

Quality Enhancement Of Palestinian Higher Education Institutions: The Case Of Islamic University Of Gaza (IUG)

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ABSTRACT

The Palestinian tertiary education system considered to be young according to international standards, as the establishment of the oldest university was only forty years ago. The Palestinian universities were created during Israeli occupation, as part of a Palestinian collective effort to preserve the Palestinian identity as well as to provide young Palestinians with the opportunity to pursue higher education. Quality assurance efforts in Palestine had begun in 2002 with the establishment of the Palestinian Accreditation & Quality Assurance Commission (AQAC). IUG, being one of the biggest higher education institutions in Palestine, established its quality unit immediately and worked in linking its internal quality procedures with external national ones managed by AQAC. The purpose of this paper was to describe IUG quality procedures; with regard to: students, academic programs, teaching and learning, university staff, university environment, administration, and the collection of external feedback. Several challenges were presented along with lessons learned.

Keywords: *Quality, Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Palestine, Quality Enhancement.*

INTRODUCTION

The Palestinian tertiary education system is considered to be young according to international standards, as the establishment of the oldest university was only in the 1970's. Palestinian Universities were created during Israeli occupation, as part of a Palestinian collective effort to preserve the Palestinian identity as well as to provide young Palestinians with the opportunity to pursue higher education. The Palestinian higher education system as a whole have witnessed large shifts after the war in June 1967, as there has been wide spread in establishing community colleges and then the establishment of the major Palestinian universities began in 1971. Years between "1971 – 1979" have witnessed the establishment of six universities, which came as result of national aspirations and as response to challenges imposed by the conditions of occupation on the one hand, and the Palestinian national struggle (MOEHE, 2003). Palestinian higher education is unique in its structure as most universities are non-profit and non-governmental (public). See the following table for more details regarding types of TEIs in Palestine by periods of their creation and type of institutions.

Table 1: Types of TEIs in Palestine by periods of their creation Type of institutions

	Before the 1970s	During the 1970s	During the 1980s	During the 1990s	From 2000 till now	Total
Traditional universities		6	1	3	5	15
Open University*				1	1	
University colleges	1	1	1	8	5	18
Community colleges	2	4	3	5	6	20
Total	3	11	5	17	7	53

According to MOHE recent statistics (2013), the number of Palestinian higher education institutions is (53). They are distributed as follows: (15) Universities: (14 traditional universities, 1 open university), (18) University colleges, (20) Community colleges, all are private. There are (213,581) students registered in the Palestinian higher education institutions; (126,138) females, (87,443) males. Because of the difficulties it faces due to the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian tertiary education is struggling to exist. However, its newness has made it relatively open and, therefore, ready to embrace change. This explains its relative dynamism even in the face of adversity (Diambomba, 2009).

The concept of quality assurance in Palestinian higher education system has emerged as a result of its rapid development, the challenges it faces and criticism of its educational outcomes. The emergence of this concept was associated with the establishment Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission (AQAC) in 2002 as a governmental semi-autonomous body under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) and directly responsible to the Minister. The general objective of the Commission is the improvement of the quality of Palestinian higher educational programs and institutions. It has the responsibility of accreditation of new academic programs, and licensing and accrediting of any new educational institution, regardless of specialization and level of degree. Towards this end, it reviews existing criteria; develops new criteria for accreditation and licensing; and develops procedures for the ongoing comprehensive assessment of all programs of study that grant academic degrees." (AQAC, 2013). AQAC worked for more than a decade in very complicated political, economic and social conditions. However, it was able to assist higher education institutions to improve their performance gradually using limited resources (Abou-dagga, 2013).

One of the biggest recognized higher education institutions in Palestine is the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG). It is an independent academic institution supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education. It is a member of four associations: Association of Arab Universities, Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World, Community of Mediterranean Universities, and International Association of Universities. In addition, IUG works closely with numerous universities around the world. IUG provides for its students an academic environment that adheres to Islamic principles as well as Palestinian traditions and customs. It also provides all available resources, including the most up-to-date technology in service of the education process. IUG offers more 114 programs at the different levels (B. A, higher diploma, Masters, Ph. D. and professional diploma) for almost 20,000 students. IUG has developed in 2004 the 1st strategic plan (2005 to 2010) in 2010, IUG developed the 2nd strategic plan (2011-2013). IUG strategic goals are to:

- raise the levels of educational programs based on quality standards
- develop, support and invest in scientific research in order to achieve continual development
- Strengthen the university's role in serving and developing the society.
- Regulate and raise the efficiency of technical and administrative institutional performance.
- Improve the university environment and the level of services presented to students and staff.
- Reinforce partnership and cooperative relationships with local, regional and international organizations.

The enhancement of the quality of higher education has been among the key issues and concerns facing higher education in all countries. Within institutions of higher education, use of external examiners, self-evaluation and academic audits are the most common forms of quality assurance processes. The question of how effective quality assurance systems should be designed and implemented is subject to wide debate (Kis, 2005). Harvey & Williams (2010) stated that the "external quality evaluations are not particularly good at encouraging improvement, especially when they had a strong accountability brief. An essential element in this failure is the apparent dissolution of trust. Another issue is the use of industrial models and TQM in particular, which contributors, on the whole, regarded as of little use in the higher education setting". Lim (1999) argues that the 'best practice in quality assurance in higher education' includes: 1) establishing a mission for the institution followed by the functions that have to be carried out to achieve this mission and setting the objectives for each function; 2) quality management system introduced to ensure the quality of the programs; 3) an external audit system to assess the effectiveness of the management system; 4) strong commitment on the part of university leaders and managers to Quality advancement. Williams (1997) states that over elaborate bureaucratic systems of external monitoring may lead to internal processes becoming determined by external requirements, but at the expense of what is good for the Higher Education Institutions. Thus innovation may suffer for fear that it will not be understood.

- A study by Shah (2013) on 30 Australian universities to assess the extent to which audits by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) have improved quality assurance in the core and support areas of the universities, showed that external quality audits alone cannot be credited for improving quality

assurance in universities. A combination of external quality audits together with the internal and external operating environment has significantly contributed to improving quality assurance in universities. While external audits have led to an improvement in systems and processes in Australian universities, this study finds that they have not improved education outcomes and the student experience. Another study by Darandari, & Hoke (2013) about the Saudi Arabian experience where the national quality assurance system used in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) showed that the external quality assurance system had to lead change and organizational learning. Study emphasized the role of assessment and reflection methods used within the system to encourage continuous improvements and institutional learning and how they interacted with the organizational cultures. One can notice that the use of internal processes does not exclude the use of external processes. Harvey (2002) argues that the interaction between both processes is essential to ensure that the results of external monitoring are not just temporary adjustments but lead to lasting improvement.

Since the establishment of AQAC, there was considerable amount of structural and organizational changes has taken place recently in many higher institutions in Palestine. Many of the changes could be attributed to quality efforts launched by AQAC; others could be attributed to internal quality procedures in the different higher education institutions. Recognizing IUG efforts to meet the requirements and standards of the national accreditation commission, and gain the confidence of the stakeholders & society with regards to graduates in the light of specific clear standards, it is worthwhile to be familiar with IUG experience of quality. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to present the major IUG quality procedures and activities; and the challenges it faced with regard to quality in addition to lessons learned.

METHODOLOGY

The study was based on a desk study of published Palestinian quality information, and related documents and annual reports provided by IUG quality key personals. Focus group was conducted with selected key informants at IUG. To be sure that they are key informants; they were selected based on the criterion that each one should have deep involvement in quality efforts at IUG.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of documents' analysis provided a good description of the main quality processes that is implemented at IUG (Quality Unit, 2012, 2013). There are seven major areas of quality procedures as being of major importance to IUG faculty/departments in maintaining appropriate oversight of their existing arrangements. They are as follows:

Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IUG has clear published policies and procedures for the recruitment and admission of students including students with special needs to higher education that are fair, clear and explicit and are implemented consistently. The university admission committee review annually the colleges criteria for acceptance and makes sure that they are implemented as planned.
Program design, approval & monitoring and reviewing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are clear internal procedures and criteria for starting up new programs at IUG. A special form is used that assures the existence of society need for the specialization, the availability of human and logistic resources in addition to referencing subject benchmarks. Once the internal process is completed and approved, applications are prepared and sent to AQAC for external review and accreditation. Here we can see the link between the internal quality process with external one. AQAC criteria for opening new program are embedded in some way within IUG internal process. The criteria includes: 1) rational for opening the program, 2) the content for the academic program, 3) human & educational resources, 4) and quality procedures (for more details see the website of AQAC).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are policies and procedures also to make sure that academic programs are effective and achieving their goals. The evaluation process focuses on having the departments to modify periodically (4-5) years their academic plans to meet the needs of the society taking into consideration subject benchmarks. IUG is working now in increasing the percentage of practical aspects in academic plans in addition to enhancing life needed skills in the curricula. • The quality unit had supervised internal evaluation activities for undergraduate programs that aspire to proceed with graduate programs. This internal assessment helped in self-reflection and brought about enhancement in the different programs. • IUG started procedures to encourage departments to review annually their programs using a special annual review form using AQAC criteria. Quality and Development Deanship follows up with the program review reports and gives departments feedback. • Several external evaluation activities for academic programs were conducted by AQAC at different times during the last ten years as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health sciences programs in 2003. • Social sciences and the humanities programs in 2005-2006. • Science, engineering, and computer technology in 2006-2007. • Education programs in 2009-2010. • Science, economics, management, humanities, natural sciences, 2011. <p>IUG quality unit supervised the implementation of the external evaluation feedback that enhances the quality of programs.</p>
Teaching and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are procedures and mechanisms at the university level and faculty level to ensure that teaching and learning is achieving the programs goals. Examples: use of students evaluation forms, regular meetings with students and faculty, analysis of grades reports, annual reviews of program, external feedback ... • There is formal and informal mechanisms available within the division /faculty /department to disseminate good practice in learning and teaching at both taught and research levels; • The examinations at division /faculty /department are well supervised and audited. • The University established its Centre for Excellence and E- learning to support faculty development. • There is an induction program for newly appointed faculty. • There were several developmental projects that supported teaching and learning in several departments. These projects were funded by Palestinian Quality Improvement Fund (QIF) that is financed by the World Bank and EU and supervised by the MOEHE. The projects are implemented in cooperation with local, Arabic and international partnerships.
University staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IUG makes sure that it recruits quality staff. The selection criteria and appointment procedures are clear, published and transparent. It worthwhile to note faculty at IUG graduated from almost 31 countries from all over the world. • There is a system that manages training courses for the academic and administrative staff based on needs assessment studies or performance

	<p>assessment results. Courses include: Teaching skills, Computer skills, English Language skills (different levels). , Special training courses based on the needs of departments (e. g. psychological support after crisis, quality issues for labs, geographic systems, ...), General skills (e.g. writing projects, SPSS, .. etc). Quality related topics courses: e.g. preparing self-assessment documents, preparing self-assessment institutional documents, how to prepare for a review mission.. etc . Annual training program for administrative staff in various administrative issues to improve capabilities of the university staff (2 training events are required for every staff at the university).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a system that evaluates the performance of all academic staff using: electronic student-faculty form, department chair- faculty evaluation form, dean- Faculty evaluation form, and annual report. There is an evaluation system that evaluates the performance of all administrative staff using electronic forms. • IUG conducts regular workshops for newly appointed staff and department chairs in the beginning of every year. This activity enhances the quality culture in the institution. • There is a reward system at IUG. It included awards such as: the employees' Annual Excellence Reward. More work is needed to enhance the existing system. The work is going on preparing the Teaching Excellence Award for faculty.
University environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are procedures that follow-up continuously with improving the university environment (e.g. cafeteria library, medical services, the stadiums ...) • The Quality and Development Deanship distribute periodically satisfaction surveys to measure the opinions for those involved (students - employees - visitors ...) regarding facilities and services. • Internal institutional assessment for the whole university had been conducted in 2010 that highlighted points of strength and weakness. Results of the self-evaluation report were used as a major document for preparing the second strategic plan for IUG.
Administrative structure for quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of Quality Unit structure in 2002. It includes both: the administrative unit and the academic unit. In 2003, the academic quality unit was merged with the administrative one in addition to the planning and development deanship in a new entity titled Quality and Development Deanship. • There are quality committees at the different colleges and unit. They are linked to the quality and development deanship. • There are efforts now to effectively link the performance management system with the quality system with the planning system. • There is a system for information management. More work is still needed .
Collection of external feedback and benefit from it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting external feedback is crucial to quality efforts at IUG. It is collected from different resources: external examiners, supervisors for graduation projects, and field training, ... • Feedback is collected from graduates through the use of tracking graduate system • There is functional complain system that can be used by students, employees

Quality procedures at IUG were linked with its mission that states: "IUG is an academic institutions that strives to raise the educational, cultural and civilization levels in the Palestinian society, to keep up with current trends in higher education and technology advancements, to encourage scientific research, and to contribute in building future generations and developing the society in a framework of Islamic values." (IUG, 2013). This idea of linking planning system with quality system had been addressed strongly in literature (Lim, 1999; Shah, 2013). Linking internal quality system with the external one had assisted IUG to proceed confidently with quality activities. Several factors assisted in this regard:

- Quality was introduced at IUG as an authentic Islamic concept for the following terms: "Ihsan, Itqan, Tasdeed".
- Concept of quality at IUG was integrated gradually in the system. It was not introduced by force.
- The adoption of top management of quality concepts was supported with suitable strategies and policies at different levels. This has established a culture that supports quality.
- The formation of appropriate quality structure that meets the needs of the institution. Quality Unit was formed in 2002, then Quality and Development Deanship in 2013, besides to quality committees in colleges, departments and units.
- Holding regular training courses for staff and those in managerial positions in the field of quality in higher education, self-evaluation of the programs and external evaluation...
- Openness to international experiences and best practices in quality assurance and enhancement. This was manifested in use of external benchmarks in curricula development and modification, participating in regional and international conferences, workshops and training.

Several challenges were encountered. They include: 1) Gaza's being under siege besides the unstable Arab political environment which affected negatively the implementation of institutional plans and making it difficult to invite and consult with experts. 2) There are no standards & models for QA that fits with our culture. 3) Quality as a concept needed time to be fully integrated in the culture of the institution. 4) Administrative processes at IUG are not all automated. 5) Limited financial resources for quality and development activities.

CONCLUSION

Quality is a long journey. It needs patience, commitment and clear vision about what is needed to be done to enhance educational outcomes. A number of lessons were learned as result of the different quality efforts at IUG. They involve: 1) the combination of external quality audits together with the internal and external had significantly contributed enhancing quality at IUG. 2) Quality is linked to our culture and is not difficult to be achieved depending on local expertise. 3) The existence of well-designed and linked strategic system, performance measurement system and quality system accelerates quality processes (holistic approach to quality). 4) Quality assurance worldwide experiences & models are good to be fully studied in order to build our own model that fits with our culture and meet our needs. Collaborative work between Arab and Islamic countries is needed in this regard. 5) Quality needs to be a priority to prevail in the institution. Moreover, it needed to be supported financially, technically and administratively from top management. 6) Continuous professional development for staff affected positively on the implementation of quality activities and enhanced the quality of outcomes.

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