




Internal Quality Enhancement: Case of a UAE Business School

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study of a quality enhancement process of a small business school in the United Arab Emirates. The research explores this specific quality enhancement process with a focus on why it is implemented by the case institution and how it achieves quality improvement. The case quality enhancement process is an internal institutional approach that deviates from the Scottish Enhancement-Led Institutional Review approach. Articulation of the process is conducted from policy and practice. The articulation provides deeper and clearer understanding of the approach to quality enhancement, how it achieves quality improvements, and the leadership's justifications for adopting the approach. Justifications for the adoption include compliance with regulations, institutional transformation, quality improvement, and evidencing the quality improvement activities.

Keywords: *quality enhancement, quality improvement, benchmarking, transformation, critical self-evaluation report, quality assessment, quality weakness*

Date Submitted: June 5, 2025 | **Date Published:** March 5, 2026

Recommended Citation

Matthews, V. (2026). Internal quality enhancement: Case of a UAE business school. *International Journal of Applied Management and Technology*, 25, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.5590/IJAMT.2026.25.1646>

Introduction

The Bologna Declarations of 1999 focused on the assurance of the quality of the educational qualifications and education offered across the European higher education area. It enshrined within higher education policy the creation of easily readable and comparable degrees, with the aim to ease student mobility, and the development of a quality assurance system (Reichert and Tauch, 2003). The establishment of a common standard and guidelines by the Bologna Process assigns accountability for the quality of education provided by higher education institutions (HEIs) while ensuring that students can make informed choices about their education. It emphasized the importance of accountability and transparency while involving all stakeholders in the quality assurance process. However, the Bologna Process created tensions between national and European dimensions of higher education policy (Vukasovic et al., 2017). The Prague Communiqué of 2001 and the Berlin Communiqué of 2003 introduced quality enhancement into European higher education policy.

The United Arab Emirates' (UAE's) higher education regulator is the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), and the latest iteration of its regulatory standard (CAA, 2019) was created to be responsive to the maturing provision of higher education in the UAE. Within this policy, quality enhancement is viewed as researching quality weaknesses to modify and improve programs, resources, services, benchmarking, monitoring, and evaluation of the improvements. Internally, HEIs create and implement quality enhancement processes (QEPs) to address the regulatory mandate.

In this study, I explored the following questions:

RQ1: How does the articulated QEP design achieve improvement?

RQ2: How does trust of the quality practitioners impact the improvements?

RQ3: What are the leadership's justifications for implementing the QEP?

Literature Review

Quality enhancement is a non-neutral complex social process shaped by factors such as an HEI's characteristics, culture, external stakeholder influence (Gvaramadze, 2011), funding bodies, stakeholder involvement (Groen, 2017), leadership, and resources (Tinto, 1993). It is a process designed for specific HEI contexts and the constraints within which each HEI operates, steady, reliable, and evidencable improvements in the quality of learning opportunities (Harvey, 2025).

Quality enhancement has been viewed as a bottom-up, negotiated process based on qualitative judgement and engagement with academics (Williams, 2016). This definition suggests that no relationship exists between quality improvement and regulatory metrics and no links exist between quality enhancement and regulatory compliance (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). A challenge then is to uncover how QEPs achieve quality improvements. Strategic plans are embraced in top-down enhancement activities (Bok, 2003; Martinez, 2015). The challenge is to explore these relationships and how they lead to continuous improvements of HEIs. A significant number of publications have discussed the Scottish approach to quality enhancement (Gvaramadze, 2011) and within the European policy context. However, a gap exists within literature on the implementation of quality enhancement and how it integrates with quality assurance and accountability. Another gap exists in institutional leadership's justifications for its implementation, inclusive of regulatory imposition within the Middle East.

Methodology

An evidence-informed approach (Petticrew & Roberts, 2003) to QEP articulation from practice ensures the relevance, practicality, and effectiveness of the articulation. Participatory and evidence-informed policymaking are nuanced, and collaborative approaches hence could jointly impact the synergistical improvement of policy and practice (Beerrens, 2018). This synergistic approach grounds policy conceptualization and symbolism in the realities of social and administrative context (Boaz et al., 2009).

Research Design

The research design in Table 1 bridges the divide between the abstract philosophical attributes of the paradigm and the adopted methods (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). The QEP framework is first articulated from the HEI's five policy documents and then the practice. The exhumed practice is used in this research to enhance

the QEP articulation from the policies. This approach reinforces the articulated framework and exposes policy progressions over time.

Table 1. *The Research Design*

Research question	Method	Sources of data	Number	Analysis	Outcomes
QEP Articulation	Qualitative (document analysis and interviews)	Institutional policy documents	5 policy documents	Thematic analysis (two cycles) and PDSA cycle	Articulated and updated QEP framework
How QEP improves the HEI's quality		Interview of academic and non-academic managers	8/22 managers		
		+ Questionnaire for faculty and managers	+ 15/18 of the faculty 16/22 of the managers		Logic model and discussion of themes
Leadership perceived reasons for the QEP		Senior leadership members	2/5 purposefully selected members	Thematic analysis (single cycle)	Discussion of themes

Note: PDSA = Plan-Do-Study-Act; QEP = quality enhancement process.

The practice is explored by interviewing academic and non-academic managers responsible for development and implementation of the QEP. Within the same interviews, questions are asked to capture how the QEP achieves improvement. Semi-structured questions are put before two of the senior managers to capture the HEI's quality intents and understand its justifications for implementing the QEP approach. This provides clearer information on what the HEI seeks to achieve. Qualitative responses are also sought from a questionnaire implemented to extract further knowledge of the process and how quality improvement is attained.

Data Collection

Policy documents are studied in a first pass (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), noting all references to quality enhancement, QEP, and quality improvements. In a second pass, the relevant information is highlighted and placed into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet indicating the source reference page number and document. Eight interviewed managers and the questionnaire respondents are representative of the population (Patton, 2015). The questionnaires are electronically sent to the participants with a month's timeline for completion.

Analysis

The data analysis occurs in the following order: policy document analysis, interviews, and questionnaires. Apriori deductive codes are created (Saldaña, 2013) to reflect literature prior to the coding of the policy data.

Post-familiarization with the policy documents' sentences and phrases reflecting who should do what, when, where, why, and how (Gibbs, 2018) within the quality improvement, accountability, compliance, and enhancement activities are highlighted. These are then transferred into spreadsheets. The first cycle is deductively coded and organized (Bowen, 2009), and the second cycle is inductively coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Themes are created from the second cycle codes. The themes describe a collection of activities that fit and extend the PDSA cycle (Deming, 1993). Specific questions within the research protocol explore the leadership's justifications for implementing the QEP. Single-cycle inductive codes and higher-level themes are created, and faculty and managers' perceptions of how improvements are achieved are exhumed from the interviews and questionnaires.

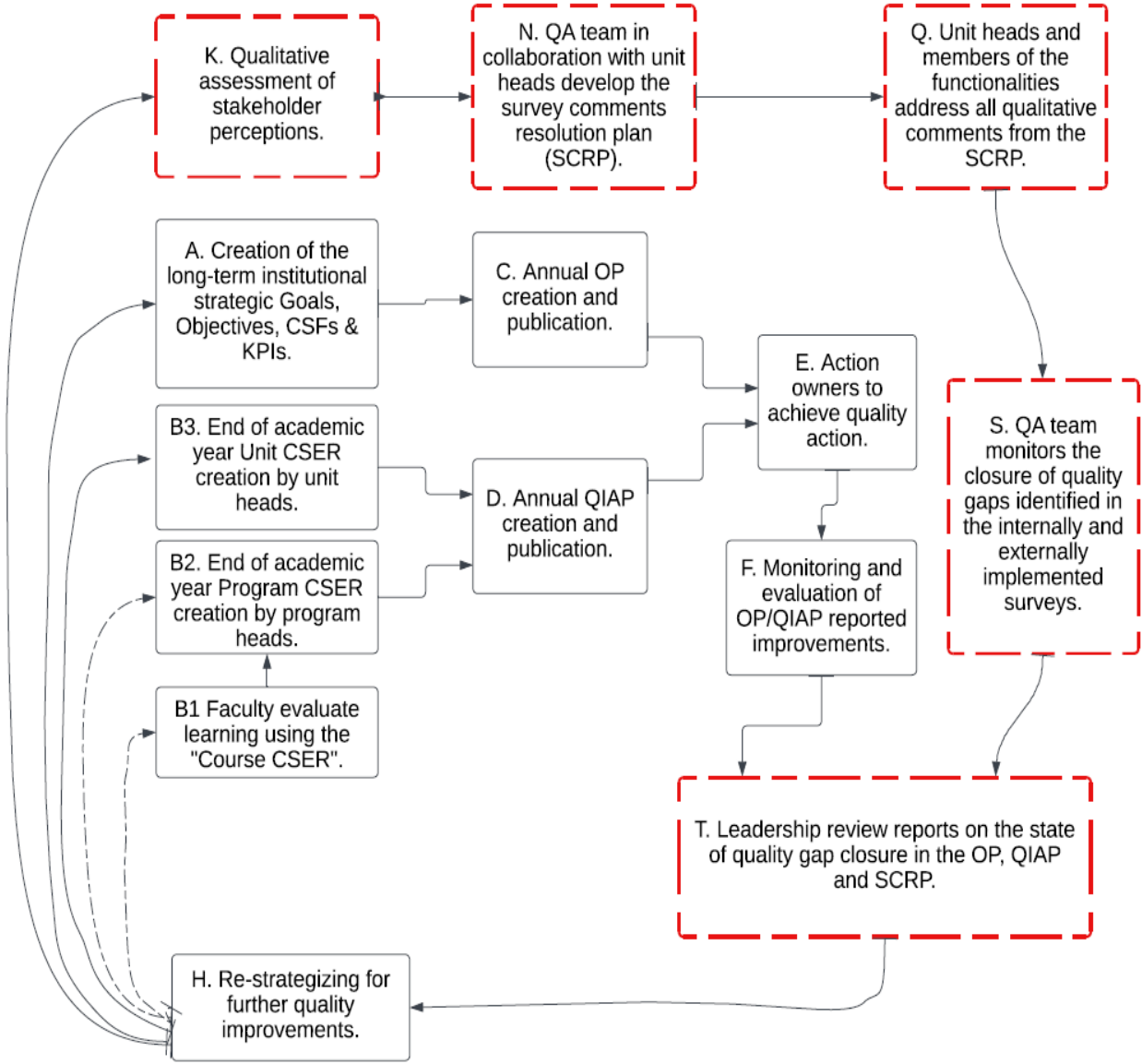
Results

Articulated QEP Framework

Figure 1 shows the policy and practice articulated QEP framework with the red boxes revealing the policy and practice deviations. The findings show that the policies and practices are generally aligned; however, themes K, N, Q, and S from the practice are missing from the policy articulation. The red boxes reveal additional themes retrieved from stakeholder qualitative comments.

The case QEP has 6 stages: (1) quality assessments, (2) operationalization, (3) achievement of quality actions, (4) monitoring and evaluation of achievements, (5) reporting of the state of achievement, and (6) re-strategizing.

Figure 1. *The QEP Framework*



Quality Assessment

The HEI has adopted a five-pronged assessment approach, including one top-down and four bottom-up assessment tools. The top-down approach assesses strategic quality weaknesses by co-opting the quality aspirations of internal and external quality stakeholders using strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. This aligns institutional quality goals with the HEI’s mission and vision. The goals are achieved through leadership and regulatorily created key performance indicators (KPIs). The strategic KPIs are extractions of the regulatory standards, hence the link to regulatory compliance. The long-term targets are benchmarked qualitative and quantitative drivers of improvement with higher performing HEIs as the focus. Although the long-term targets and strategic KPIs are created at the institutional level, they are implemented at the unit level by managers.

The bottom-up approaches include three focused critical self-evaluation reports (CSERs) of course delivery, academic programs, administrative units, and qualitative outcomes of internal and external questionnaires. Qualitative comments capture explanations of the reasons for the choice made in response to the closed-ended questions or are entirely new views of the quality weaknesses not captured by the collective innovative and diverse stakeholders. This is a form of critical reflection. The course and program CSERs are faculty retrospective reflections of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of learning. The unit CSERs are not guided by regulatory standards and are at the discretion of the managers. The outcome of the questionnaire shows that the focus is on management- or administration-related activities. The managers focus on the achievement of regulatory metrics, staff development, and facilities. Where faculty reflect on course- and program-level activities, managers co-opt quality weaknesses from accountability tools such as internal and external quantitative questionnaire outcomes, budgets, external regulatory evaluation infractions, internal audit findings, and the experiences of the managers. The HEI's implemented internal and external qualitative questionnaire outcomes raise concerns from the wider community of stakeholders.

Operationalization

The strategic KPIs that are viewed as quality weaknesses are operationalized using an operational plan (OP). The managers achieve the long-term 5-year targets through annually negotiated incremental unit KPIs and targets. Implementing the strategic KPI at the unit level with annual increases of the targets keeps the long-term targets in sight. Multiple unit-level KPIs are created to achieve the single strategic KPI. These are all negotiated between the quality assurance team and the middle manager responsible for achieving the strategic KPI. Quality weaknesses raised in the course CSERs are collectively summarized into the program CSERs. Outcomes of the program and unit CSERs are operationalized in a quality improvement action plan (QIAP). Outcomes of the HEI's qualitative questionnaire comments, which are stakeholder reflections of perceived weaknesses, are analyzed, summarized, and operationalized into a survey comments resolution plan (SCRCP). The quality assurance team agrees and negotiates specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) actions with the unit managers to address these quality weaknesses. These SMART corrective actions drive quality improvements using the experiences of the managers. The achievement of the benchmarked KPIs and outcomes of the critical reflections link compliance and measures of accountability with quality enhancement activities.

Addressing the Quality Weaknesses

According to the policy and practice, quality weaknesses in the OP, QIAP, and SCRCP are achieved by granting agency and conferring trust of the managers to achieve the KPIs and corrective actions. Achievement of the KPIs and corrective actions is the responsibility of managers who also quarterly self-report the achievement of these actions using RAG (red, amber, green) status. Reporting of RAG status is highly subjective and designed to report the state of achievement of the SMART targets. The use of RAG status largely relies on trust conferred with the managers' reported achievements and not qualitative description of actions taken to address the quality weaknesses. Such empowerment of the managers suggests that significant value is placed on their experiences. This approach is seen by managers to result in significant embellishments of the reported achievements.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Achievements

Monitoring involves the quality assurance team's driving of the QEP activities by that the managers report all RAG statuses. Evaluation consists of statistical analyses of the managers' self-reported quarterly achievements. Monitoring in this context is the process of tracking and ensuring that action owners within the OP, QIAP, and SCRCP report the "state of achievement" of the quality weaknesses.

Leadership Review of Progress

Monitoring and evaluation culminate in the quality assurance team's development of quarterly summary reports on the outcomes achieved. Policy statements indicate that the summary report created by the quality assurance team provides information on the state of progress made in the achievement of institutional strategic goals and addressing of all set targets. The review of achievements is more “bark but no bite” due to the excessive reliance on the managers' self-reported achievements without verifications. The review of the achievements phase involves senior leadership's review of overall achievements and decision-making using the outcomes and quality assurance team recommendations.

Re-Strategizing

The leadership reviews the quarterly summary reports and provides recommendations for improving the QEP for future planning and for improvements. The policies also indicate that the heads of business units contribute to further improvement reviews by bringing quality concerns to the leadership. The leadership's list of adopted recommendations is communicated to the managers.

Impact of Trust on the HEI's QEP

The resources, which include dedicated quality assurance unit managers, faculty and staff, external stakeholders, support of institutional leadership, financial resources, time, and Microsoft Teams for hosting and tracking the SCRP, OP, QIAP, and CSERs, are key in the QEP. Provision of these resources is required to achieve the desired outputs, outcomes, and impacts. The systematic and structured nature of the QEP is underpinned by the logical relationships between the resources, activities, output, and short- and long-term outcomes. The QEP activities rely on the resources for implementing and achieving the desired impacts. Also, the process of quality assessment through to the reporting of the achievements relies heavily on trust granted by the leadership to the faculty and managers as well as the value placed on the comments of internal and stakeholder comments.

The policy and practice indicate that significant trust is conferred on the faculty and managers to adequately and accurately assess the quality weaknesses through the CSERs. Hence, their knowledge and experiences are important in these reflections. A “trust but validate” approach is employed in the course and program CSER, ensuring that all regulatorily prescribed reflective silos are adequately addressed by the faculty. Likewise, a “trust but verify” approach is implemented on the unit CSERs to verify that the assessment outcomes satisfy the case HEI's quality intents. The strategic plans are approved by an institutional board of trustees, while the summarized outcomes of the stakeholder qualitative comments are approved by the quality assurance unit. These indicate a robust verification approach.

Reporting of achievement of set targets is likewise dependent on trust granted to the unit managers. There are also no verifications of the reported achievements or RAG status, which suggests that the institutionally reported quality improvements are assumptions. The “bark and no bite” monitoring approach is also highly subjective, relying on the managers' stamp of approval as the final confirmation of achievement. A more appropriate approach would be to ensure that managers make qualitative comments on how the targets are achieved. Random sampling of these qualitative comments would verify that the reported improvements are real and not acts of tokenism.

Leadership-Perceived Justifications for Implementing the QEP

The managers indicated that the HEI failed its external quality assurance (EQA) evaluation due to noncompliance with requirements of the updated regulatory CAA standard (2019). CAA provides elevated and improved regulatory standards to bring the quality of UAE HEIs closer to the quality of European HEIs. The

senior leadership indicated that the QEP is implemented to quickly satisfy the regulatory requirements by addressing the regulatory infractions and for evidencing the HEI's compliance with regulations.

The interviews also suggest that the QEP seeks to improve quality from within and to achieve compliance with regulations as a mechanism for improvement. Implementation of the QEP itself follows the updated regulatory standards. The HEIs also prioritize quality improvement to transform the HEI and achieve its program and institutional reaccreditation. Transformation of quality activities is perceived by the leadership as the streamlining of the quality actions to ensure that quality improvements are achieved. This would address the HEI's ineffectively implemented quality assurance controls. This was earlier noted by the external regulatory evaluation report. The report viewed the weak quality assurance controls as reasons for ineffective evidencing of quality activities. Thus, the key reasons for implementing the QEP include transformation of the quality processes to quickly address regulatory infractions, ensure compliance with regulations, and streamline the quality activities.

Discussions

How the QEP Achieves Improvement

The five-pronged quality assessment approach is foundational, focusing on addressing all quality weaknesses raised by the quality assessment tools. The adoption of regulatory metrics in guiding the assessment tools demonstrates a link between enhancement and assurance. This deviates from the view of Elassy (2015) that tensions exist between quality enhancement and quality assurance. Where peer review processes like the enhancement-led institutional review are deemed to serve both compliance and enhancement (Elassy, 2015; Swinglehurst et al., 2008), the QEP co-opts regulatory requirements and bottom-up evaluations. The aim is to achieve compliance and performance comparable to higher performing HEIs.

The contextual QEP show that the strategic plan is leadership created and imposed, thus conflicting with Barzelay and Campbell (2003) who view it as a collective effort of "barons, ranks and file." The strategically assessed quality weaknesses and the SMART targets are imposed on the quality practitioners, agreeing with the position of Harvey and Knight (1996) that the top-down assessment indicates managerialism. The strategic plan co-opts regulatorily defined measures of performance and internally created KPIs. Where Whittington et al. (2020) indicated that managers see this as an "imposition of strategy by powerful external stake holders," the case HEI's managers see them as impositions by the senior leadership. It also exposes the HEI's restriction of fundamental and widely impacting decision-making to deliberations of the "knowledgeable few." The HEI's approach partly aligns with the suggestion of Zechlin (2010) that it is a strategic analysis of changes in the HEI's environment. However, within this HEI context, the KPIs are more nationally prescribed than leadership prescribed.

The changes in approach between the top-down and bottom-up approaches, or from institutional to lower evaluative domains, is due to the changes in the focus of interest and the evaluative intents. These approaches to bottom-up assessments align with the view of Saunders et al. (2011) that evaluations are focused on "the critical concerns or questions derived from the interests of various stakeholders with the purpose of improving practice." Adoption of regulatory silos in the course and program CSERs strictly grounds the reflections on well-researched perceptions of quality.

Inclusion of student qualitative comments by the case HEI agrees with Farkas et al. (2023). It leverages outcomes of quality weaknesses exhumed from wider stakeholder experiences of the HEI. Where Barab and Plucker (2002) deemed such exhumations of quality weaknesses as "new knowledge," within this context, exhumed knowledge is the combination of new knowledge of the context and previous cycles' unaddressed

improvement targets. Outcomes of the qualitative comments provide further depth into the stakeholder ratings of the closed-ended questions. This finding also aligns with Grebennikov and Shah (2013) and Decorte et al. (2019) that the outcomes of the open-ended questions hold explanatory reasons for the quantitative findings.

Subjectivity is introduced using RAG status and non-qualitatively verified achievements, challenging the argument that improvements are achieved by the QEP. It agrees with Trow (1996) that enhancement fails to achieve true quality improvements. The monitoring approach is a statistical numbers game rather than a focus on qualitative confirmations. The findings are congruent with the views of Hopmere et al. (2020) and Keil et al. (2014) that use of RAG status conflates outcomes. RAG status is seen as a subjective and oversimplified monitoring approach. It suggests that unmitigated trust is conferred on the managers accepting their unverified and subjective use of RAG status as “true and accurate.” Randomized sampling of the reported achievements is proposed to build stakeholder trust in the QEP and ensure the accuracy of the reported achievements.

Impact of Trust on the QEP Outcomes

“Unmitigated trust” is granted to managers to address weaknesses. Consequentially, the impact of trust on the implementation and achievements of the QEP in the case HEI are reported below.

Trust in the Top-Down Assessments

Like Oakland (2014), the managers view the strategic plan as leadership imposition and the KPIs as regulatory imposed. Exclusion of the managers who are responsible for achieving the KPI targets from negotiating these strategic targets suggests that the top-down quality assessment is managerial. Managers see their exclusion from creating the KPIs and the long-term targets as a lack of trust. At strategic levels, the leadership imposition of KPIs and their targets conflict with the assertions of Peterson (1998) that quality systems continuously build on trust in “dealing with the organizational culture and probably changing it.” Where Barzelay and Campbell (2003) noted that creation of strategic plans involves “barons, ranks and file,” the case HEI excludes “ranks and file.”

Effects of Trust Within Bottom-Up Assessments

Trust is viewed by the quality managers as a source of vulnerability in the QEP’s achievement of the set targets. The position of the quality managers is that the QEP and its implementation are challenged by trust granted to the quality practitioners in evaluating the quality weaknesses. This is particularly the case in the expert reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of courses, programs and administrative units. According to Bolton and Delderfield (2018), reflections are “responsible and ethical practice(s).” However, the managers of the case HEI indicate that the assessment outcomes are impacted by embellishments resulting from employee interest in self-preservation and not institutional improvement. This finding agrees with Sedikides & Gregg (2008) that the reflectors’ concern is over “the self”; therefore, role preservation rather than self-identity is the priority.

Impact of Trust on Reported Achievements

Vulnerabilities also exist when addressing and reporting on the closure of these quality gaps. Unmitigated trust is granted to the managers in achieving and reporting these achievements. The reported achievements are viewed by the case HEI as “accurate” without verifications. The position of the managers is that a “trust but verify” approach should be adopted to sustain the quality culture and ensure the accuracy of the reporting. The managers agree with Gundlach and Cannon (2010) that “trust but verify” safeguards against vulnerabilities of trust. Non-qualitative reporting of the achievements and use of subjective interpretations of the RAG status is seen by managers as a source of loss of information. It suggests that the true state of

achievement is not known by the HEI. These findings agree with Keil et al. (2014) and Hopmere et al. (2020) that the achievements could be skewed by using RAG status.

Justifications for Implementing the QEP

Transformation as Change to Quality Achievement Activities

The leadership indicated that adoption of the QEP is justified to achieve transformational change to the status quo from simply implementing accountability tools and quality assurance to a more streamlined approach, ensuring quality is improved. The changes sought by the HEI are partly prompted by institutional, government-prescribed thresholds and desires for improvement of HEIs across the country. The view of transformation agrees with Harvey (2025) that it is about change from one state to another. The focus of the transformational changes is multifaceted depending on the aspect of institutional governance and national policy intent.

Quick Means to Address Internal Process Audit and EQA Infractions

The case HEI failed its program and institutional evaluation due to several regulatory infractions. To quickly address these infractions, the QEP absorbs the infractions as quality weaknesses. As noted previously, teaching, learning, student skills, research, and other aspects of institutional governance have been the focus of quality enhancement. Where Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) suggested that whole HEIs are sometimes transformed, and QEPs address quality weaknesses identified from internal process audits and EQA infractions. Through its SMART actions, the QEP ensures that managers achieve the assigned infractions to the regulatory metrics within defined timeframes.

Compliance With Regulatory Requirements

It has been suggested that constant changes to higher education regulations are due to public politics (Benavides et al., 2020; Singun, 2025). The managers and the leadership view the updated regulatory standard as a means for improving the UAE's higher education sector. This position aligns with the view of the regulators that the policy updates are a response from the political leaders (CAA, 2019). According to the National Higher Education Strategy 2030, improvement in the quality of HEIs is the government's focus (Ahmed, 2023). The use of regulatory standards to force change in HEIs could be viewed as a means for ensuring effective blanket changes to the higher education sector at all levels.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the case QEP does not improve quality “on the fly” but is an internal and systematic approach to quality enhancement. It retrospectively assesses quality weaknesses using a five-pronged top-down and bottom-up quality assessment approach. Through these approaches, strategic and stakeholder perceptions of weaknesses and strengths are assessed. The QEP addresses these to improve all aspects of institutional governance. This approach assumes that the improvement of all aspects of institutional governance would support the improvement of stakeholder experience. It seeks to positively impact teaching and learning and the wider institution. The assessment, operationalization of the quality weaknesses, addressing of the weaknesses, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting and re-strategizing stages of the QEP framework are dependent on regulatory and leadership performance impositions and “trust” conferred on the stakeholders.

The QEP is perceived by the managers as a transformational tool streamlined to ensure achievement of quality improvements and regulatory compliance and address internally and externally assessed quality weaknesses. Transformation is viewed by quality managers as changing from a lower state of quality to a higher state. The state of continuous assurance that these changes progressively occur is viewed by the

managers as enhancement or continuous quality improvement. This is also a contribution to knowledge and existing literature on quality enhancement methods.

Quality improvement is achieved through concerted efforts of students, faculty, managers, leadership, lower-level staff, and external stakeholders. Trust granted by the leadership upon the managers is the key to assessing quality weaknesses and in addressing and reporting these weaknesses. The quality practitioners engage in unethical practices by not reporting true weaknesses that reflect poorly on the reflector.

There is a loss of stakeholder confidence in the accuracy of the reported improvements due to managers' unethical embellishment of the reported achievements. This weakness coupled with the adoption of RAG status rather than qualitative reporting of the reported achievements of the managers are seen as the reasons for the multiplexed QEP outcomes. Although trust is necessary in sustaining the quality culture and addressing the quality weaknesses, it is viewed as a source of process vulnerability.

Limitations

The unique structures of the QEP are some of the factors limiting QEP comparisons. The findings are also limited by the institutional administrative structures.

Future Research

The next steps in this research are to ascertain the effectiveness of the process, the challenges impacting the implementation, the existence of a supporting quality culture, and whether the QEP achieved the intended improvements. It is also necessary to research how quality enhancements are implemented within other HEIs outside of the Scottish environment.

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