfortable expressing their opinions and offering alternative or conflicting ideas during and after the accreditation processes?
- Did the leaders actively seek alternative ideas? Did the leaders actively listen to different opinions? Can you describe their attitude while listening to opposing ideas? How was consensus reached in standing committees?

#### **Collegiality and shared vision**

- It seems that a lot of people contributed to the accreditation processes while working well together. How do you think they reached this collegiality? Were they ready for this challenge from Day 1 or were they slowly convinced as things evolved? How did they reach the shared vision (of gaining accreditation)? Are new ideas valued or do people resist new approaches? When you had to implement changes during the accreditation period, how was the general attitude? Has it changed in time?

#### **Experimentation and treatment of mistakes**

- Documents suggest that there were several occasions when taking risks, innovation, and/or experimentation were promoted. How were failures treated? How was success treated? Did you have time to critically reflect on both failures and success?

#### **Systematic data collection, evaluation, and information collection**

- When new ideas were tested during the accreditation process how were they conducted and evaluated? Was it systematic or more ad-hoc? Have these processes become part of your daily practices in the college?
- Can you elaborate on systematic information collection from competitors, best-in-class institutions, students, the general public, etc. considering current practices? How about information transfer in and out of the institution? What challenges may members be facing?

#### **Reflection**

- There are many references to the reflective aspect of the self studies, and how they contributed to improvements (esp. in MSCHE docs.). Tell me more about how you reflected on past performances to make improvements in the accreditation processes. Can you comment on your experiences during problem identification, especially

regarding dialogue and debates on possible solutions? How was time created for this during the accreditation processes? What about reflection on performance at other times?

**Underlying assumptions**

- While making decisions, solving problems, or dealing with institutional challenges do you allow time to deal with underlying assumptions and different viewpoints? How did your college manage these during the accreditation processes?

**Empowerment of skills**

- How were people's different skills and expertise utilised during the accreditation processes?

## Appendix 4

## PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (INTERVIEW)

<b>Title of Research Project:</b>	External international quality assurance at a higher education institution and becoming a learning organisation: A Case study in the United Arab Emirates.	<b>Please initial</b>
<b>Researcher:</b>	Burcu Tezcan-Unal	
1.	I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated June 26, 2016 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.	
3.	I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained by the use of pseudonyms and it will not be possible to identify me or my job title in any publications.	
4.	I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings to substantiate and complement the data analysis and survey stages of this research.	
5.	I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team (researcher and her supervisors) to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that no identifying characteristics will be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.	
6.	I understand that this study will be conducted under the close supervision of the researcher's thesis supervisor Dr. Kalman Winston of the University of Liverpool and I can contact him if I feel the need to.	
7.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____	_____	_____
Participant name	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

**Principal Investigator:**

Name Burcu Tezcan-Unal  
 Work Address Zayed University, UAE  
 Work Telephone 097144021392  
 Work Email [burcu.tezcanunal@online.liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:burcu.tezcanunal@online.liverpool.ac.uk)

**Thesis Supervisor**

Dr. Kalman Winston  
 The University of Liverpool

[kalman.winston@online.liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:kalman.winston@online.liverpool.ac.uk)