

Islamic Higher Education: Maintaining and Ensuring Quality

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Abstract:

In this presentation, I would like to discuss the issue of quality in higher education, specifically in Islamic universities. In addressing the issue, I will also be discussing the ISO 9000: what it is, and how it came to be applied in education; and raises the question of whether the institution of this system would necessarily lead to quality. The paper concludes by stressing the need for a dialogue among academics at Islamic universities on the issue of quality and how we should go about ensuring and maintaining quality at our institutions.

The issue of quality in higher education has been on the agenda of most discussions pertaining to higher education as universities grapple with the growing demand for accountability and quality. Tax payers want to be assured that their money is being put to good use; parents want to be convinced that their children are receiving the best kind of education; and future employers want to be convinced that they are being fed with a high quality workforce (Burrup, Brimley, and Garfield, 1993; Cohn and Geske, 1990; Kraft and Nakib, 1991). Universities suddenly find themselves in a situation where quality is no longer considered an internal issue; instead, they now have to show proof to the world outside that they are providing quality education, and that they are serious in their efforts to do so (Franklin, Roche, and Hussey, 1995; Karapetrovic, Rajamani, and Willborn, 1998).

In response to demands for a more visible strategy to manage quality in higher education, the USA and other European nations began to establish their own quality assurance methods and agencies during the 60s and 70s. In the US, for instance, several accrediting bodies were formed, which eventually merged into what was

known as the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, which was later replaced by the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in higher education in 1992. The UK experience with quality and standards began in 1964, with the formation of the Council for National Academic Awards, which progressively led to the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Council in 1992 and the Quality Assurance Agency in 1998. Similar quality assurance movements also made the scene in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Netherlands, and Hong Kong at around the same time (Liston, 1999).

Initially, all efforts to evaluate, enhance, and improve the quality of higher education were carried out by individual countries according to their own norms and standards. However, as higher education became more accessible, and with increasing numbers of private institutions of higher learning being established, and as education became more internationalized with increased mobility of students from different states and different nations, more and more institutions began to see the need to establish recognized quality standards and to gain external approval for university management systems (Freeman and Voehl, 1994).

As institutions sought ways to establish recognized quality standards in higher education, attention came to be focused on the manufacturing sector, which had already successfully implemented a quality assurance and quality management model known as the ISO 9000 standards. The success of the ISO 9000 in the manufacturing sector made it a popular choice as a quality management system for many institutions of learning all over the world (Thonhauser, 2005). Later, many Islamic institutions of higher learning also followed suit, and started to adopt the ISO 9000 standards.

Hence, the ISO 9000 has become the most widely accepted quality management system, and has come to be widely used in higher education in many

countries around the world. Customers expect quality in all aspects of their lives, and want to be assured that educational institutions provide quality service. In fact, increasing globalization has led to a need to assure customers, not only locally, but also internationally, of the quality of the educational services that institutions provide (Jesweit, 1995), and ISO 9000 certification is becoming a requirement for any university wanting to do business in the international marketplace. All this should lead us to raise several questions. Is the ISO 9000 the best way to ensure quality in higher education? How did it get to be applied to the educational context? How should Islamic universities deal with the issue of quality? What is quality to us? How should we go about ensuring and maintaining quality? These are some of the questions that will be discussed in this paper. However, before we attempt to address the above questions, it would be pertinent, at this point, to go into a discussion of what the ISO 9000 is.

What is the ISO 9000?

The ISO 9000 is the commonly used name to label a series of international standards for quality assurance within organizations. It began with the launch of Technical Committee 176 in 1979 to deal with generic quality principles--the need for an international minimum standard for how manufacturing companies established quality control methods, not only to control product quality, but to maintain its uniformity and predictability, because customers were beginning to demand for quality and value for their money. As a result of this, twenty participating countries and many observer countries met and created a series of quality system management standards called the ISO 9000, which were originally published in 1987 by the International Organization

for Standardization, and was revised in 1994, and again in 2000 (Van den Berghe, 1997; Freeman & Voehl, 1994).

These generic standards, which were derived mainly by professionals and managers involved in manufacturing, provide a framework for emphasizing the organization's commitment to quality, as well as making quality efforts *visible* to customers. The founding of the ISO 9000 was part of a global action to "rationalize the thousands of conflicting standards of the various nations" and "to promote standards in international trade, communications, and manufacturing" (Goetsch & Davis, 2002, p.3).

The initial aim behind the ISO 9000 series was to build confidence between suppliers and manufacturers in business-to-business transactions and in international trade. The ISO 9000 standards also helped to ensure that organizations follow specific well-documented procedures in the making or delivery of their products or services in accordance with customer specifications, and nothing more (van der Wiele, van Iwaarden and Williams, 2004). Therefore, it would be more accurate to say that the ISO 9000 standards are aimed at the *assurance of quality consistency* rather than *improving* the quality of products or services of an organization. It is therefore not a standardized package that can be applied in the same way in every organization; the standards merely detail the essential elements of a formal quality assurance system, *without actually recommending the ways to apply them*. However, the ISO standards do specify what activities need to be controlled, measured, and documented and where applicable, competencies, performance indicators, standards, and benchmarks are to be identified (Liston, 1995). Thus, it is up to the individual organization to interpret the underlying principles of the ISO 9000 standards to make them applicable within its specific context, so that individual organizations will have

their own focus, conceptual approach, creative processes, administrative structure, and method of operation.

In trying to document quality, organizations and institutions work towards being certified, which means that the organization has been awarded a certificate by one of the many independent auditors, attesting that the organization has met quality management requirements determined by the ISO (Henkoff, 1993). The certificate awarded indicates that the organization is able to meet the needs and demands of its customers in a planned and controlled way. The label, however, *does not guarantee* that the products or outputs of the organization *are of the highest possible quality level* (van den Berghe, 1998). Quality, in the ISO context, simply means having a *system* in place that will assist in the management of a process to assure a predetermined outcome and at the same time provide a framework for evaluation of the quality assurance systems of the organization against a known model, the ISO 9000 standards (Joosten, Scarlett & Heywood, 1999). Basically, the idea of ISO 9000 is simple: “Say what you do, do what you say, prove it, and improve it” (Zuckerman & Rhodes, 2000, p.20).

The Application of ISO 9000 standards to Education

As has been mentioned in the previous sections, higher education has become more competitive. As a result, quality demands have become a pressing matter for most institutions of higher learning, and quality services have become an edge to competition. Many universities have responded to these quality demands by adapting and adopting quality systems embedded in the ISO 9000 requirements. This, however, begs the following question: Is the adoption of the ISO 9000 the best way to ensure quality in higher education?

A review of the literature shows that many academics do not have positive views about the application of the ISO standards to education, especially to higher education. Karapetrovic, Rajamani, and Willborn (1998) assert that academics are always weary of structured approaches and those that require additional documentation, and also doubt that the creative and empathic aspects of their work can be standardized (Seddon, 2001; Zuckerman & Rhodes, 2000). In the UK, Neil & Michael (1998) found that the newly promoted universities have been especially susceptible to the ideals of the ISO 9000 standards. However, the changes introduced under the ISO quality systems have failed to impress the academics (Moreland, 1998), who now find themselves in a position whereby they are forced to be more transparent and accountable for their performance and become more market oriented in their work. Hazman (1999) has observed the same signs of reluctance, resistance, and resentment toward the ISO within the private and public educational institutions in Malaysia. Academics are still skeptical about the need and value of the certification and the increasing usage of commercial concepts such as *customer* and *customer satisfaction*.

Others who have criticized the use of the ISO 9000 standards in education include Tannock (1991), who asserts that the introduction of the ISO to education as nothing more than a government ploy to impose bureaucratic standards derived from industry on academic departments; and Buckingham (1991), who goes one step further to label the ISO 9000 standards as a 'straightjacket', because the translation of the standards when applied to educational institutions cause "confusion and consternation" as most academics are unable to distinguish a quality system standard from a product or technical standard. There is also fear amongst academics that the management focus of the ISO will jeopardize many traditional teaching and learning

practices, which have always been the fiercely guarded hallmark of the academic profession (Matthews, 1993; Moreland, 1998; Peterson, 1995).

In recent years, with the focus on quality and the ISO in higher education, many academics feel that the academic culture, with its tradition of freedom and autonomy, has been invaded by the alien culture of managerialism and its vocabulary of ‘customer’, ‘quality assurance’, and ‘product’. According to Alderman (1999),

quality in higher education is not about satisfying the customer (i.e. the student), but is rather, about changing the student, which is not the same thing at all ... an ISO 9000 approach will not and cannot lead, by itself, to the achievement of quality: the most it can lead to is short-to-medium, to mid-term bureaucratic procedural compliance” (p.262).

Studies by Marchese, (1991); Seymour, (1991); and Walker, (1995) have indicated that academics do not take kindly to any attempt to control or change their academic endeavours because they have always been the dominant decision-makers when it comes to matters pertaining to academic activities. However, all these seem to be changing with the arrival of ISO quality management systems, where the emphasis is on the “customers”, that is, the students. Another reason why the academics have not taken kindly to the ISO and the quality assurance systems is that they are mechanisms that emphasize processes and procedures. Academics are very unhappy about the increasing levels of administration and accountability associated with the systems because it leaves them with very little time and resources to focus on core activities of teaching and learning, research and community service, and even less time and resources to focus on continuous improvement in these areas (Peeke, 2000; Newton, 2001; Vidovich, 1998; Watty, 2002).

Advocates of the ‘quality movement’ in education, on the other hand, believe that in the case of higher education, quality is what the customer says it is because the

product generated by higher education is not a visible, tangible product that can be held, analyzed, and inspected for defects. If customers are perfectly happy with the services provided to them by institutions, then quality is acceptable (Motwani & Mazur, 2002). But then again, the question of ‘customer’ for higher education poses a very sticky problem. No college or university seems willing or able to settle on a specific definition of customer. Motwani and Mazur (2002) observe that:

there appears to be something inherently ominous about defining a higher education institute’s customer as the student. Faculties balk at the idea of having a student as the customer, as in ‘the customer is always right’. This tends to engage faculty to the boiling point because they believe that giving the student what they want will not necessarily lead to higher quality education (p. 125)

The proponents of the ISO 9000 also state that since there is an alarming rate of change in technology, programs of continual improvement and closed-loop control are appropriate and necessary for educational systems in order to standardize a process that incorporates values of the customer (Waks & Moti, 1999). In addition, they assert that the ISO 9000 is seen by some to improve education by introducing the private sector ideals of efficiency, reliability, and free-market competition to the field. Authors such as Peters (1999) support the ISO 9000 as a global quality system for educational institutions, not necessarily to have the education content standardized, but as a tool to assure that educational providers are keeping their promises to the student-customer. While Peters (1999) acknowledges the value of standardizing procedures, he also notes the difficulty of standardizing books, relationships and dynamic class environment. Other writers too have written about the benefits that the ISO 9000 has to offer to educational institutions. Waks & Moti (1999) for instance, believe that the ISO 9000 “checks how the system is being run based on the assumption that proper functioning coupled with the development of internal control

will yield better educational and scholastic results” (p.253), while Solomon (1993) and Bevans-Gonzals & Nair (2004) revealed that benefits from ISO 9000 certification include, for instance, more client confidence in the organization, a greater involvement of staff and faculty in the educational process, better management structure, a clarity of roles and responsibilities, better links to industry and business clients, and a marked improvement in efficiency and organization of educational institutions.

It is quite clear from the above discussion that there is a great debate about the relevance of the ISO 9000 to educational institutions. While the proponents of the ISO argue about its benefits to education, other writers such as Alderman (1999) argue that a critical evaluation of the success or the failure of concepts such as the ISO 9000 and Total Quality Management, especially in the field of education, is still lacking today. Therefore, before embarking on the journey towards ISO certification, several issues must be considered first because among other difficulties, certification comes at a cost—in terms of effort, time, money and sheer commitment from the entire organization. Doherty (1995) explains that the ISO 9000 series may not be suited to the purposes of all educational institutions—and that it is a judgment that must be made by an individual institution itself.

Conclusion

In addressing the issue of quality, one of the first things that Islamic institutions should do is to have a dialogue between faculty members within an institution and then between institutions on to how we conceive of quality and what quality means to us. We need to be clear about what quality means to us, because only then can we go about ensuring that we achieve our aims.

Perhaps the first aspect we need to look at in defining quality is to look at the aims and objectives of Islamic education. As has been stated by al Attas (1980), the content of education should lead toward the “recognition and acknowledgement of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence” (p. 9) and that the comprehensive and integrated approach to education in Islam is directed toward the "balanced growth of the total personality...through training Man's spirit, intellect, rational self, feelings and bodily senses...such that faith is infused into the whole of his personality" (p. 158). The questions that need to be asked are: “To what extent have we set these as our objectives?”, and “To what extent have we set out to achieve the above objectives?” As has been argued by Goddard & Leask (1992), we should really be looking at the structure and processes underlying the achievement of educational goals because these are the elements that ensure success, and it is the improvement of these underlying processes and structures which ensures quality education.

Another aspect that needs to be looked into in our attempt at defining the quality of higher education is to examine the purpose of higher education itself. Higher education should be judged by the extent to which it is able to produce capable graduates; graduates who can contribute effectively to the nation, society and industry. This is a view shared by writers such as Stephenson & Weil (1992) who state that for any institution of higher education, ‘the development of capable graduates is an aspiration of the highest order, and its achievement a genuine mark of quality in higher education.’ Quality is related more to the relevance and value of each institution’s mission, purpose, goals and objectives, and the achievement of identified outcomes.’ The onus is thus on us, on our universities, to come up with a

clear and honest definition of its vision and purpose so that appropriate quality judgments can be formed based on our institutions' specific purposes that would do justice to our quality efforts. A dialogue is needed for us to define as clearly as possible the criteria we are using when judging quality and the steps that we would take to ensure and maintain quality.

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