**Learning-oriented quality assurance in higher education institutions**

Burcu Tezcan-Unala, Kalman Winstonb, Anne Qualterc

Academic Bridge Program, Zayed University, Dubai, UAEa , University of Cambridgeb University of Liverpool, Liverpoolc, UK.

Burcu Tezcan-Unal, Zayed University, Academic City, Dubai, PO Box 19282 [Z9685@zu.ac.ae](mailto:Z9685@zu.ac.ae)

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9558-2669>

Twitter: @burcu.tezcan.unal

Facebook: Burcu Tezcan Unal

**Learning-oriented quality assurance in higher education institutions**

Many institutions allocate resources to assessment by external quality assurance bodies. Most such schemes aim to enhance students’ educational experiences. This elusive goal may be attainable by creating an inquiry-based institutional dynamism, which resonates with the main principles of learning organisations. This article discusses findings from a case study exploring the influence of US-Based accreditation experiences of an Arabic higher education institution on its development as a learning organisation. Employing mixed-methodology, data was primarily analysed with a specific learning organisation framework based on three building blocks: supportive learning environment, learning practices and leadership that supports learning. This relationship between external quality assurance and becoming a learning organisation in higher education institutions has not been studied widely. Thus, knowledge and recommendations based on this empirical study may offer insights to researchers and local, regional and international practitioners.

Keywords: quality assurance, accreditation, learning organisations, higher education, learning environment, learning practices, leadership

**Introduction**

External quality assurance practices in higher education have not effectively enhanced students’ learning experiences (Mårtensson *et al*., 2014). Since the 1990’s when the business concept of quality assurance emerged as a global higher education phenomenon (see Harvey and Newton, 2007; Altbach *et al*., 2010) empirical studies have led to a range of recommendations and several conceptual models for higher education (see Harvey and Newton, 2007; Blanco-Ramírez and Berger, 2014). While consensus has not been reached on a model (Ryan, 2015), there is agreement that institutions should ensure ownership and engagement of academic staff in matters of quality and accountability in collegial, inquiry-based, data-informed, self-regulatory and dialogic professional environments (Harvey and Newton, 2004; Fullan *et al*., 2015). This kind of institutional dynamics echoes the main principles of learning organisations including self-reflective, focused and evidence-based team learning (Senge, 1990). Although neither quality assurance agencies nor institutions explicitly aim to develop characteristics of learning organisations, there are potential benefits to be gained from external quality assurance processes where collegial team learning is reinforced to achieve sustained growth.

To explore whether external quality assurance practices could influence a higher education institution in becoming a learning organisation, a practice-based single case study was undertaken in an Arabian Gulf university that has undergone several institutional and specialised rounds of quality assurance from US-Based accrediting bodies. The study used a specific framework to operationalise the elusiveness of ‘learning organisation’, a concept comparable in its vagueness to that of ‘quality assurance’ in educational settings (Harvey and Green, 2003). We hope to contribute, with empirical knowledge, to the sparse literature that correlates external quality assurance experiences to aspects of learning organisations and their impact on institutions (Kezar, 2005; Elliott and Goh, 2013).

**External Quality Assurance, US-Based Accreditation and Learning Organisations**

Due to the growing demand for public accountability, quality assurance of higher education providers has become a common global practice (Altbach *et al*., 2010). Typically, semi-independent external reviewers assess and publicly report on institutions’ performance by referring to institutional self-evaluation, guided by predetermined standards (El-Khawas, 2013). Advocates argue that external quality assurance provides an opportunity for institutions to reflect on their practices, make improvements based on feedback (Elliott and Goh, 2013) and increase structural effectiveness (Stensaker, 2011). Others consider the intervention as a bureaucratic, box-ticking exercise that does not necessarily enhance students’ educational experiences, and creates a rather compliant institutional dynamic (Cardoso *et al.,* 2016). Nevertheless, external quality assurance remains relevant for higher education institutions worldwide (Singh, 2010; Stensaker and Lieber, 2015).

Amongst the schemes, the US-Based accreditation model may be the most influential (Blanco-Ramírez, 2015) in developing countries and also in some European institutions (Stensaker, 2011). With over 100 years of history in the US (CHEA, 2015), this model’s popularity might be related to its aspirational aspects which, in turn are associated with both accountability, and the establishment of internal, self-regulating, quality-enhancement focused procedures to meet the needs of changing contexts (Harvey and Newton, 2007; Elassy, 2015). If external quality assurance is thus seen as process rather than product (Stansaker and Lieber, 2015), then there may be commonalities between the US-Based accreditation model and the prominent principles of learning organisations, which are based on making use of people’s personal mastery (e.g. individual skills) and dealing with their mental models (e.g. beliefs and assumptions) for team learning to reach a collectively constructed shared vision based upon systems thinking (Senge, 1990).

While studies on the impact of quality assurance or the relevance of learning organisations in higher education exist, few investigated quality assurance processes using learning organisation lenses. Elliott and Goh (2013) studied four Canadian Business Schools that gained specialised accreditation from a prestigious US-Based agency, examining various perceptions on the contribution of the processes to organisational learning. They found that in three of the four schools the reflective stages of accreditation processes resulted in improvement of quality thanks to the focused feedback. The study highlighted the importance of leadership for engaging institutional members in evaluative inquiry that led to learning in the organisation. Olson (2016) undertook a comparative case study in one private and one public top-tier US-Based institution that were both accredited by a regional accrediting body. Olson inquired into the self-study stage of the accreditation process and explored its potential influence on systematising these practices beyond accreditation. He concluded that institutions could benefit from better follow-up procedures, as they tend not to refer back to their practices other than reactively fixing areas to improve noted in accreditors’ feedback. In both studies, researchers used normative descriptions of learning organisations that were popularised by Senge (1990).

However, Örtenblad (2004), Garvin (1993), Marsick and Watkins (2003) emphasised that study of learning organisation concepts requires using a more analytical framework. Thus, for the current study, Garvin *et al.*’s (2008) framework was selected as the main analytical lens, as it offered relative specificity, using building blocks of learning organisations described under three main constructs of learning environment, learning practices and leadership that supports learning. The framework was also accompanied by a publicly accessible survey instrument (Garvin *et al*., n.d.), designed to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of a unit considering the characteristics of learning organisations under the three main building blocks. Each block consists of sub-constructs with lists of statements for participants to reflect on current perceptions within their units (Garvin *et al*., 2008). This framework was designed and validated for the corporate world; however, what individuals expect from the environment, practices and leadership while working in educational settings resonates with this framework. Thus, the study was guided by this framework alongside other pertinent principles of learning organisations.

**Conceptualisation of the use of the framework and the external quality assurance processes**

Garvin, *et al.*’s (2008) learning organisation framework reflects several aspects of organisational learning theory: learning in practice-based settings as a result of social interaction (Lave and Wenger, 1991); learning as cognitive activity (Huber, 1991) that may emerge from individuals’ insights during dialogic interactions (Garvin, 1993; Nanoka, 2007), reflective action-learning resulting in changed behaviour as opposed to unplanned changes (Fiol and Lyles, 1985) and the quality of human relationships as a determinant for individuals to engage in activities that increase organisational learning opportunities (Garvin *et al*., 2008). The following briefly describes each building block of the framework, and its relevance to external quality assurance processes.

***Learning environment***

The sub-constructs of this block are psychological safety, appreciating differences, openness to new ideas, time for reflection. According to Garvin *et al*. (2008), the working environment in learning organisations encourages individuals to reflect critically on their practices considering the shared vision of the organisation. Feelings of safety impact on employees’ performance (Argote, 2012), communication (Edmondson, 1999) and the establishment of a quality culture in HEIs (Dzimińska *et al*., 2018). A review of the accreditation standards of several providers reveals that self-reflection on the congruence of institutional practices with the institutional vision is a major expectation, along with collective decision making. Typically, during accreditation processes, institutional members are encouraged to discuss and improve their assessment criteria, curricula and other relevant matters based on their own mission. It can then be posited that when academics evaluate their own issues and practices against the standards of quality assurance agencies in a psychologically safe working atmosphere, the prospects of learning as an organisation would be enhanced.

***Learning practices***

The sub-constructs of this block are experimentation, information collection, information transfer, analysis, education and training. Garvin *et al.* (2008) suggest that how organisational processes and practices are conducted indicates the extent to which they operate as learning organisations. For example, it matters how information is collected from various stakeholders as does the amount of time and budget they allocate for training and education. Similarly, it is important to assess how assumptions are dealt with, how new ideas and services are introduced, how individuals engage in debates to improve practices, and how newly generated information is transferred both within and outside the institution (Garvin, 1993; 2000). Given that higher education institutions generate knowledge in teams, some useful practices may be instituted via accreditation processes.

***Leadership that supports learning***

Garvin *et al.* (2008) stress that leaders’ behaviours have a strong influence on organisational learning: leaders need to model behaviour that they expect of employees. Additionally, leaders need to empower employees and create environments where employees can debate matters without feeling intimidated. Garvin *et al*.’s (2008) description of corporate leadership is consistent with descriptions of contemporary educational leadership such as demonstrating expected behaviour, building capacity of teachers, and fostering collaborative cultures of inquiry, self-evaluation and purposeful interaction and communication in and out of the institution through a ‘systems thinking’ attitude (McCaffery, 2018; Fullan *et al*., 2015). In short, the leadership descriptions attributed to learning organisations were also evaluated as suitable to be used in this study.

**Research design and questions**

The preceding line of reasoning led us to hypothesise that an institution that has undergone extensive external quality assurance might have concurrently developed characteristics of learning organisations. Zayed University (ZU), the first author’s workplace, has allocated considerable resources to gaining US-Based accreditation in its relatively short history. Thus, this institution provided a suitable local context to explore the possible influence of US-based quality assurance processes in-depth. Acknowledging that it was neither the accreditors’ nor the institution’s intention, we hypothesised that the rigorous quality assurance processes might have influenced ZU’s environment and practices, helping it to develop some characteristics. Thus, we formulated the main research question:

*How have external quality processes influenced Zayed University (ZU) in becoming a learning organisation?*

The research was designed as an interpretive single case study, including all the degree granting colleges at ZU as the main unit of analysis, while two of the specially accredited colleges were chosen to further examine some issues. Being a member of ZU, the first author acted as an insider investigator, although she was also an outsider, as her department was included in neither the accreditation processes nor the study.

To address the multiple realities and complexities of the educational context (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), we applied methodological pragmatism, which allowed us to converge quantitative and qualitative data sources (Creswell, 2009). We generated the following sub-questions to operationalise practical methods for approaching the main question:

1. A. What aspects (if any) of the accreditation criteria relate with the characteristics of learning organisations?

B. Which ones (if any) are addressed in the institutional accreditation documents?

1. How do the current views of ZU’s colleges relate to what will have been found in the accreditation documents?
2. What are the perceptions of people holding different roles within the colleges related with accreditation processes and becoming a learning organisation?

**Research context**

This study was undertaken in Zayed University, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which was established in 1998. ZU was accredited by the Middle States Commission for Higher Education (MSCHE) in 2008, re-accredited in 2013 for another five years, and presented its periodic review report in 2018. Five of its seven degree granting colleges have also gained specialised accreditation. ZU has faculty members representing over 50 different countries, teaching approximately 10,000 mainly Emirati students. ZU’s values and objectives indicate that it pledges quality education at high international standards in creative, student-centred and innovative learning environments, and ensuring transparent leadership that respects diversity and collaboration with stakeholders within and outside the institution (Zayed University, 2018). However, faculty members with Western educational backgrounds, who were recruited to maintain Western standards are challenged by students whose linguistic, educational, traditional, and cultural backgrounds do not always allow them to be critical, creative and reflective thinkers (see Zayed University, 2008, 2013; Ashour and Fatima, 2016). Curricular improvements during accreditation processes in this environment would likely have involved considerable discussion and debate.

**Data collection and analysis**

Data collection was in three stages, documentary analysis, survey and interview, with each informing the next. First, accreditation-related documentary analysis was conducted to see the extent they reflected characteristics of learning organizations. This stage was followed by the learning organisation survey of staff across departments to evaluate the relationship between the findings from the documentary analysis and the perceptions of a sample of employees. Having interpreted the results, we interviewed people who have held various roles during ZU’s accreditation processes to extend our understanding.

Data collection and analysis took place between May 2016 and March 2017. Necessary ethical clearance was gained from the institution, and informed consent from the survey and interview participants was obtained. Pseudonyms (S1-S10) were used to anonymise interview participants.

Table 1 presents a summary of data collection methods, sources, data analysis tools and codes.

Table 1 comes here

***Documentary analysis***

Publicly accessible standards, visions and expectations of ZU’s institutional accrediting body (the Middle State Commission of Higher Education) and of the specialised accrediting bodies (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education and Accreditation Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications) of two of its selected colleges were analysed along with institutional self-study, peer-review and evaluation reports to explore whether or not these documents reflect the principles of learning organisations. In total, 45 documents were selected, and read several times for familiarisation before analysis (Cohen *et al*., 2011). Using content analysis technique, the environment and practices main constructs of learning organisations were used as the *parent nodes* and their sub-constructs as *child* nodes to analyse the data in NVivo®. As the leadership construct lacks sub-constructs, we interpreted descriptions and self-generated four child nodes (empowerment, allocating resources, openness to new ideas, time to listen). Documents were scrutinised considering the frequency of references to these nodes and other concepts of learning organisations.

***Learning Organization Survey******and analysis***

Garvin *et al*.’s Learning Organization Survey (n.d.) was sent out as an online link. Thus, college members could access the survey easily, and the researchers could collect data on a spreadsheet before analysis on statistical software. The original survey was designed to garner respondents’ perceptions of their units considering 55 statements categorised under the three main constructs. 18 statements describe the environment construct, 29 statements describe the practices construct, and 8 statements describe the leadership construct. Respondents reflect their opinion for the first 47 questions rating the statements from highly inaccurate (1) to highly accurate (7), whereas for the last 8 statements rating was from never (1) to always (5).

With permission of the developers, words such as ‘unit’ and ‘customer’ in the original survey were changed to ‘college’ and ‘student’ respectively to clarify the meaning in an educational setting; also, examples were given to elaborate on the word ‘supplier’. Although the instrument was amended with only minor changes, it was piloted with five academics who were not included in the sample population. Once confirmed, an online survey link was produced with two required questions to specify the respondents’ workload and college. The rest of the questions were not compulsory. The sample size for the study was 300 (staff in degree granting colleges) and the response rate was 34%. After descriptive statistics were retrieved, reliability of each main construct and sub-construct was assessed.

***Interviews and Analysis***

Interview questions were conceptualised having analysed the documentary findings and survey results. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 individuals, who were purposively sampled based on their roles in the accreditation processes (see Table 1). The interviews were audio-taped, 403 minutes of raw data were transcribed and coded on NVivo software based on the appropriate topics, analysis of which then produced preliminary themes.

**Findings**

***Documentary Analysis***

The documentary analysis (See Table 2) revealed that many characteristics of learning organisations were embedded in the accreditation documents, despite no explicit reference to the concept. For example, accrediting bodies require institutions to self-reflect on their practices in relation to the institutional mission and encourage data-informed decision making in teams. ZU’s institutional documents evidence these practices, as well as others such as experimentation with new products, implementation of mutually developed assessment rubrics, and references to the crucial role of the leadership in resource allocation, communication and collaboration during EQA processes. However, specific leader behaviours such as asking probing questions, creating a safe and collaborative working environment, and empowering individuals were inferred rather than explicit. Collecting information from competitors or best-in-class organisations were not identified. Even though many details are missing of how efficiently, systematically or safely certain practices are experienced in an institution, findings from the documentary analysis suggest that by accrediting an institution, quality assurance providers implicitly acknowledge the value of many characteristics of learning organisations.

## [TABLE 2 near here]

***Survey***

The internal consistency of the survey was measured by calculating Cronbach’s Alpha of the three main constructs and nine sub-constructs. All three overall constructs had Cronbach’s alphas close to 1, indicating very strong reliability (Cohen *et al*., 2011). Table 3 summarises the quantitative survey results. The mean scores of each sub-construct and the composite scores of the main constructs were calculated according to the original method of the developers “… 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 way it was possible to compare ZU’s scaled scores with the benchmarking baseline data on the survey’s website. This comparison revealed that all the composite scores of the main constructs as well as the sub-constructs are considerably below the median benchmark scores, suggesting that to reach higher quartile scores of learning organisations in all these areas, according to the current perceptions of its college members, ZU needs further development.

[Table 3 near here]

***Formulating interview questions***

Documentary analysis evidenced that ZU developed many aspects of learning organisations during the accreditation processes. Yet the survey results indicated that ZU’s degree granting college members perceive that their practice is largely in the bottom quartile compared with benchmarks on the survey developers’ website. For example, accreditation documents include evidence that ZU engaged in experimentation, and collection and analysis of data before making informed decisions. However, the survey results indicated that these are not practised systematically (See table 3 for the mean averages of Experimentation: 3.68, Information Collection: 3.82 and Analysis: 4.06). Another area to explore further was finding time for reflection because the statements in this sub-construct were rated on average as 3.14 (Table 3), which may be indicative of ZU’s members lacking quality time for reflection. However, according to the documents, they seemed to have had time during the accreditation processes.

Based on these contradictory findings and the areas that lacked clarity, especially about the leader behaviour, and in order to clarify links between the external quality assurance processes and becoming a learning organisation, semi-structured interview questions were designed to explore what made it possible for ZU’s members to work collegially while gaining US-Based accreditation. Interview questions were formulated to allow us to probe more deeply into selected topics: decision-making environment, collegiality and shared vision, experimentation and treatment of mistakes, systematic data collection, evaluation and information collection/transfer, reflection on practices, underlying assumptions, empowerment of skills. These topics included aspects of the learning environment, practices and leadership blocks of the learning organisations (See Table 1 for details).

***Interviews***

First and foremost, when it was founded in 1998, ZU had a very different context when compared with the current one. Until 2008, the year it gained its first institutional accreditation, the university focused on becoming accredited by a US-Based accreditor, which motivated its members (S3) to showcase their work (S9) in an international platform as a young university. S10 nicely summarised how the shared vision was created 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’. Back then, ZU was a smaller, teaching-oriented university (S7). The leadership fully supported the processes, informing new members about the goal (S2, S8) and allocating time and budget for education and training (S1, S2, S3, S5).

All interviewees agreed that institutional self-reflection considering accreditation standards contributed greatly to improvements in the colleges. Initially, it created an institutional shared vision, although tasks were not always equally shared. ZU became more organised and transparency of requirements from students increased (S5, S6, S7, S9) despite difficulties as S7 indicates ‘… with all the concerns, all the annoyances, all the frustrations we are a much better college because of the specialised accreditation ...’. Teams engaged in designing and implementing common exams and marking rubrics, (S2, S5, S9) and experimenting with alternative modes of assessment (S2, S6). ZU’s colleges also established useful habits such as making data-informed decisions in regular retreats where institutional issues were discussed (S1, S7, S9), although currently the efficiency, frequency or systematisation of these can be contested (S3, S8, S9). Despite some interviewees’ references to the incongruence of some aspects of the standards with the local context (S3, S7, S4), they commonly reiterated that ZU gained experience and confidence during the accreditation processes.

Having received the initial institutional accreditation, a phase of major changes started. First, ZU’s student numbers increased unprecedentedly, as did the number of faculty members (S3, S10). Also, it opened a brand-new campus in a major city in the UAE. Five of its colleges engaged in specialised accreditation. While ZU’s members were busy with these, they also worked on re-accreditation institutionally in 2013. In 2014, ZU and its colleges were mandated to go through UAE national accreditation with the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA). Thus, members of ZU have simultaneously had to deal with MSCHE, CAA and specialised accreditation each with varying demands, which sometimes caused some practices to be paused (S2, S3, S9). Because ZU is a federally-funded university, CAA accreditation takes precedence, yet S2 reflects the concerns of her college members “... until we are fully accredited by the government (CAA) we can’t change our curriculum, and yet we are accredited by our accrediting agency.” In the meantime, it was decided that ZU should become a research-intensive institution, and faculty members’ contracts were tied to their research productivity. Additionally, the university has experienced many academic leadership challenges including over 7 provosts since its foundation in 1998 (S3): being led by multiple interim deans affected the environment and practices inconsistently (S4, S7, S8).

At the time of the interviews, faculty members were overwhelmed by the emotional burden of changes and demands (S4, S8), and the accreditation related requirements which come from four directions –voluntary institutional (MSCHE) and specialised accreditation and mandatory national institutional and programme-based external quality assurance (CAA), with varying and sometimes contradictory requirements (S2, S9). Top-down decisions seem to have been accepted as an institutional reality by ZU’s employees (S1, S3, S8). Some faculty members tend to keep their conflicting opinions to themselves either for fear of losing their jobs (S6, S10) or believing that their opinions would not matter (S1, S4, S8). Some others do not attempt to experiment with any educational improvements due to perceived accreditation related restrictions or do so off-the record (S4, S8).

***Response to the research question***

Synthesising interview findings with the previous data, we concluded that historically ZU benefitted from the external quality assurance practices and developed some useful habits that are comparable with those of learning organisations. Its unique situation as a federally funded institution with a leadership fully supportive of the goal of getting accredited by a US-Based agency which allocated sufficient resources for the project must have had a major influence on ZUdeveloping the characteristics of learning organisations. However, subsequent contextual changes and leadership ~~issues~~ inconsistencies have had an influence on the psychological safety of the environment, affecting the quality of the practices. It seems that ZU needs to focus more on establishing a safer working environment and redefining its institutional mission collectively considering new contextual realities. Recent institutional experiences seem to have shaped members’ mental models adversely. Because organisational routines are developed over time and mental models influence individuals’ actions and behaviour (Bourne *et al*., 2018), reconciling people’s existing mental models is a prerequisite for building learning organisations (Senge, 1990; Marquart, 2011). Only then might ZU form effective professional communities of practice that could focus on data-informed problem identification to make systematic and inquiry-based improvements. It is notable that despite the issues, 103 staff took the time to respond to the survey, which might be interpreted as an indication of ZU’s members’ commitment to the betterment of their workplace.

**Conclusions**

As a result of this case study, our main argument is that higher education institutions could make use of external quality assurance processes to become learning organisations to sustain growth; however, existential and internal changes can support the process or throw it off course. Also, leadership, committed to ensuring a safe, creative college environment seems to be critical.

US-Based accreditation standards aspire to instil habits for institutions to engage in continuous improvement to enhance students’ educational experiences. However, most academics do not perceive that external quality assurance is a solution to their educational quality issues. A more impactful approach which places *learning* at the core of quality seems to be necessary. Institutions may benefit from external quality assurance if they are willing to turn the rigorous processes into a sustainable growth opportunity. This suggestion resonates with Elassy’s (2015) argument which appreciates quality assurance as a diagnostic stage to be followed by quality enhancement activities wherein improvement of learning and teaching experiences become on-going processes.

Quality assurance ensures higher education institutions employ *good-enough* practice (Gibbs, 2011). Yet they could utilise external quality assurance practices to go beyond ‘good enough’, as a catalyst to become learning organisations to combat challenges they face: instead of relying merely on being accredited externally, institutions should improve themselves internally (Fullan *et al.*, 2015).

One may argue that idiosyncratic academic environments with their loosely-coupled and hierarchically structured professional communities that have a high regard for autonomy and value competition (Kezar and Lester, 2009; Kok and McDonald, 2017) may struggle to become learning organisations. However, one should also acknowledge that academics value data-informed decisions and are capable of working in various communities of practice to contribute to altruistic goals such as their students’ learning (Kolsaker, 2008), all of which can potentially be triggered during quality assurance processes. Further, numerous studies highlight how experimentation, reflective, critical and evidence-based professional debates improve academics’ work-based learning (see Biggs and Tang, 2011; Gosling, 2014). Thus, higher education institutions should invest in adaptive learning by modifying practices based on dialogue and data and generative learning by incorporating new knowledge to stay relevant and keep growing (Senge, 2000; Bui and Baruch, 2012; Marquart, 2011).

This practice-based case study has several limitations, as it was undertaken in one single institution, of which only its degree-granting college staff’s perceptions were included. Representation of college members is also only 34%. From the theoretical perspective, the learning organisation concept is critiqued due to its elusiveness, inclusion of only *good* events and disregard of the political nature of workplaces (Santa, 2015) In order to operationalise the concept an analytical framework was utilised, which had not been validated in higher education environments. As for the data sources, documents are prepared for a particular audience, and numerical results gained from the survey results may only reveal limited understanding of people’s perceptions although interviews do reveal more detail. Despite its weaknesses, the practice-based focus of the framework used in the study may allow practitioners to assess their present status before engaging in accreditation processes, and may promote institutional dialogue and insights on how to improve.

Correlating aspects of external quality assurance and learning organisations has not been extensively studied in higher education. This study offers insights for future researchers as well as local, regional and international external quality assurance practitioners, who may focus on organisational learning. We believe that transformational changes could occur as a result of quality assurance procedures provided that they are managed effectively, since there seems to be a significant relationship between organisational dynamics and quality assurance (Naidoo, 2013).

References

Altbach, P.G., Reisberg, L., and Rumbley, L.E., 2010, ‘Tracking a global academic revolution’, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning,* 42(2), pp. 30–39. 10.1080/00091381003590845.

Argote, L., 2012, *Organizational Learning: Creating, retaining and transferring knowledge,* 2nd edn. (New York, Springer).

Ashour, S., and Fatima, S.K., 2016, ‘Factors favouring or impeding building a stronger higher education system in the United Arab Emirates’, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management,* 38(5), pp. 576–91. 10.1080/1360080X.2016.1196925.

Biggs, J. B., and Tang, C., 2011, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the student does*. (Berkshire, Open University Press-McGraw-Hill Education).

Blanco-Ramírez, G., 2015, ‘International accreditation as global position taking: an empirical exploration of US accreditation in Mexico’, *Higher Education*, 69(3), pp. 361–74. 10.1007/s10734-014-9780-7.

Blanco-Ramírez, G., and Berger, J.B., 2014, ‘Rankings, accreditation, and the international quest for quality: organizing an approach to value in higher education’,*Quality Assurance in Education,*22(1), pp. 88–104. 10.1108/QAE-07-2013-0031.

Bourne, M., Melnyk, S., and Bititci, U.S., 2018, ‘Performance measurement and management: theory and practice’, *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, 38(11), pp. 2010-2021. 10.1108/IJOPM-11-2018-784.

Bui, H. T., and Baruch, Y., 2012, ‘Learning organizations in higher education: An empirical evaluation within an international context’, *Management Learning*, 43(5), pp. 515-544. 10.1177/1350507611431212.

Cardoso, S., Rosa, M.J., and Stensaker, B., 2016, ‘Why is quality in higher education not achieved? The view of academics’, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* 41(6), pp. 950–65. 10.1080/02602938.2015.1052775.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K., 2011, *Research Methods in Education,* 7th edn. (London, Routledge).

Council for Higher Education Accreditation., 2015, *An overview of U.S. accreditation—revised.* Washington, DC: Judith S. Eaton.

Dzimińska, M., Fijałkowska, J. and Sułkowski, Ł., 2018, ‘Trust-based quality culture conceptual model for higher education institutions’, *Sustainability*, 10(8), p.2599. 10.3390/su10082599.

Edmondson, A., 1999, ‘Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams’, *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 44(2), pp. 350–83. 10.2307/2666999.

Elassy, N., 2015, ‘The concepts of quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement’, *Quality Assurance in Education*, 23(3), pp.250-261. 10.1108/QAE-11-2012-0046.

El-Khawas, E., 2013, ‘Quality assurance as a policy instrument: what’s ahead?’, *Quality in Higher Education,* 19(2), pp. 248–57. 10.1080/13538322.2013.806740.

Elliott, C. J., and Goh, S.C., 2013, ‘Does accreditation promote organizational learning? A multiple case study of Canadian University Business Schools’. *Journal of Management Development,* 32(7), pp. 737–55. 10.1108/JMD-03-2011-0028.

Fiol, C.M., and Lyles, M.A., 1985, ‘Organizational learning’, *The* *Academy of Management Review,* 10(4), pp. 803–13.

Fullan, M., Rincón-Gallardo, S., and Hargreaves, A., 2015, ‘Professional capital as accountability’, *Education Policy Analysis Archives,* 23(15). 10.14507/epaa.v23.1998.

Garvin, D. A., 1993, ‘Building a learning organization’, *Harvard Business Review,* 71(4), pp. 78–91.

Garvin, D.A., 2000, *Learning in Action: A guide to putting the learning organization to work*. (Boston, Harvard Business School Press).

Garvin, D. A., Edmondson, A.C., and Gino, F., 2008, ‘Is yours a learning organization?’, *Harvard Business Review,* 86(3), pp. 109–16.

Garvin D.A., Edmondson A.C., and Gino, F. ‘Survey | qualtrics survey software’. Available at: <https://hbs.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_b7rYZGRxuMEyHRz> (Accessed 2 December 2018).

Gibbs, P., 2011, ‘Finding quality in ‘being good enough’ conversations’, *Quality in Higher Education*, 17(2), pp. 139-150. 10.1080/13538322.2011.582798.

Gosling, D., 2014, ‘Collaborative peer-supported review of teaching’, in Sachs, J., and Parsell M. (Eds.) *Peer Review of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: International perspectives*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, pp. 13–31. [10.1007/978-94-007-7639-5](https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7639-5).

Harvey, L., and Green, D., 1993, ‘Defining quality’, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18(1), pp. 9–34.

Harvey, L., and Newton, J., 2004, ‘Transforming quality evaluation’, *Quality in Higher*

*Education,* 10 2), pp. 149–65. 10.1080/1353832042000230635.

Harvey, L., and Newton, J., 2007, ‘Transforming quality evaluation: Moving on’, in Westerheijden, D.F., Stensaker, B., and Rosa, M.J. (Eds.) *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation*. (Dordrecht, Springer).

Huber, G.P., 1991, ‘Organizational learning: The contributing processes and the literatures’, *Organization Science,* 2(1), pp. 88–115. 10.1287/orsc.2.1.88.

Kezar, A., 2005, ‘What campuses need to know about organizational learning and the learning organization’, *New Directions for Higher Education,* 2005(131), pp. 7–22. 10.1002/he.183.

Kezar, A., and Lester, J., 2009, *Organizing higher education for collaboration: A guide for campus leaders*. (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass).

Kok, S. K., and McDonald, C., 2017, ‘Underpinning excellence in higher education – an investigation into the leadership, governance and management behaviours of high-performing academic departments’ *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(2), pp. 210-231. 10.1080/03075079.2015.1036849.

Kolsaker, A., 2008, ‘Academic professionalism in the managerialist era: A study of English universities’, *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(5), pp. 513-525. 10.1080/03075070802372885.

Lave, J., and Wenger, E., 1991, *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Marsick, V. J., and Watkins, K.E., 2003, ‘Demonstrating the value of an organization's learning culture: the dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire’,  *Advances in Developing Human Resources,* 5(2), pp. 132–51. 10.1177/1523422303005002002.

Marquardt, M., 2011, *Building the learning organization: Achieving strategic advantage through a commitment to learning* (Boston, Nicholas Brealey Publishing).

Mårtensson, K., Roxå, T., and Stensaker, B., 2014, ‘From quality assurance to quality practices: an investigation of strong microcultures in teaching and learning’, *Studies in Higher Education,* 39(4), pp. 534–45. 10.1080/03075079.2012.709493.

McCaffery, P., 2018, *The Higher education Manager's Handbook: Effective leadership and management in universities and colleges,* 3rd edn. (New York, Routledge).

Nanoka, I., 2007, ‘Knowledge-creating company’, *Harvard Business Review*. Available from: <https://hbr.org/2007/07/the-knowledge-creating-company> (Accessed 16 June 2018)

Naidoo, D., 2013, ‘Reconciling organisational culture and external quality assurance in higher education.’, *Higher Education Management and Policy,* 24(2): 85–98. 10.1787/hemp-24-5k3w5pdwhm6j.

Olson, A.E., 2016, *The accreditation-related self-study and its potential for organizational learning: A comparative case study.* Doctoral Dissertation. University of Pennsylvania. Available at: https://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI10158535/ (Accessed 2 December 2018).

Örtenblad, A., 2004, ‘The learning organization: Towards an integrated model’, *The Learning Organization,* 11(2), pp. 129–44. 10.1108/09696470410521592.

Ryan, T., 2015, ‘Quality assurance in higher education: A review of literature’, *Higher Learning Research Communications,* 5(4), pp. 1–12. 10.18870/hlrc.v5i4.257.

Santa, M., 2015, ‘Learning organisation review–a ‘good’ theory perspective’, *The Learning Organization,* 22(5), pp. 242–70. 10.1108/TLO-12-2014-0067

Senge, P. M., 1990, *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. (New York, Currency Doubleday).

Senge, P. M., 2000, ‘The academy as learning community: Contradiction in terms or realizable future’, in Lucas, A. (Eds.) *Leading Academic Change: Essential roles for department chairs,* 1st edn. (San Francisco, Jossey Bass).

Singh, M., 2010, ‘Quality assurance in higher education: Which pasts to build on, what futures to contemplate?’, *Quality in Higher Education,* 16(2), pp. 189–94. 10.1080/13538322.2010.485735.

Stensaker, B., 2011, ‘Accreditation of higher education in Europe–moving towards the US model?’, *Journal of Education Policy,* 26(6), pp. 757–69. 10.1080/02680939.2010.551785.

Stensaker, B., and Leiber, T., 2015, ‘Assessing the organisational impact of external quality assurance: Hypothesising key dimensions and mechanisms’, *Quality in Higher Education,* 21(3), pp. 328–42. 10.1080/13538322.2015.1111009.

Zayed University, 2008, *Self-Study Report. Available from:* <http://www.zu.ac.ae/main/files/contents/assessment_resource/Accreditation/2008ZayedUniversityMSCHESelfStudy.pdf> (Accessed 2 December 2018)

Zayed University, 2013, Self-Study Report. *Available from:*

<http://www.zu.ac.ae/main/files/contents/assessment_resource/Accreditation/MSCHE_Self-Study_2013.pdf> (Accessed 2 December 2018)

Zayed University, June 2018, *Vision*. *Available from:* <http://www.zu.ac.ae/main//en/explore_zu/index.aspx> (Accessed 2 December 2018)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 1. Data collection methods, sources, data analysis tools and codes. | | | | | |
| **Data collection methods** | **Data sources** | **Analysing Tools** | **Learning Organisation Framework** | |
| **Documentary**  **Analysis** | 25 Publicly accessible data from the respective websites | NVivo® | Parent nodes | Child nodes |
| Environment | Psychological safety  Difference of opinion  Openness to alternative ideas  Time for reflection |
| Practices | Experimentation  Analysis  Information collection  Information transfer  Education and training |
| 20 Institutional reports | Leadership | Empowerment  Allocating resources  Openness to new ideas  Time to listen |
| **Learning Organization Survey** | ZU’s six degree granting colleges  -Sample size: 103 (34%) | SPSS® | Descriptive analysis  Reliability analysis of the main and sub-constructs  Confidence intervals (95%) | |
| **Semi-structured interviews** | Purposive sampling (10 interviews)  2 Faculty members (recruited after accreditation) S1/S4  2 Faculty members (heavily involved in accreditation) S2/S9  2 Higher administrators (heavily involved) S3/S10  2 Administrative staff members (heavily involved) S5/S6  2 Faculty members (partially involved) S7/S8 | NVivo® | Decision-making environment  Collegiality and shared vision  Experimentation and treatment of mistakes  Systematic data collection Evaluation and information collection/transfer  Reflection on practices  Underlying assumptions  Empowerment of skills | |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Table 2*. US-Based external quality assurance criteria and aspects of learning organisations in accreditation documents. | | | |
| **Learning Organisation Framework** | **Clearly included learning organisation characteristics** | **Inferred but not specifically included learning organisation characteristics** | **Non-existent learning organisation characteristics** |
| Environment | * Self-reflection on vision, mission, and practices for continuous improvement | * Psychological safety * Appreciation of differences * Openness to new ideas |  |
| Practices | * Experimentation, innovation * Systematic, data-driven decision-making * Professional development * Collaboration * Internal and external information collection * Information transfer/ Communication |  | * How mistakes should be treated * Information collection from best-in-class institutions and competitors * Dealing with underlying assumptions during discussions * Asking probing questions * Engaging in productive debates |
| Leadership | * Importance of leadership (goal alignment, clear roles, welcoming opinions from stakeholders prior to decision-making, transparent communication) | * Shared governance model * Leader behaviour (respecting for opinions, being open to alternative views, empowering skills, etc.) |  |
| Note: 1. Collegial decision-making was not highlighted in the framework.  2. ZU presented evidence of all the clearly defined criteria. | | | |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 3. Statistical Learning Organization Survey Results at ZU. | | | | | | |
| **Main constructs** | **Sub-constructs** | **N** | | **Means** | **Standard**  **Deviation** | **Cronbach's**  **alpha** |
|  |  | **Valid** | **Missing** |
| **Learning environment**  **(average mean 4.03)** | 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 |
| **Construct Reliability** | | | | | | 0.909 |
| **Learning practices (average mean 3.88)** | 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 |
| **Construct Reliability** | | | | | | 0.951 |
| **Leadership**  **(average mean 3.30)** | Leadership  (8 items). | 72 | 31 | 3.30 | .98 | .915 |
| Note: \*indicates the construct with weak reliability. | | | | | | |