Impacts of Internationalisation for Quality Assurance: A case study on institutional best practices for quality assurance in a research university

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Abstract.   The higher education sector in the UAE has expanded exponentially with due attention to quality assurance supported by CAA. Internationalisation dynamics has added to quality enhancement efforts in the country. This study explores the impacts of internationalisation for quality assurance in higher education and it particularly accounts institutional best practices for quality assurance in a research university. The study used literature review, case study and document analysis as research methods. The research relied on relevant literature and documents from the case studied. Standard protocols of systematic literature review, and document analysis were followed in the study. Meta-analysis and meta-synthesis helped to achieve in summarising, analysing, interpreting the findings. The findings indicate that the role of institutional quality assurance department is pivotal to enhance quality. Research universities are expected to uphold higher order quality assurance protocols. The best practices highlighted in this study may offer unique lessons for young and new research universities.

Keywords: internationalisation of higher education, quality in higher education, institutional quality assurance, research universities

Introduction

This study explores the impacts of internationalisation for quality assurance in higher education and it particularly accounts institutional best practices for quality assurance in a research university. The research is keen to find an answer to the question: What are the impacts of internationalisation for quality assurance in higher education in the UAE and how do institutional best practices support quality enhancement in research university? The British University in Dubai (BUiD), a local post-graduate research university has genuine collaboration with four UK partner universities of Cardiff, Edinburgh, Manchester, and Glasgow. BUiD is offering over twenty research master and doctoral

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programmes in three faculties namely, Business & Law, Engineering & IT and Education. BUiD's best practices for quality are steered by the quality standards from both the UAE and the UK. The study relied on relevant literature on quality in higher education and documents from BUiD on institutional quality assurance. United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a young and emerging country with strong attention to education strongly supported by internationalisation (David, 2017a). The post-graduate education in the UAE is gradually developing with fewer universities offering research master and doctoral programmes (Karabchuk, 2020). However, the higher education sector in general, UAE has relatively expanded with relevant quality enhancement in the last few decades with a strong intervention from the Commission for Assessment and Accreditation (CAA). The diverse nature of the higher education sector in the UAE with the presence of the local, foreign, public, and private institutions developed healthy competition in the sector (David, 2017b). Particularly the internationalisation dynamics has added to quality enhancement efforts in the country. The licensing and regulatory authorities have embraced necessary local and global standards to ensure quality higher education in the country. Along these standards, often many institutions develop and follow suitable best practices fitting their contexts and nature.

The Office of Quality and Institutional Effectiveness (OQIE) coordinates programme accreditation, policy governance, programme evaluation and assessing programme effectiveness. In addition, it contributes towards improving BUiD's overall performance by collecting, analysing, and disseminating variety of data and reports for the perusal of the executive office and other key stakeholders. The best practices for quality assurance at BUiD ranges from the need analysis to the global certifications. The number internal and external assessment and auditing that BUiD goes through periodically involving wide range of stakeholders' feedback, review and recommendations contribute to these best practices. BUiD's journey has been a remarkable experience that offers unique lessons for young and new research universities offering post-graduate research programmes (The British University in Dubai, 2018). The study used literature review and document analysis as research methods. The research relied on relevant literature and documents from the case studied. Case study research often help to gain specialised understanding of a similar cases (Rowley, 2002). Case studies are often used to persuade readers on the practical value the specific case brings (Siggelkow, 2007). Standard protocols of systematic literature review, and document analysis are followed in the study. Meta-analysis and meta-synthesis helped to achieve in summarising, analysing, interpreting the findings.

Internationalisation and quality assurance in higher education

The internationalisation of higher education for Verger and Hermo (2010) is a phenomenon that shapes range of policies and programmes develop bilaterally, regionally, and globally. Knight (2004) describes four complementary dimensions of internationalisation, such as activity, competency, ethos,

and process dimension. The term quality has become the buzzword in higher education research and practices in recent years. The Oxford Dictionary (2018), defines, quality as the standard of something to be measured against other things with a degree of excellence and improvement. Defining quality in higher education has been not an easy task as quality means different things to different people. However, Harvey and Green (1993) view quality as exception (the idea of excellence), as perfection (consistent and reliable), as fitness for purpose (product or service meeting the purpose), as value for money (quality via return on investment) and as transformative (quality as a process of change).

Quality assurance practices in higher education evolved as a response to emerging problems the sector faced with an intention to enhance product and service delivery with necessary accountability (Kis, 2005). Quality is something everyone likes, and it has become an integral part of higher education system. Higher educational institutions go through some kinds of evaluation, assessment, accreditation, and audit to build their reputation or as part of the requirements. However, many take quality for granted and building quality culture in higher education sector has been always challenging. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) present the four possible ideal types of quality culture, as indicated in the following framework.

Table 1. Quality culture framework

Degree of group control ⟶ Intensity of external roles ↓	Strong	Weak
Strong	Responsive	Reactive
Weak	Regenerative	Reproductive

Source: Harvey and Stensaker (2008)

Responsive type is led by external demands and have an improvement agenda for quality assurance. Reactive type rather engages with external demands, which may take advantage when action is linked to reward (ex: evaluation is linked to funding). Regenerative type more focuses on internal developments although aware of the external context and expectations. The reproductive type focuses on reproducing the status quo to minimise the impact of external factors by manipulating the situation (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). Cheng (2016) suggests that the concept 'quality assurance' must be treated as a virtue of professional practice in higher education rather as a management tool. International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE, 2016) suggest the following good practices for quality assurance in higher education, having a credible and accountable External Quality Assurance Agency (EQAA), a good relationship between higher education institutions and EQAA, the relationship of EQAA to the public, collaboration of EQAA with transnational agencies. Komotar (2018) argues that the role of internationalisation for quality assurance must be assessed and measured both internally and externally. While internationalisation contributes for quality enhancement in higher education, it is also necessary to address the quality concerns surrounded internationalisation of higher education (OECD, 1999). Orkodashvili (2021)

points out that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have strategically embraced internationalisation dynamics to support the quality enhancement in higher education in their countries. Carvalho, Rosa, and Amaral (2022) mapped out 79 Scopus indexed publications between 1998 to 2019 and highlight that there is strong link between cross-border higher education and quality assurance.

Quality assurance in research universities

Research universities pay relatively higher attention to quality assurance compared to others. Today's society is focussing on knowledge as main and important good. Higher education plays a crucial role in shaping a knowledge-based society, especially research universities that generate new knowledge play critical role (Bernhard, 2012). Altbach and Salmi (2011) point out that research universities play pivotal role for knowledge economies. Globalisation and the global economic transformation have driven the demand for quality higher education across the world. Varghese (2016) points out that the globalisation process has stimulated the concern for quality and global standards through internationally recognised accreditation, ranking and other quality initiatives for universities to remain competitive in the globalised world of higher education.

Acedo, Adams and Popa (2012) highlight that the shifting of the global and national priorities on higher education makes it difficult for consistency and consensus for quality measures and they insist the need for a systematic assessment and planning of educational quality. Research universities have greater advantages in global ranking as most ranking agencies consider research output as key criteria for ranking. Rauhvargers (2011) observes that ranking reflects university research performance much better than teaching. Amidst supportive and opposing views on ranking, higher education experts such as Marginson (2013) believes that university ranking is likely to grow to become more specialised. David and Motala (2017) indicate how universities in the BRICS[1] nations emerged in global university ranking, following the emerging trend that ranking becoming an important external quality mechanism. Some of the BRICS nations, particularly China has made tremendous advancement in brining several of its universities to the league table of global ranking (David & Motala, 2017).

Thoening and Paradeise (2014) draw our attention on how effective organisational governance of two research universities have produced academic quality. Three key factors they list are priority for self-evaluation to develop talents, community membership and commitment to society, mutual respect, and trust to regulate faculty behaviour. The downside of excess attention to quality, in particular by research universities is making them less accessible and less inclusive. David (2016) observes that some universities tend to be exclusive when attempting to improve their quality that leaves them failing from their duty to respond to access and equity. He indicates that highly performing

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[1] BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa

universities are often less inclusive.

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) (2014) in the United Kingdom (UK) has made relevant impact on overall quality enhancement of research universities. REF derives overall research quality of universities from three elements, namely, outputs, impact, and environment. It defines research outputs to benefit society broadly, improve quality of life, and support continued research. Research universities have strong social and economic impacts on society. The Russel group universities in the UK have shown such impacts (Halterbech, Conlon & Julius, 2017). Khazragui and Hudosn (2015) indicate that measuring the benefits of university research accurately in the light of the research excellence framework is difficult. In particular, measuring the economic and societal impact of university research as most of the impacts are narratives and not hard information to evaluate against counterfactual. Penfiled et al. (2014) list the following as the key reasons for evaluating research impacts of universities; to monitor and manage the performance of universities, for accountability, to inform funding decisions, to understand the method by which research leads to change. It is interesting to observe that some smaller countries strategically embrace internationalisation to strengthen their higher education. Chan (2011) indicates that internationalisation has influenced policy and research in universities in Hong Kong and Singapore.

University ranking has played significant impact on the improving quality of universities, especially the research quality of research universities. Hazelkorn (2009) highlights that ranking have gained importance as they help measure the global status of universities, national competitiveness and stimulate accountability. The report contends that ranking is important indicator for research universities seeking to brand themselves and many governments draw lessons from ranking to build their higher education system. Vernom, Balas, and Momani (2018) indicate that most ranking systems measure research performance of universities and therefore the ranking systems do influence the research quality of universities. They, however, inform that the current indicators are insufficient to evaluate research outcomes accurately.

Sarrico et al. (2010) indicates that higher educational institutions face various stakeholders with different expectations and priorities regarding quality in higher education. Varghese and Martin (2015) in their study on governance reforms in higher education in Asian countries, indicate that autonomous universities predominantly have set up centres for internal quality assurance compared to non-autonomous universities. Mapesela and Moraka (2008) while accounting the numerous benefits of institutional auditing to different stakeholders, they highlight the challenges it brings to the academic enterprise. Skolnik (2016) addresses the challenges for quality assurance systems to accommodate the distinction among academic and applied higher education. He highlights that the external quality assurance systems tend to use same yardsticks to measure programmes and institutions with different background. Kis (2005) points out that it is difficult to measure the impact of quality assurance, in particular the institutional quality assurance practices, as many educational changes are invisible, incremental, and slow.

Institutional best practices for quality in research universities

It is important to understand the difference between external and internal quality assurance. The External Quality Assurance (EQA) system is mainly concerned on the regulations, policies, and practices at the national education system to assure quality of higher education programmes and institutions. While the Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) refers to universities taking responsibility for monitoring and enhancing the quality on their programmes and institutions (Matei & Iwinska, 2016). In order to establish a culture of quality in higher educational institutions, it is highly recommended to set up an Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) in every institution. IQAC may conduct various quality assurance activities such as enhancing students learning experience, supporting research activities, enriching curriculum, engaging learning technology, providing professional and skills development trainings, offering mentoring support, engaging students in club activities and community services and various other academic and extra-curricular activities (NAAC, 2018). Asiyai (2020) recommends the following best practices for quality higher education; good physical facilities / infrastructure, innovative curriculum / teaching, quality teaching, human resources, globally acceptable standards. Building and sustaining such best practices of quality assurance is essential for continued quality enhancement.

Internationalisation and international cooperation have brought universities across the world to come together and experience the global quality standards and practices, which posed both opportunities and challenges (Matei & Iwinska, 2016). Chueca, Ivern and Marimon (2013) identified the relationship between internationalisation and quality of university research. While Van Damme (2001) comments that internationalisation policies and practices have evolved without much concern for quality assurance in higher education. Rensburg, Motala and David (2016) highlight the importance of research collaboration for quality research. They indicate the opportunities that BRICS nations may capitalise in engaging collaborative research in common priority areas. Matei and Iwinska (2016) pointed out that accrediting international programmes and branch campuses have not been easy. One of the key areas of the works of the QAA (2018) in the UK is to accredit the UK higher education operating outside the UK, which indicates that the quality assurance of international programmes and branch campuses has recently gained some attention. Internationalisation is perceived as both opportunity and thread to quality assurance. Urbanovic & Wilkins (2013) argue that internationalisation is used as a strategy to improve quality of higher education by some countries. While Zapp and Ramirez (2019) claim that internationalisation poses threats and limits on the potentials and individualism of sovereign states. The Research Universities Future Consortium (2012) in the USA highly recommends the need for institutional research funding to support every academic to have access to research funding that would foster and support research culture. More than the external approaches, what happens in the core of university functioning such as research and teaching need much quality attention. Particularly, curriculum of research focused postgraduate programmes in

research universities must be innovative and futuristic (David & Hill, 2020). Teaching and learning in research focused tertiary programmes must be student centred and self-regulated (David & Hill, 2021).

It might be worth looking at the best practices in some of the established research universities. The MIT 2030 framework of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology aims to ensure that the future research environment of MIT be innovative, flexible, responsive, complex, iterative, inclusive, and intelligent. University of Oxford's research framework (2018) has three distinct commitments; maintaining originality, significance, and rigour in research with highest standards of infrastructure, training, and integrity, empowering the creative autonomy of individuals to address questions with potential to change the world, developing resources, and invest in subject areas of long-term worth. European Union's (2018) European Research Area aims to be open to the world, in which scientific knowledge, technology and researchers circulate ideas and operate freely. University of Reading (2018) indicates the following as the key concerns for quality assurance in research; the responsibilities of those in research, transparent planning of research, the development and competence of research staff, facilities and resources, documentations of procedures, methods, research records, the handling of participants and materials. The National Academies Press (2017) in a report titled 'Fostering Integrity in Research', identifies, and promotes range best practices in research; starting from the conceptualization, development, and dissemination of the research with relevant ethical and practical details for researchers, institutions, funders, and all stakeholders involved in formal and informal research. It addresses best practices from data handling, authorship, communication, mentoring, supervision, peer review, research compliance and so on.

Quality assurance of higher education in the UAE

Higher education in the gulf countries expanded from a small historical base, addressing to inclusion, enhancing quality and accountability, establishing international links (David, 2017a) and partnership, supporting the local public and private sector employment needs, and fulfilling nationalisation of the labour force (Smith, 2008). Fox (2008) contents that higher education in the UAE has rapidly developed in short span of time with a strategic engagement of various players in the market that consists of federal institutions, non-federal emirate-level institutions, private licensed institutions, branch campuses of foreign universities, and institutions operating in free zones (David et al., 2017). Good quality assurance policies and practices support and nurture positive educational environment (El Alfy & David, 2017).

Quality assurance of higher education in the UAE is managed by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) in coordination with the Ministry of Higher Education and other related entities (CAA, 2018). CAA is committed to enhance the learning experience of the students and it has two key roles; one is authorising and other is accrediting higher educational institutions in the UAE. The CAA standards for licensure and accreditation (CAA, 2011) include 11 standards to measure the quality of

programmes in higher educational institutions. CAA standards on research and scholarly activity strongly recommend institutional support to faculty members to conduct high quality research leading to publications in peer reviewed journals, and it encourages research cooperation for economic advancement (David, 2017b).

According to Kinser and Lane (2017), the UAE aims to bring its QA system into alignment with international best practices that would support to accredit the large number of foreign providers in the country. According to them, the accreditation of CAA starts with the submission of an application with self-study materials that are reviewed by the External Review Team (ERT)[2], followed by a site visit that may seek necessary adjustment in the application before the CAA makes the recommendation to the Minster, who makes the final determination on the (re)-accreditation. Kinser and Lane (2017) also highlight that the considerable number of international branch campuses in the UAE has led for the creation of additional standards for such institutions. According to them, compliance with the rules and regulation of the UAE is required for those standards. This includes institution's licensure, accreditation expectations, establishment of a local advisory board (which involves local community members) and expectations to work with the CAA on joint visits and reviews between the CAA and the accrediting bodies of the institution.

Institutional quality assurance practices of the British University in Dubai

The British University in Dubai is a research-based, postgraduate university in the UAE, which was established with a special decree from Dubai government in 2003. The university is governed by its council. The establishment of BUiD is an outcome of the interactions between academia, industry, and government, as a typical triple helix model[3]. It has a mandate to serve with the three missions of any university: research, teaching, and community service (David, 2019) with strong attention to research. British Business Group (an association of expatriate British businesspeople), Rolls Royce (aero engine manufacturing business), Emirates NBD (one of the largest banking groups in the Middle East), Al Maktoum Foundation (an educational foundation in the Middle East), and Dubai Development & Investment Authority came together as **key founding partners** of BUiD (The British University, 2016). BUiD has now grown in such a way that it is relevant to local industry and promotes significant knowledge for the advancement of the country. As of September 2022, BUiD has graduated 1674 master and 195 doctoral students. BUiD employed 81 nationalities. It has completed 162 research projects and published 1269 scholarly publications (The British University in Dubai, 2022a).

BUiD's academic strength is reinforced by its **UK alliance partners** whose role spans from advocacy to programme auditing. BUiD's initial UK partners were University of Birmingham,

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[2] The ERT is comprised of international experts and CAA staff.
[3] The concept of the Triple Helix of university-industry-government relationships was initiated in the 1990s by Etzkowitz (1993) and Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1995) (Stanford University, 2018).

University of Edinburgh, University of Manchester, and Cass Business School. The current partners since 2015 are University of Edinburgh, University of Manchester, University of Glasgow, and Cardiff University. The **concordat agreement** with the four associated universities aims to ensure excellence in research, teaching, external/industrial engagement, professional support services. And it supports research to respond to the local and national agenda, using fair approaches to quality assurance, strengthening UK higher education in the Gulf region, and maintaining high standards of ethical conduct and integrity in all decisions. Each of the programmes BUiD offers has an affiliation to one of its partner universities. The partner universities offer support in curriculum development and enhancement, staff recruitment, auditing programmes, and offer consultation at various other academic processes. The delegates from the partner universities make annual visit to BUiD to offer various support. While BUiD's staff and students make periodical study visits to the partner universities in the UK for learning and research activities (The British University in Dubai, 2016).

The **mission** of the university is to provide world-class British education and research to support the aspirations of the Dubai government to be a hub for education and research in the region. The **vision** of the university is to be recognised as Dubai's premier institution that focuses on the reflective pursuit, accessibility, effective transfer, and application of scientific, academic, professional knowledge (The British University in Dubai, 2017). According to the **institutional effectiveness manual** of BUiD, it is totally committed to evaluating its efficacy and success to drive the process of continuous self-improvement. The responsibility of BUiD's institutional effectiveness lies with all staff of the university and with those who have a direct interest in the success of the university (e.g., students, UK associate universities and other key external stakeholders) (The British University in Dubai, 2014).

BUiD's response to quality assurance is multi-layered. All the programmes BUiD offer are accredited and re-accredited by the CAA, which is the sole authority to accredit higher education in the UAE. **CAA accredits** at the start of the programme, re-accredit after the first badge graduates, and follows re-accreditation for every five years (CAA, 2018). BUiD has achieved global quality accreditation through the UK's quality assurance agency for higher education (QAA) which is valid from June 2022 to June 2027 (The British University in Dubai, 2022c). All the modules (courses) taught at BUiD are designed in line with the framework of the **National Qualification Authority** (NQA) of the UAE (The British University in Dubai, 2016). The role of NQA is to establish and implement internationally recognised qualifications system for the UAE (NQA, 2018). BUiD's partner universities in the UK are accredited by the **Quality Assurance Agency** (QAA) of higher education in the UK. QAA is an independent, not for profit organisation that reviews higher education providers in the UK and transnational UK higher education providers (QAA, 2018). All the UK partner universities have good standing in global and UK university rankings. The establishment of a centre called B.ACE (The British University in Dubai, 2022b) that provides skills and career supports to students is a result of continuous of quality enhancement.

Several institutional quality practices are unique to the British University in Dubai. All the BUiD's programmes are annually reviewed by an internal review committee assigned by academic council of the university. The **annual programme review** committee goes through students' feedbacks[4] on each module taught in the programme, meet students, staff, and the programme coordinator to discuss their concerns about the programme and submit the report to the quality office. Each of the programme has an **external advisory board** that provide relevant support through the **board of studies**. For every programme, an **external examiner** from the UK is assigned who moderates and evaluates the assessment processes and offer diligent support at the **board of examiners**. Apart from the module feedback, every student take part in the **entry and exit programme survey**, which offers students' voice and perspectives to help improve the programmes. Both academic and administrative staff members complete **annual employee survey** that brings the views of staff to help improve the process in the university. The university had **academic success unit**, which recently has been converted as **doctoral training centre** that provides range of supports to develop research and academic skills to the research scholars (The British University in Dubai, 2016). Developing relevant and robust quality assurance provision for research programmes would be essential to ensure the quality outcomes of the research programmes (Abukari & David, 2019). In addition to regular programmes, BUiD offers several **global certificates from international professional bodies**. They include the Certified Energy Management, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), Certified Energy Auditor, and the WELL Building Standard accreditation. BUiD has signed **memorandum of understanding** (MOU) with nearly 55 local and international professional bodies (The British University, 2016). BUiD actively support **joint research** and has a good track of **externally funded research projects** to enhance the research quality. Some of the **external grants** to BUiD's research projects came from the Federal Demographic Council, National Research Foundation of the UAE, Emirates Foundation, Fast Search and ATKINS. BUiD offers **internal research grants** for staff to conduct locally relevant research. Some of the **globally recognised academic conferences and events** are periodically hosted at BUiD to encourage academic and professional development. BUiD supports some of the **community outreach programmes,** particularly in inclusive education in association with Al Jalila Foundation and Emirates Foundation.

Conclusion

Demand for quality assurance has been growing in recent years as higher education has expanded with different players offering range of programmes with good and substandard quality. Research and past experiences have contributed to the advancement and refinement of the quality standards, which

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[4] Students at BUiD complete an online module feedback form at the end of every module. The module coordinators receive the report of these feedbacks after the results are approved by the board of examiners. The module coordinators make necessary recommendations to revise the module to the board of studies with an approval of the programme coordinator.

contributes to the quality of both the higher education sector and higher educational institutions. In particular, most research universities have often proved to display decent quality stand. In addition, many higher education institutions have unique institutional good practices for quality assurance that offer lessons for other institutions.

UAE with its brief history of modern higher education, it has rapidly expanded and enhanced the quality of higher education. The strategic engagement of diverse players into the sector, particularly the presence of international branch campuses and collaboration with foreign universities have been advantageous for quality advancement in the UAE. Although young, the British University in Dubai has made tremendous impact in delivering quality higher education in the UAE. BUiD has learnt quickly from some of the operational challenges from internal and external stakeholders and able to deal with them diligently and continues to grow with its integrative slogan 'Globally Aware – Nationally Accredited – Locally Focused.' Some of the best practices of BUiD for quality assurance as discussed above may offer unique lessons for young and new research universities offering post-graduate research programmes. The study has limitations common to a single case study, therefore the findings of this study is not transferable while lesson drawing is possible. The insider effect is another potential limitation of the study, which was reduced by objective reflection. Future studies could involve multiple cases using other empirical data to further research in this field.

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