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EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES: DOES IT MATTER?

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Abstract

This paper is intended to examine the effects of External Quality Assurance (EQA) on Human Resource Management Practices (HRMPs) at the Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Oman. The government of Oman has given higher education its undivided focus. This matter is true for both public and private higher education. The quality of all work related to higher education is a mandatory requirement. Hence, all higher education institutions (HEIs) are required to maintain quality in their strategies and operations. The EQA has been developed and nowadays is considered as an important tool to evaluate quality at HEIs. The HRMPs is one of the sensitive issues which are vital to the organization and the staff. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen the HRMPs as the staff are the backbone of any organization. Consequently, staff satisfaction is essential to enhance their performance and, ultimately, the organization performance. This study uses the qualitative design approach. Secondary data is used to gather the information, including the Quality Audit (QA) and Institutional Assessment Outcomes Reports from Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA) Accreditation Stages 1and 2 reports. The study is an essential step towards a sound understanding of the HRMPs atmosphere at Oman PHEIs as this field has not gotten enough attention from researchers. The study shows that the PHEIs in Oman have to be more proactive in providing the essential services for their staff through the HRMPs.

1. Introduction

Higher Education has gotten great attention from different modern communities (Al-Amri et al., 2020). There has been a tremendous increase in the number of institutions (Savior, 2017). As the sector keeps growing, the need for quality becomes a necessity. Accountability in higher education also becomes necessary, so higher education institutions have to produce quality education with a high level of accountability (Noaman et al., 2017).

The higher education sector has been under full attention and scrutiny of public attention. Changes were recorded in the role of institutions and the growth of the number of institutions (Al-Amri et al., 2020). Different factors helped to have these changes. New forms of governance, reduced government funding, borderless education, new technologies and increased demand for higher education were identified as some factors that played a role in the changes in higher education (Varouchas et al., 2018). More factors were identified by Chen (2017), who stated that the higher education sector had seen a dramatic change. It was due to demographic changes, declining public support, the rapid development of information technology, and internationalization. The changes have made a huge impact on higher education institutions and greatly affect the scope and density of higher education evaluation (Chen, 2017).

Therefore, higher education institutions are put under pressure to adjust their method of operation due to the increase in accountability (Noaman et al., 2017). The significance of accountability in higher education is primarily due to some concerns in the field like fees increase, low rate of retention and progression, poor knowledge attainment, lack of skills needed for employment and fading of social values (Prakash, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

Human Resource Management (HRM) is defined as "a strategic and coherent approach to the management of an organization's most valued assets – the people working there, who individually and collectively contribute to the achievement of its objectives" (Armstrong, 2008, p. 5). It is understood that human resources are the backbone of any organization. Hence, the need for a robust human resource administration system in higher education has been activated due to the public demand for accountability (Allui & Sahni, 2016). Furthermore, as staff are considered the pillar of any organization (Taib et al., 2018), it is essential to provide well-organized services through human resource practices. If managed well, the organization will perform better (Miranda & Fernando, 2020). As the higher education sector in Oman is under a systematic quality assessment, it is worth finding out whether the staff have appropriate human resources practices that motivate them to do their best for the organization. Based on this argument, the question of whether the EQA has an impact on the HRMPs at Oman PHEIs was identified as a research problem.

Allui and Sahni (2016), in their study, concluded that the higher education system has to carry out more research on the practices of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) in HEIs. Moreover, they also observed a major deficiency of research studying the influence of quality assurance on HRM practices in higher education. Besides that, Dakovic and Gover (2019) asserted that following the growth

of the accountability concept in higher education in the 1990s, external quality assurance has received a great attention. As part of higher education expansions, EQA has been introduced. As a result, higher education institutions become subject to EQAs, which are carried out by quality assurance agencies (Dakovic & Gover, 2019).

The scene of the higher education sector in Oman was not away from the other international scene. However, quality assurance comes into existence due to different issues. The need for a skilled and educated workforce, the pressure on the higher education sector to develop and produce graduates with high quality and the lack of chances to pursue higher education studies at the only government higher education institution, Sultan Qaboos University, were identified as factors that helped to introduce quality assurance at Oman higher education sector (Goodliffe & Razvi, 2011).

To overcome those issues, the government has positively reacted by issuing the private higher education law. As a result, the first private college was established in the 1990s (Goodliffe & Razvi, 2011). Moreover, the government acknowledged the necessity for a well monitoring system for the quality of these PHEIs and the programs offered as the number of the PHEIs increased. Therefore, the establishment of the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) in 2001 as an external quality assurance agency was to assure the community that the institutions and the programs offered meet the international standards (Goodliffe & Razvi, 2011).

According to Shah (2013), external quality assurance's goal is to reassure society that higher education standards are appropriate and comparable worldwide. Moreover, Nguyen (2016) has recognized four purposes of quality assurance in higher education. These are accountability, control, compliance and improvement. In Oman, Quality Audits become a move from a compliance-focused culture to a culture where HEIs are fully accountable for developing their quality management systems and effectiveness (Goodliffe & Razvi, 2011). As a result, two stages were identified for the institutional accreditation for the higher education institutions in Oman. These are Stage 1: Institutional Quality Audit (QA) and Stage 2: Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA).

The public demand for accountability has forced the need for a robust human resource administration system in higher education (Allui & Sahni, 2016). According to Oman Accreditation Council (2008), nine scopes were identified for the QA. These are:

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

The HEIs are requested to carry out a self-study and submit a portfolio for the quality audit. The quality assurance agency, currently the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA), is responsible for evaluating the portfolio and conducting a visit to

the institutions to verify that the submitted portfolio and the evidences are accurate and serve the purpose. After the visit, a quality audit report is produced. The quality audit is formative in nature, and it gives CARs. These are Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations (Oman Accreditation Council, 2008).

On the other hand, the Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA) has nine standards, and each one has several criteria to be met by the HEIs (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, 2016). The HEIs are responsible for submitting a portfolio to the OAAAQA. The latter is responsible for the evaluation through a selected panel with specific guidelines for issuing the report. The report is summative, and it evaluates whether the HEI has met or not the applicable standards.

The ISA report includes the final outcomes of the standards assessment. Each standard gets a formative result after examining the different criteria associated with that standard. Each criteria receives one of the following descriptions and rating: Met (4), Met (3), Met (2), Partially Met (1), and Not Met (0) (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, 2016).

According to Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (2016), a rating of (4) suggests that the institution has satisfied the criterion's requirements and in most cases exceeded them. The HEI has also proved that the outcomes are purposeful in the sense that they were well-planned and implemented. Moreover, it is also suggested that the outcomes are sustainable in the sense that the levels of performance are anticipated to be maintained for the duration of the accreditation. This shows that there is an innovative and excellent practice done by the institution.

A rating of (3) suggests that the institution has met the specified requirements of the criterion and occasionally exceeded them. The level of performance can be managed and likely to be retained over the accreditation period. The rating indicates an example of good practice (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, 2016).

According to Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (2016), a rating of (2) suggests that most of the time, the Panel found the HEI to be satisfying the criterion's standards. The outcomes of the accreditation process are intentional in the sense that they were carefully planned and executed. In addition, the results are long-term in the sense that the level of performance is expected to be retained throughout the accreditation period. This implies that the practice adheres to international standards and expectations.

A rating of (1) shows that at the time of the Assessment of Standards, the panel determined that an institution has met some of the criterion's requirements prescribed for the standard. However, the HEI Self-Assessment panel or ISA Panel has determined that the institution has demonstrated a willingness to completely satisfy all standards in the future. Furthermore, criteria rating of 1 is only given under two circumstances: first, there is evidence that all of the criterion's requirements will be met in the future. Second, failing to meet all of the criterion's requirements at the time of the Standards Assessment does not prohibit the standard from being met (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, 2016).

Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (2016) has asserted that a rating of (0) means that the institution does not meet the standard's criteria. In this case, the standard will be considered Not Met if any relevant criterion receives a score of (0).

3. Research Questions

This paper is trying to answer the question of "Is there any influence of the EQA on HRMPs at the PHEIs in Oman?"

4. Purpose of the Study

This study will focus on the potential effects of EQA on HRMPs at the PHEIs in Oman. The study will mainly focus on the results of the two stages of the external quality assurance of twenty-one private higher education institutions, which have already taken place in Oman. The first stage is the QA, and the second one is the ISA.

5. Research Methods

The purpose of the research was to see whether there is an influence of the external quality assurance on human resource management practices at Oman PHEIs. This study used an analytical approach. Documents were collected, reviewed and analyzed. A qualitative data collection was done in this study. The data collection took place between November 2018 and April 2021. The data collected from the website of Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education.

An analysis of twenty-one reports was carried out for the private higher education institutions of both stage 1 and stage 2 QA and ISA. Although the number of PHEIs is more than twenty-one institutions, this study focused only on the private institutions that have completed both stages of quality assessment till this moment.

This study reviewed and analyzed the section titled Staff and Staff Support Services of the quality audits and the institutional accreditation outcomes. Due to the importance of this area, the Quality Audits and the Institutional Standards Assessment focus on the practices offered to staff by assigning one full section for that purpose. The section titled: Staff and Staff Support Services dealt with different practices that need to be met by the HEIs (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, 2016). These are:

1) Human Resources Planning and Management
2) Staff Profile
3) Recruitment and Selection
4) Induction
5) Professional Development
6) Performance Planning and Review
7) Promotion and Other Incentives
8) Severance
9) Staff Organizational Climate and Retention
10) Omanization

6.   Findings

This study focuses on the influence that EQA has on HRMPs at the PHEIs in Oman. After analyzing the data from the first stage and getting the outcomes Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations, it is observed that the number of recommendations are more than the commendations and the affirmations. The recommendations indicate that the PHEIs have not done well, so they were recommended to review their operation in the specified areas. Table 1 below shows that 90 recommendations were given for Standards 8: Staff and Staff Support Services. The number of recommendations suggests that there is an issue with the services provided to staff. The recommendations given by the external review panels show that the PHEIs did not have a particular system for the sub-areas of the standard, or they lack evidence to show that they have taken proper steps to implement the quality cycle ADRI (Approach, Deployment, Results and Improvement). At least five sub-areas received the most recommendations. These are: Professional Development, Performance Planning and Review, Staff Organizational Climate and Retention, Human Resources Planning and Management and Recruitment and Selection.

Moreover, the number of commendations that have been made to the PHEIs is also giving an alarming signal that the PHEIs are not doing well for their staff. Out of 21 PHEIs, only six commendations were given for different sub-areas of staff support services. According to the Oman Accreditation Council (2008), commendations are issued when the results meet or exceed appropriate goals and objectives. In addition, 26 affirmations were given for different sub-areas. The affirmations indicate that the PHEIs have identified areas for improvement, but they have not completed the quality cycle (Oman Accreditation Council, 2008).

The carried analysis of the audit reports was not that simple because some sub-areas of the evaluated scopes did not receive an explicit direct outcome from the panels. This happened when the reviewers were unable to make a final conclusion even after an area had been thoroughly investigated. This is due to the unavailability or inconsistent of crucial information (Oman Accreditation Council, 2008). Therefore, reading between the lines has given an indication for the situation of that particular sub-area. For some sub-areas, it was challenging to decide the outcome, so as indicated in Table 1, the total number of CARs (Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations) do not tally with the total number of the institutions' reports being reviewed. The outcomes of Standard 8 in the first stage is shown in Table 1 below.

The analysis results also show that the PHEIs in Oman have done well in some sub-areas of Standard 8: Staff and Staff Support Services. For example, they did well in Omanization, Staff Profile, Severance and Induction as these sub-areas got the lowest recommendations. They got 3, 4, 4, and 7 recommendations each respectively.

Table 1. Standard 8: Staff and Staff Support Services Outcomes in Quality Audit

Standard 8 Sub-Areas	Commendations	Affirmations	Recommendations	Total
Human Resources Planning & Management	0	2	12	14
Staff Profile	1	2	4	7
Recruitment and Selection	0	1	13	14
Induction	3	2	7	12
Professional Development	1	6	13	20
Performance Planning and Review	0	4	13	17
Promotion and Other Incentives	0	2	8	10
Severance	0	0	4	4
Staff Organizational Climate and Retention	0	4	13	17
Omanization	1	3	3	7
Total	**6**	**26**	**90**	

On the other hand, the outcomes of the second stage, the ISA, are also collected by analyzing the results given at the website of the OAAAQA. The outcomes of the second stage showed that most of the PHEIs have met or partially met the requirements for the sub-areas in Standard 8. Moreover, almost none of the 21 PHEIs have scored 3 or 4 which indicates very low outcomes. Table 2 below shows the outcomes of the twenty-one private higher education institutions in Standard 8 Staff and Staff Support Services. As this assessment is formative, all sub-areas were evaluated by three outcomes: not met, partially met, and met. The evaluation is represented by giving a rating of zero for not met, one for partially met and two, three and four for met (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, 2016).

The ISA outcomes show that some PHEIs have not done well in some sub-areas. For example, five PHEIs have failed to meet the Human Resources Planning and Management requirements, Staff Profile, Recruitment and Selection, Professional Development and Promotion, and Other Incentives. On the other hand, 10 PHEIs have partially met the requirements for Professional Development services provided to staff. Moreover, 11 PHEIs have partially met to recruit the national staff, so they did not do well in the Omanization criterion. However, 3 PHEIs have met the requirements of Omanization with a score of 3, which is the highest score achieved. In general, it is observed that most of the PHIs have met the requirements of the ten sub-areas and scored 2. Moreover, 21 PHEIs have scored 2 in Severance services while 20 PHEIs have scored 2 in Recruitment and Selection and Induction.

Table 2. Standard 8: Staff and Staff Support Services Outcomes in Institutional Standards Assessment

Standard 8 Sub-Areas	Not Met (0)	Partially Met (1)	Met (2)	Met (3)	Met (4)	Total
Human Resources Planning & Management	1	4	16	0	0	21
Staff Profile	1	9	11	0	0	21
Recruitment and Selection	1	0	20	0	0	21
Induction	0	1	20	0	0	21

Professional Development	1	10	10	0	0	21
Performance Planning and Review	0	4	17	0	0	21
Promotion and Other Incentives	1	6	14	0	0	21
Severance	0	0	21	0	0	21
Staff Organizational Climate and Retention	0	4	17	0	0	21
Omanization	0	11	7	3	0	21

Additionally, the accreditation outcomes are related to Stage 2 of the EQA. It is a very crucial stage where the HEI is accredited or not. The accreditation outcomes of the ISA shown in Table 3 below indicate a significant gap in the services provided to staff. For example, out of 21 PHEIs, only eight institutions were accredited which is around 38% of the institutions, and one is conditionally accredited. On the other hand, 12 HEIs were put under probation which makes around 57% of the institutions, and they have to apply for a reassessment as per the criteria provided by OAAAQA (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, 2016).

Table 3. Accreditation Outcomes

Accreditation Outcomes	Total number of PHEIs
Conditionally Accredited	1
Accredited	8
Probation	12
Total	**21**

Moreover, the overall calculation of Standard 8: Staff and Staff Support Services, shown in Table 4 below, indicates that this standard has a significant impact on the accreditation outcomes of the PHEIs in Oman. The results of the analysis show that 9 PHEIs have not met the criteria set for the standard which is around 43% while the other 12 institutions have met the requirements for Standard 8 which is around 57%.

From this result, it is evident that the PHEIs in Oman have not taken advantage of the outcomes of the QAs, which were carried out before at least four years from the second stage. It seems that the opportunities for improvement identified in the QAs reports were not addressed properly or the institutions ignored them. This is in fact a very sensitive matter as whether the institutions were ready to use the QAs reports as an assist to implement and adopt the observations of the reviewers to improve the given services to their staff before the commencement of the second stage.

Table 4. Standard 8 Outcomes

Standard 8 Outcomes	Total number of PHEIs
Met	12
Not Met	9

7. Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to see if there is an influence of EQA on HRMPs at the PHEIs in Oman. From the analysis above, it can be concluded that the PHEIs have to make much effort to maintain the quality of their provided services to their staff. However, the EQA and ISA have shown that the PHEIs have only satisfied the minimum prescribed requirements regarding HRMPs. Moreover, it is evident that the services provided to staff at the PHEIs in Oman have to be improved. Therefore, the institutions need to take further steps to show that HRMPs are essential to the staff and the organization.

As the quality culture dominates the higher education field in Oman and worldwide, it is very essential to reply positively to the opportunities offered by the QAs and ISA to improve the human resource management services provided to different stakeholders in the organization. The improvement of the services without any doubts will eventually foster the organizational culture and performance.

On the other hand, this study has focused on the results of the documents analysis. Therefore, there is a limitation to this study. As the nature of the data collection was based on documents analysis, it is difficult to generalize from one side only. The study mainly focused on the results of the evaluations done by different external panels who worked under OAAAQA. Hence, it is very important to get the feedback of the staff who are the recipients of the services provided. The perception of the staff in the target audience will assist in formulating a more reliable judgment and show the correlation between the data analysis of both methods used.

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