ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: KEY ENABLERS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING GOVERNANCE

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study investigated higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia to identify the key success factors regarding teaching and learning governance. It found that governance and assessment play a major role in achieving academic excellence. **Methodology:** This study adopted a qualitative research design involving semi-structured interviews with leaders having hands-on knowledge of academic affairs and curricula from five accredited public universities in Saudi Arabia. **Findings:** Key initiatives and performance measures were reviewed. The study addressed the following objectives of governance and assessment: applying the principles of governance in academic performance; building a strategic plan and procedures for assessment and feedback that lead to required changes in academic performance; building and developing outstanding performance in students' academic achievement and academic research practices; and using big data and advanced analytics to guide strategic and operational decisions. **Research implications:** To achieve the aforementioned objectives, higher education institutions must prioritise these areas in strategic planning and track progress in achieving academic excellence. This study's results identified prominent initiatives and performance indicators as the enablers of governing teaching and learning. **Originality/Value:** There is a paucity of research regarding the governance of teaching and learning; this study fills that gap by highlighting several initiatives and performance measures designed or implemented to achieve academic excellence in higher education.

Keywords: Governance, teaching and learning, academic excellence, indicators, measures

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction:

Governance and assessment bring about profound changes in academic vigour, whether in terms of achieving equality in learning opportunities or high academic achievement. These can substantially enhance the quality of higher education outcomes. However, higher education institutions must adopt and prioritise governance and assessment in their strategic planning.

Hence, the Royal Decree No. M/27 of the Law of Universities was rendered on 30 October 2019 to regulate the affairs of Saudi universities (Council of Universities' Affairs, 2021). This policy document emphasises adopting a governance that will develop higher education institutions' effectiveness in realising excellence, thus achieving the targets of the 2030 Vision to transform Saudi Arabia from an oil- to a knowledge-based economy and stimulating entrepreneurship. For this purpose, the Human Capability Development

Program (HCDP) was established with priority of building the Kingdom's future through a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation (HCDP, 2021).

An analysis of the current situation in the educational ecosystem has revealed several challenges, including the complexity and ambiguity of policies and procedures, which have resulted in poor governance (HCDP, 2021). Not all higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia are subject to the new regulations. Implementation requires a set of principles and procedures that serve as indicators of whether an institution adopts a governance approach. These indicators include financial, administrative, and academic affairs. Higher education institutions are striving to address all the related issues, including academic excellence.

Despite these efforts, the landscape remains variable across institutions, with some embracing change and others facing challenges. AlMarwani (in press) investigated the current practices of higher education institutions to achieve quality and framed a model for academic excellence. The model represents six key academic domains, among which governance and assessment play a major role (AlMarwani, in press). Although all the study participants raised the issue of governance and assessment as important factors in achieving excellence, most could not confirm the availability of well-structured policies and procedures of governance and assessment. This study deviates from previous research by addressing governance at the micro academic affairs level (i.e., teaching and learning), not at the institutional level.

This study aims to shed light on the conditions and practices that facilitate the development of an effective pattern of governance and assessment that achieves excellence in teaching and learning.

2. Methodology:

This study used a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews to investigate how the participants perceived the academic affairs governance in their institutions and what initiatives were implemented to establish guidelines for enabling the governance and assessment of teaching and learning. Qualitative methods help to answer complex questions and embrace different perspectives of the same concept (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). According to Creswell (2013), this type of research makes it possible to analyse individualistic data on a deeper level that can help understand a phenomenon from the perspective of the individuals involved rather than from the outside only.

The study's sample included leaders (associate and full professors) with hands-on knowledge of academic affairs and curricula from five accredited public universities in Saudi Arabia. Further details on the sampling raise the issues of confidentiality and anonymity; this is a major disadvantage of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). All the participants voluntarily participated in the study, and their consent was obtained verbally at the beginning of the interviews. Secondary published data were also used to enrich the conclusions of this study.

3. Findings and discussion:

Four themes related to the governance of teaching and learning in higher education (AlMarwani, in press) guided the data collection process: the principles of governance; assessment and feedback; students' academic achievement and research practices; and data-driven strategic planning and decision-making (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Objectives of Teaching and Learning Governance

Objectives

Objective 1
Applying the principles of governance in academic performance.

Objective 2
Building a strategic plan and procedures for assessment and feedback that lead to the required change in academic performance.

Objective 3
Building and developing outstanding performance in students' academic achievement and academic research practices.

Objective 4
Using big data and advanced analytics to guide strategic and operational decisions.

Teaching and Learning Governance
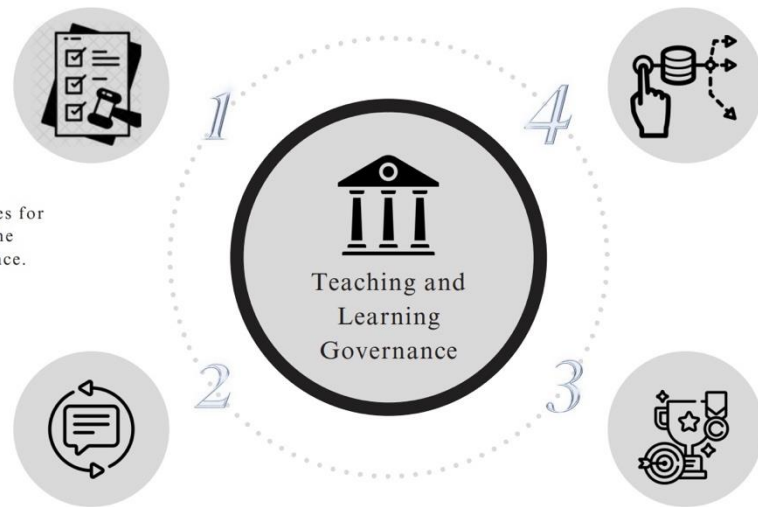
3.1 Principles of governance:

Numerous studies (Al-Khelaiwi, 2022; Manes-Rossi et al., 2022; Yassin et al., 2022) have emphasised the importance of adhering to the principles of governance and their impact on higher education. However, since the autonomy and diversity of higher education institutions are major targets of strategic national transformation planning (Council of Universities' Affairs, 2021), a crucial need exists for Saudi universities to properly and meaningfully apply governance, which will have a profound impact on improving research, teaching, academic creativity, and innovation (Al-Khelaiwi, 2022).

The Higher Education Code of Governance in the United Kingdom (Committee of University Chairs [CUC], 2020) has set out six key interrelated principles that enable higher education institutions to promote excellence in all aspects of governance, including learning, teaching, research, and general monitoring of performance. These principles are accountability, sustainability, reputation, equality, inclusivity, diversity, effectiveness, and engagement.

An investigation into the current practices and initiatives of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia has revealed that accountability is targeted through the application of a quality assurance system in colleges and academic departments. The system is supposed to define roles and responsibilities in academic affairs to guide academics' efforts achieving learning outcomes. However, significant challenges exist in measuring performance, such as complex structures and undefined functions, as well as discrepancies between the desired goals and the actual practice (Alghamdi et al, 2022). The participants indicated key performance measures for accountability in teaching and learning, which are the prospective outcomes of the quality assurance system, including the defined roles, responsibilities, and tasks to do, and the documented internal and external reviews against specified criteria.

That said, the participants also raised the issue of radical economic changes, which pose challenges to the sustainability of the strategic direction of academic affairs, and their direct effect on labour market requirements. Hence, we cannot depend only on changing educational policies, as this is a long-term process. We must adopt the best teaching and learning practices to secure long-term success in academic affairs that are responsive to changes in the economic and labour market. It is easier to adapt these practices than policies

(Leal Filho et al., 2018; Yassin et al., 2022). According to the participants, simplistic key performance measures for sustainability are inappropriate. Leal Filho et al. (2018) underscored the necessity for academic affairs to ensure 'a smart change to accommodate the ever-changing requirements which surround the higher education business' (p. 716). Hence, the review cycle for courses and academic programs and the consequent improvement actions that actively assure alignment with changes and expectations can be used as indicators and measures of sustainability.

Another key principle is reputation, which must be maintained throughout the academic process. According to the participants, members of steering councils and academic affairs committees should always act neutrally in accordance with public and institutional interests. The key performance measure of this principle is the proportion of academic procedures associated with regulations and policies, and the level of trust in decisions made by members of the governing bodies of academic affairs (Al-Khelaiwi, 2022).

These councils and committees should promote fair outcomes for all (CUC, 2020). The participants clearly stated that non-discriminatory academic policies and procedures aim to enhance equality, inclusivity, and diversity. One of the participants indicated the need for well-designed implementation plans that consider the need to have clear statements and well-defined policies and procedures; however, the Human Rights Commission in Saudi Arabia has clearly defined laws and regulations of equality, inclusivity, and diversity by applying human rights standards, creating effective partnerships, raising awareness of these rights, and monitoring their implementation (Human Rights Commission, n. d.). All public and private institutions in Saudi Arabia are legally bound by human rights legislation. Key related performance measures can be obtained from data included in the reviews and reports on the institution's approach to equality, inclusivity, and diversity, such as the enrolment of students with disabilities and their graduation rates, academic leaders, faculty members, and staff diversity by race and gender, the fair distribution of resources and opportunities, number of inclusive and diverse curriculum offerings, and the availability of academic support services for underrepresented groups (non-Saudi students and students with disabilities) (Kayyali, 2022).

The participants indicated that the effectiveness and efficiency of academic affairs can be enhanced through the optimal utilisation of human, technical, and physical resources. Academic affairs' effectiveness can be measured through a regular review of decisions made by the academic affairs steering committees and councils at a departmental, college, and institutional level (Al-Khelaiwi, 2022; CUC, 2020). Additionally, the suitability of educational programmes, their compliance with the Saudi National Qualifications Framework, and their compatibility with global trends—including the Industry 4.0, sustainable development, circular economy, and knowledge-based economy—are key effectiveness measures.

Operationally, higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia steer their academic affairs through specific bodies such as the Standing Committee for Curricula and Academic Programmes at an institutional level and the College and Department Councils at a college and departmental level. However, to ensure engagement, the membership of such governing bodies should be representative of the key stakeholders (CUC, 2020). Once engagement at the membership level is achieved, committees and councils should establish measures to ensure that academic programmes engage with the community to provide public benefits as well as economic, cultural, and social growth.

Higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia are currently driven by national transformation plans towards the implementation of governance principles and values in

financial, administrative, and academic affairs (Al-Khelaiwi, 2022; Council of Universities' Affairs, 2021; HCDP, 2021). Hence, a strong governance model for the restructuring of academic affairs is key to the successful implementation of these principles. By adopting a strong governance model at a strategic level, as well as well-designed implementation plans and initiatives, higher education institutions can protect their institutional reputation and provide a level of assurance to key stakeholders, partners, and the wider community.

3.2 Assessment and feedback:

The terms assessment and feedback represent a conjunction of activities. Winstone and Boud (2022) presented a critical examination of assessment and feedback in contemporary higher education and concluded that 'the processes of assessment and feedback are often seen as coexisting activities. Consequently, they have become entangled in both policy and practice, resulting in a conceptual and practical blurring of their unique purposes' (p. 656). However, the introduction of academic accreditation in higher education has a positive impact on teaching and learning, including assessment, feedback, and the continuous improvement cycle (Bougherira & Elasmar, 2023; De Vincenzi, et al., 2018; Iqbal, et al., 2023).

In 2004, Saudi Arabia established the Saudi National Commission for Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) to assess all higher education institutions. All the participants asserted the crucial role played by the NCAAA in reforming practices in higher education, which includes assessments and feedback. Although all higher education institutions have different practices for assessing the academic performance of faculty members and students; however, feedback interpreting the performance-relevant information to promote practices of teaching and learning is often discarded. The focus is on justifying the assigned grade rather than providing developmental feedback. Unfortunately, the best practices for assessment and feedback only exist in improvement plans. The participants highlighted the need for an institutional planning objective of an assessment and feedback system that will improve academic affairs by establishing performance expectations for all faculty members. An assessment plan for performance that combines self-assessment with peer reviews, programme leader reviews, and student feedback should be adopted. It should also consider specific criteria for excellence in practices and performance expectations, not to mention the need for separating the assessment procedures for accountability from those for continuous improvement and development. However, Kallio et al. (2017) raised several challenges to such a performance assessment, including the structure of higher educational institutions and interrelated functions and processes, as well as the conflict between academic freedom and the ideologies behind performance measurement.

Regarding students, two of the participants highlighted planning to proactively address students' poor performance by identifying at-risk students and applying appropriate interventions. But they all reached the same conclusion: nothing can be done without the necessary training and support for the heads of academic departments to help them manage the academic performance of both faculty members and students.

As a result of these initiatives, the use of simple quantitative measures, such as end-of-course surveys, to assess faculty members' performance or student grades are not always the most appropriate way to measure performance. Manes-Rossi et al. (2022) stated that 'performance measures should not be adopted to support ranking activities and determine who or what is the best and who or what is the worst, but rather should support improvements by organisations and actors that strive for better performance' (p. 333). This includes well-rounded results of faculty members' assessments, students' performance

improvement rates that are based on applied interventions, and the number of appeals related to assessments, including qualitative investigation and whether the appeals were upheld.

3.3 Students' academic achievement and academics' research practices:

Student achievement and academic research practices are crucial criteria for assessing the excellence of higher education institutions. Both are vital metrics for institutional performance (Manes-Rossi et al., 2022). The participants indicated several initiatives to attain outstanding student achievement and academic research performance. They referred to the academic programme transformation strategy, which was designed and executed to embrace alignment with national transformation goals and ensure that the curriculum can empower students with the required capabilities to compete globally by fostering values, developing basic and future skills, and enhancing knowledge (HCDP, 2021).

The participants also voiced their concerns regarding the need for a standard methodology for examination and grading of assignments and projects, including external verification of students' academic achievement. Furthermore, they suggested creating a graduates' database to track their achievements within a year after graduation. Measuring students' achievements in a way related to academic excellence is complicated. Indicators of students' achievement, such as grade point average, graduation rates, post-graduation employment rates, and alumni earnings, are not significantly related to the quality of the education received (Cameron, 2009; Manes-Rossi et al., 2022). Therefore, these indicators can be enhanced by using the licensure and professional certification exam pass rates.

Regarding outstanding research performance by academics, the participants suggested an institutional initiative of creating and disseminating a scientific research framework directed at improving research practices in all applied and theoretical scientific disciplines. Another multifaceted initiative to achieve scientific research commitment is to include the quality of research production in relevant regulations related to performance assessment and rewards. Another suggestion, but not an initiative, that was offered by one participant, was related to directing and promoting teaching and learning, curriculum design, governance, and assessment based on internal institutional research projects. The annual research output rate for academics, the rate of dissemination in well-recognised publishing channels, and the extent to which research outcomes contribute to continuous improvement plans and projects to achieve relevant institutional excellence standards are key measures of outstanding research practices.

3.4 Data-driven strategic planning and decision-making:

Higher education has shown great interest in taking advantage of big data and analytics to provide and promote an effective and efficient work environment (Alkhalil, 2021; Aseeri & Kang, 2023; Jha et al., 2018). Participants referred to various information technology systems for different institutional functions that resulted in scattered data (i.e., the student portal, faculty portal, learning management system, students' information system, library management system, and human resources management system). Higher education institutions have also established data management offices to collect and provide statistics, reports, and evidence-based analytics to inform decisions and develop strategic plans to achieve institutional vision.

The participants ascertained that what is happening so far marks a substantial change in the direction of decision-making, but there is an urgent need to equip leaders and decision-makers with the necessary skills for interpreting and mapping the visualised data into evidence-based decision-making. Initiatives related to data governance, data management, and accessibility policies have been planned but not yet implemented in all higher education

institutions. To promote academic excellence, the participants posited the need to enable advanced analytics of learning management system, create and activate analysis of the academic advisory system and the resulting data, students' information systems, and the advisory system to build an active learning dashboard that helps college deans, heads of academic departments and educational content designers to make evidence-based decisions. They also highlighted the importance of student privacy protection policies.

Data-driven plans and interventions to support and enhance the performance of students and academics can indicate academic excellence (Aseeri & Kang, 2023; Cameron, 2009). However, the increased focus on data-driven planning and decision-making, where data are obtained by measuring what can be measured rather than what is supposed to be measured, alongside the limited ability to assess and interpret outputs, may lead to unintended implications.

4. Limitations:

The findings of this study should be seen in light of some limitations. First, this study is based on the perspectives of academic affairs leaders from five higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia as well as some secondary published data. Their perspectives may have resulted in insufficient explanations. Furthermore, because the conditions of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia differ from that of other countries, the results should only be interpreted as reflecting the Saudi context.

5. Conclusion:

This study reviewed a range of initiatives that enhance governance in higher education, as well as a range of related measures and indicators. The study has drawn on the participants' viewpoints and posited the need for integrating governance initiatives and guidelines within an institutional strategic plan for academic excellence. All the concrete data and best practices in Saudi higher education institutions must be legalised and regulated with laws and formal controls based on knowable measurements and indicators to yield effective governance leading to academic excellence. By adopting a strong governance model and effective measures, higher education institutions can promote academic excellence and provide a level of assurance to key stakeholders and partners including students, academics, and the wider community.

Furthermore, as most initiatives and strategies for governing academic affairs are implemented at an institutional level and managed at a micro-level, considering any possible ambiguity derived from this top-down design is needed. College and academic department councils, as the main governing bodies of academic affairs, must consider the institution's strategic objectives and safeguard the interests of their ultimate customers, in other words, the students.

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