

GLOBAL CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A GULF PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The continuous expansion of higher education institutions in the Gulf over the past years reflects ambitions beyond the region. As a matter of fact, higher education institutions in the gulf region adapt and respond to some global challenges such as internationalisation, globalisation, ranking, benchmarking, accreditation etc. Higher education institutions exist in a world that continuously and increasingly operates across autonomous and sovereign borders just like countries have become interconnected worldwide. It is undeniable that HEIs are feeling the gravity brought about by the global challenges. Of course, every institution aims to attract the best faculty and students on a global scale. Over the last decade, HEIs around the world are facing many challenges in terms of achieving effective teaching, learning, assessment and curriculum. There are many changes and developments in the higher education: learners are changing, learning styles are changing as well as learners' demands are changing. Too, much more is expected of HEIs in terms of their wider participation and engagement globally, nationally and regionally. The main role of universities and colleges nowadays is to prepare the students or alumni for global future. Due to the rapid developments, challenges and trends in higher education across the globe, higher education should succumb to "global engagement" in order to cope with the various challenges that may affect the operation of HEIs. "Global engagement" is usually used to apprehend the activities and interconnections of various higher education institutions. Global engagement, at the level of individuals, refers faculty-to-faculty research partnerships, student mobility, faculty-based research networks, student and faculty exchanges, and participation in jointly taught courses. On the other hand, global engagement at the institutional level refers to formalised relationships which can be clearly defined through memoranda of understanding, cooperative research projects, professional networks, and other related ventures.

GLOBAL CHALLENGES FACED BY HEIs: A GULF PERSPECTIVE

I. Internationalisation is one of the most tackled issues by Higher Education sector in the Gulf region. In fact, higher education institutions are focusing on internationalisation of curriculum, delivery methods, and learning outcomes to improve and enhance quality of education. Internationalisation is one of the key challenges that every HEI should look into. Noorda (2015) named five desirable outcomes of internationalisation:

1. A higher education system capable of producing global citizens and professionals
2. Respectful and appreciative of other cultures
3. Able to contribute to the development of knowledge economies and socially inclusive societies
4. Better positioned to address global issues
5. To compete and cooperate, with the rest of the world, including the emerging regions.

Institutions must be responsive to the key factors in attaining internationalisation of the institution:

1. Technological opportunities (the use of the latest technology in delivering the curriculum in order to enhance the quality of education).
2. Enhancement of faculty researches that are responsive in improving the quality of education. HEIs should encourage teachers in producing researches according to international standards that are relevant in improving education
3. Further alignment of teaching and learning that respond to the needs of the international students. The main role of the university is to prepare the graduates to become effective in their chosen career.

II. Curriculum development and alignment

Curriculum development and alignment is one of the hottest issues in higher education. Nowadays, students' needs are changing; therefore, HEIs should consider their needs when it comes to curriculum development and alignment. With the demands of the society, universities and colleges should be more receptive and responsive in terms of the new programmes or courses they are offering to the students. They should ensure the provision of interdisciplinary courses or programmes to meet the needs of the stakeholders especially the learners. This can be made possible through reorganising, reformatting and enhancing programmes, courses and modules which are tailored on international standards. In addition, HEIs should also ensure alignment and restructure their curriculum/ curricula to support learners and alumni to fit globally. In a nutshell, if HEIs are responsive in addressing the needs of students, this will reduce the skills gap and provide opportunity for the students to compete in the international market.

III. Student Employability

One of the HEIs' top priorities or agenda is the employability of graduates/ alumni. Employability does not only refer about getting a job. According to Harvey (2003, employability is more than about continuous enhancement and developing techniques and attributes or experience in order to enable the students to get jobs or to progress in their current career. It is about learning and the emphasis is less on 'employ' and more on 'ability'.

Even if HEIs and employers are closely connected with each other, it is expected that there will always be pressures in terms of skills, competencies and attitudes towards work issues. Colleges and universities often expect learners to develop and their skills and competencies based on the learning outcomes prescribed in the module handbooks, while employers incline to want things to be done their way. Of course, HEIs need to respond to the needs of the employers making sure that students know how to perform what are expected of them. Now the global challenge in terms of student employability is "*employers assume graduates to have the technical competencies and require graduates to demonstrate attributes and broader skills such as leadership, communication, teamwork, managerial abilities and critical thinking.*

According to Goodwin (2012), these are the key activities to improve student employability:

- Help with CVs
- Being able to have mock interviews with employers
- Help identifying skills gaps
- Confidence building activities

- Spending time in a business or organisation on placement
- Being able to shadow a professional person in their job
- Help researching the jobs market
- Practising presentation skills
- More information about jobs
- Personal support

IV. Quality of learning and teaching

One of the main focus areas in higher education is the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning. Maintaining quality should have the highest priority in higher education. HEIs should prioritise the quality of teaching and learning because this is one way to become recognised internationally. This is the very reason why HEIs should invest in improving the teaching and learning culture in their institutions. Mc Cornick (2009) underscored that globally, public accountability demands on higher education institutions, especially in relation to the quality of teaching and learning, are increasing and higher education institutions have to find ways of providing evidence in concrete, observable and measurable ways of what they are doing to improve teaching and learning.

It is very important that HEIs should clearly understand the factors that contribute to effective teaching and learning. Effective teaching and learning is influenced by many factors which can vary between different learning environments and individuals. Of course, there are different methods or ways to teach and all of these aims at helping a student to learn. There are three factors that contribute to effective teaching and learning:

1. ***Inclusive learning through equality and diversity***- Promoting equality entails treating every individual with equal worth irrespective of their gender, nationality, age and also supporting achievement and raising aspirations. Diversity of students and staff can contribute towards enriched learning environment since they bring and share different ideas. Hence, HEIs, staff as well as students share equal responsibility in promoting equality.
2. ***Learning through equality of opportunity***- It involves enabling access for individuals having different requirements as well as reducing or eliminating unnecessary obstacles to learning. For instance, students with disability and the students with no disability are offered learning opportunities which are equally accessible to them through reasonable individual arrangement wherever possible.
3. ***Facilitators of learning (administrators, staff, students and stakeholders) working in partnership***- In a nutshell, effective teaching and learning follows when there is harmonious partnership among the stakeholders that results in teaching that inspirational, enhancement of transformational and creative learning and assessments that support learning and academic standards.

V. Quality of research

Maintaining quality research is a global call among all HEIs. Higher education plays a vital role in the society by transmitting and creating new knowledge to students and fostering innovation through research. Research in higher education is essential in order to provide a basis for educational planning and improving quality teaching and learning. HEIs, in order to achieve this challenge, need to strengthen their research capacity and develop multidisciplinary researches bringing together different fields and building relationships between the faculties and industries.

VI. Accreditation

Accreditation is the principal means of providing accountability for institutions and programmes and the most critical part of quality assurance in higher education. Institutions that are accredited by various renowned national and international accrediting bodies have the potential to attract students (national or international), research funding organisations, and sponsors from the private and government sectors.

Quality assurance and commitment to continuous quality enhancement are the main emphasis of accreditation. To achieve accreditation, an HEI should:

1. Fulfill the rigorous standards set by the accrediting body
2. Create, implement and review the institutional strategic plan
3. Undertake a regular review of its operational plan, financial stability, placement rates, etc.
4. Undergo announced and unannounced site visits

Likewise, institutions should instill the importance of accreditation:

1. Concludes if the HEI meets or exceeds minimum standards
2. Helps students decide which university offers quality education
3. Helps employers determine the legitimacy of the degrees, or programmes and whether the graduates are qualified or not
4. Involves the stakeholders such as faculty, students, staff, alumni and advisory boards in institutional planning and evaluation
5. Helps the HEI creates goals for self-improvement

Standards/ criteria used by AARU, OAAA and QAA (UK) in accrediting institutions/ programmes

Association of Arab Universities (AARU)	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority- OAAA approaches institutional accreditation as an initial two-stage process. Stage 1 involves Quality Audit followed by Stage 2: Standards Assessment. Quality Audit provides a formative stage for HEIs to critically assess their practices and processes and identify opportunities for improvement. HEIs then undergo a summative Standards Assessment which results in either HEIs being assessed as having met or not met the standards.	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (UK) (The 19 Expectations) The Quality Assurance Agency is guided by the UK Quality Code which sets out 19 expectations that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet. The UK Quality Code is used to assure the standards and quality of higher education in the United Kingdom.
Institutions are evaluated using the following criteria: 1. Programme objectives and learning outcomes 2. Curriculum 3. Learning hub 4. Faculty 5. Library and learning resources 6. Student progress and evaluation of their performance 7. Facilities and support services 8. Academic	Stage 1: Quality Audit Quality Audit Scope 1. Governance and Management 2. Student Learning by Coursework Programs 3. Student Learning by Research Programs 4. Staff Research and Consultancy 5. Industry and Community Engagement 6. Academic Support Services 7. Students and Student Support Services 8. Staff and Staff Support Services 9. General Support Services and Facilities	Part A Setting and maintaining academic standards Expectation A1 Ensure that the requirements of <i>The framework for higher education qualifications</i> are met, consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics, where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework and consider and take account of relevant subject benchmark statements. Expectation A2.1 Degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.

<p>program management 9. Scientific research and external communication 10. Improving quality management</p>		<p>Expectation A2.2 Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve.</p> <p>Expectation A3.1 Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards</p> <p>Expectation A3.2 Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where: <input type="checkbox"/> the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit, and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment <input type="checkbox"/> both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the relevant degree-awarding body have been satisfied.</p> <p>Expectation A3.3 Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.</p> <p>Expectation A3.4 In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether <input type="checkbox"/> UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved <input type="checkbox"/> the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained</p>
	<p>Stage 2: Institutional Standards Assessment Standard 1: Governance and Management Standard 2: Student Learning by Coursework Programs Standard 3: Student Learning by Research Programs Standard 4: Staff Research and Consultancy Standard 5: Industry and Community Engagement Standard 6: Academic Support Services Standard 7: Students and Student Support Services</p>	<p>Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality</p> <p>Expectation B1 (Programme design, development and approval)</p> <p>Expectation B2 (Recruitment, selection and admission)</p> <p>Expectation B3 (Learning and teaching)</p> <p>Expectation B4 (Enabling student development and achievement)</p>

	Standard 8: Staff and Staff Support Services Standard 9: General Support Services and Facilities	<p>Expectation B5 (Student engagement)</p> <p>Expectation B6 (Assessment and the recognition of prior learning)</p> <p>Expectation B7 (External examining)</p> <p>Expectation B8 (Programme monitoring and review)</p> <p>Expectation B9 (Academic appeals and student complaints)</p> <p>Expectation B10 (Managing higher education provision with others)</p> <p>Expectation B11 (Research degrees)</p>
		<p>Expectation C Higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the learning opportunities they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.</p>

VII. Emerging technology

Colleges and universities nowadays are facing numerous challenges and this includes the emergence technology in the teaching and learning. Researches support that the rapid development of information technology has improved the delivery of quality education to the students. The lack of investment in technology among HEIs proves to be a major barrier to the ability of universities and colleges to compete in the international market. Technologies can increase the capacity of a teacher more easily and quickly to help students achieve powerful learning experience. Globally speaking, the need for flexibility provided by various electronic tools is increasing; hence, HEIS should meet the challenge of technologies. Proponents for education reform argue that students tend to be disengaged from the learning process and traditional teaching methods do not encourage student interaction, immersion or critical thinking (Atkinson 2010).

Benefits of Technology in the Classroom

1. Learning becomes interesting- It challenges and engages students with new, innovative and interactive methods.
2. Promotes independent learning- The internet allows students instant access to information. It serves as educational resource for students even with limited assistance from teachers and parents.
3. Prepares students for the future If students are knowledgeable on using technology to communicate, they will not have difficulty in finding jobs in the future.
4. Allows lecturers to create motivating and exciting way to educate students. With technology, teachers can now include videos, images and graphics in delivering the modules. Other tools such as smart boards, IPTVs and power point.

VIII. Assessment

Assessment is a key process in any Higher Education Institution. It provides how students are evaluated based on their understanding of the curriculum and determines their ability to

progress. The future directions and careers of students depend on it. Intuitions should develop effective mechanisms to deal with gaps of assessment policies and regulations.

IX. Qualified teaching staff

A Higher Education Institution is unable to provide quality education if it does not have qualified teaching staff. To effectively teach the curriculum successfully, higher education providers need to encourage teachers to keep themselves abreast with the current trends of teaching. Nowadays, it is important that HEIs need to develop faculty dedicated to engage in a diversity of learners with complex learning needs. This can be made possible through offering different types of workshops, trainings so that staff can be up to date with the latest trends in higher education environment. Administrators as well as neophyte staff should consider that education is a continuing process.

X. Governance and management

Higher education institutions' leaders are responsible for guaranteeing the effective and efficient management and for the planning the future development of the institution. Generally, governing bodies are responsible for approving HEI's vision, mission, graduate attributes, values, strategic plan, operation plan, human resource and employment policy, financial solvency, legal, compliance, audit etc. It is undeniable that the management and governing bodies are facing challenges to successfully and effectively manage the organisation; therefore is one of the critical challenges in higher education. Institutions, to cope with this challenge, need better leaders who will be able to carry out collective decision and will be able to provide academic freedom to both staff and students.

VI. Generic Graduate Attributes

One of the most important ways in which an HEI articulates the outcomes of education is through its graduate attributes. It is essential that colleges and universities should continuously review their generic graduate attributes since student needs are constantly changing. Graduate attributes emerge as one of the most important outcomes of learning. Therefore, HEIs should ensure that graduate attributes should be incorporate din the curriculum. Below are some of the significant benefits of incorporating the generic graduate attributes in the curriculum:

1. It helps the HEI in the planning, implementing and assessing the curricula.
2. It helps the students achieve skills and capabilities that are reflected in the teaching and learning methodologies and strategies, curriculum development and assessment activities.
3. It helps the students to have clear understanding of these attributes which are imbedded across modules or programmes and therefore it helps them in selecting the appropriate programme or degree.
4. It prepares the students for the workplace and enables them to perform effectively in their profession.
5. It enables the HEI to demonstrate its commitment in producing potential graduates and professionals who possess attributes and values that employer want.

CONCLUSION

HEIs are obviously in the midst of rapid revolution in response to technological, environmental, economic, political transformations sweeping the globe. Addressing these challenges is critical not only for the future of institutions in the Gulf region but also globally. Higher education going global is a truly fascinating process of which many leaders are not yet seeing the end. Institutions are feeling the pressure of these global challenges. The above-mentioned global challenges can be summarised with these questions:

1. How do educational leaders position their institutions of higher education for success?
2. How can HEI attain better international picture?
3. How can HEIs benefit of the global trends in education today?
4. How do HEIs prepare students, industries and communities for emerging jobs in today's interconnected world?

It is very essential that HEIs need to prepare their dashboards by addressing the queens as per the definition of Gulf College Oman:

1. Quality policies, procedures, processes and KPIs
2. Quality Assurance
3. Quality Enhancement

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