ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS AFFECTING RESPONSIVENESS TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY IN LEBANON

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ABSTRACT
Since the 1980s, quality assurance in higher education has developed world-wide. Nevertheless, differential implementation in pace and scope has also been demonstrated. Using a quantitative research approach, this research provides evidence on the organisational factors contributing to the variance in implementation by taking the Lebanese business schools as a case study.
The research concludes that responsiveness is associated with a number of factors; the size and vertical differentiation of the business school have been found to impact responsiveness to quality implementation with large business schools offering a doctoral degree being more likely to implement quality assurance measures.
Keywords: quality assurance, higher education, business schools, organisational characteristics.

Introduction

Due to the fast variations in the higher education environment including political, economic and socio-cultural forces that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century, the consideration of quality assurance in higher education has gained momentum from the late 1980s onward indicating a rising concern in the concept and the way it is practiced (Papadimitriou, 2011). This was also precipitated by the massification of education, the provision of a wide variety of programmes, the diversity of student types, the necessity to match programmes to labour market needs, diminishing resources, and the call for increased accountability. These factors required institutions to set formal (explicit and systematized) quality assurance measures (Dill, 2007; Westerheijden et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, actual implementation of quality assurance has not operated as expected (Tight, 2003) and differences in the pace and scope of implementation continue to be evidenced in several contexts (El-Khawas, 1998, Billing, 2004).

In Lebanon, in 2014 a new higher education Law was ratified by the parliament calling for all higher education institutions to implement a quality assurance plan and citing its main pillars.The law also set the structure for the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAHEQA) with the responsibility to inspect and audit universities in order to ultimately confer accreditation. Nevertheless, to this date, of the 46 higher institutions currently in operations, 11 have implemented a quality assurance system. Thus, this study aims to investigate the factors driving responsiveness to the implementation of quality assurance taking the Lebanese business schools as a case.

The organizational characteristics

Distinctive organisational characteristics play a role in either facilitating or inhibiting the implementation of a quality assurance system; universities and business schools are not an exception in this regard (Dill, 1992; Csizmadia, 2006). A review of literature reveals that the following elements differentiate higher education institutions and thus influence the decision to implement quality assurance.

a. Type of business (for profit or not-for-profit): is relevant to responsiveness to quality assurance because the implementation process is costly (Woolston, 2012), and questions arise as to whether the ownership is able and willing to dedicate funds for the endeavour.
b. Age of the business school: **O**rganisational members' long-standing and shared values and beliefs about proper organisational forms and behaviours restrict the organization's adoption of policies and programmes (Scott, 1995). On the other hand, age has been found to be associated with the experience and the capacity of organizations (Kahsay, 2012). Thus, the older the school, the more experience and knowledge it possesses to assimilate and implement a new management paradigm such as quality assurance.
c. Size of the business school: According to Rogers (2003), the size of an organisation can dependably be used to predict the adoption of a management innovation such as quality assurance. The size is defined as the number of employees and is considered to have a major influence on the organisational structure and processes (Damanpour, 1991). In this research, the size of the business school is defined as the number of students as

supported by Papadimitriou (2011) and Csizmadia (2006). Hitt et al. (1990) contend that large organizations have more slack resources for experimentation and innovation; they are financially able to engage in new projects and can withstand operational failures. However, others argue that in large organisations processes are slow due to bureaucracy which slows decision making and rejects innovative ideas; thus any initiative that is perceived to disturb the organisational stability will be faced with scepticism and may be resisted (Dougherty, 1996).

d. Business school complexity: Complexity is commonly identified as the combined effect of three elements: horizontal differentiation, vertical or hierarchical differentiation and geographical dispersion (Hall & Tolbert, 2005). Horizontal differentiation refers to the subdivision of the tasks performed by an organisation (Hall, 1982). Vertical differentiation is defined by Csizmadia (2006) as the hierarchy of the conferred degrees, bachelor, master, and PhD and the geographical dispersion refers to the number of locations where a university/school has campuses.

e. Tuition fee level: In private universities, fees are the main source of funding (Tempus-Lebanon, 2012). When they are set at a high level, students require value for their money (Machin and Wilson, 2005) which can be demonstrated and represented by the quality of education (Mora, 2005). Therefore, plausible expectations regarding quality of education by students are higher in private higher education institutions than in public universities (Garcia et al., 2005)

Participants

The sample for the study is constituted from the population of 33 private business schools in Lebanon for two reasons: First, the private system is by far the largest comprising 36 universities (the others are "university colleges" and "university institutions") and 63.6% of the total students' population of 199,679 in 2015-2016; the one public university takes in 36.3% of the total students' population. Second, the business schools in general attract the highest number of students (CERD, 2016). In 2015-2016, business school students comprised 11% and 35% respectively of the one public university students and private universities students. Overall, business schools students make up 25% of the total number of university students in Lebanon. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that quality assurance, if implemented, would serve a large constituent of the academic system and specifically the private sector.

Research Methods

The research is quantitative using secondary data published on the Lebanese universities for the year 2017 by Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) in addition to data collected from the universities websites. Secondary data analysis was performed to test the relationship between each business schools organizational characteristic and responsiveness to quality assurance and to determine the organisational characteristics mostly associated with its implementation. The following sections describe the results.

Descriptive analysis results

Quality assurance at a business school can be either internal and/or external. Responsiveness to quality assurance in this research is defined as the implementation of any type of quality assurance within a business school; whereas non-responsiveness is defined as the absence of any quality assurance activity. In searching the websites of all the business schools, the researcher searched for key terms that could indicate a quality assurance activity. These terms were: quality, quality assurance and accreditation. Accordingly, the following Table summarizes the categorical frequency distribution of the business schools according to their responsiveness type:

Table 1: Frequency table: The level of responsiveness and the number of business schools

Type of responsiveness	Number of Business Schools
No quality assurance	22
External accreditation/ Institutional accreditation	3
Internal quality assurance	8
Total	**33**

The results reveal that two-thirds of the business Schools (n=22) have not engaged in any activity related to quality assurance and one-third (n=11) is responsive with different types of quality assurance. The overall result indicates that quality assurance implementation is slow and has not proceeded according to the state's expectations.

The descriptive statistics used data-specific measures of central tendency to describe the independent variables (the organisational characteristics). Therefore, nominal data were described using the mode, whereas interval

and ordinal data were described using the median which is not affected by extreme values. The following table summarises the variable types and the measures of central tendency.

Responsive schools have implemented at least one type of quality assurance; non-responsive schools have not implemented any type of quality assurance.

Table 2 Results of descriptive statistics

		Responsive Business schools		**Non-Responsive business schools**	
		Median	Mode	Median	Mode
1	Type of business (0=not-for-profit, 1= for profit)		0		0
2	Age (years)	56		18	
3	Size (number of students)	2063		280	
4	Tuition Fee ($ per credit)	196		163	
5	Number of Programmes	6		8	
6	Number of Branches	4		1	
7	Level of conferred degrees (1=BA, 2= MBA, 3=PHD)		3		2

The descriptive analysis of the two groups of business schools (responsive/not responsive) suggests that responsive schools tend to be older and larger (in terms of students' numbers and branches), receive a higher tuition fee and have fewer programmes. Both groups of schools are mostly not-for-profit. The following table shows the business types of the schools and their frequency.

Table 3 Type of business

	Responsive business schools	**Non-responsive business schools**
Not-for-profit	9	12
For profit	2	10
Total	**11**	**22**

Four of the 11 responsive schools (36%) offer a doctoral level degree, whereas the Master degree is offered at the majority of the non-responsive schools (n=14, 64%) and only one school offers a doctoral level degree. The following table shows the number of schools and their offered degrees level.

Table 4 Level of offered degrees

	Responsive schools	**Non-responsive schools**
Bachelor degree only	0	7
Bachelor and Master degree	7	14
Doctoral studies	4	1
Total	**11**	**22**

Inferential statistics results

To test for the correlation between the organizational characteristics of the 33 business schools in operation in Lebanon and the implementation to quality assurance, Fisher's exact test of association was run between each of the independent variables and the dependent variable. As a special type of chi-squared test, it is the preferred association test to use when the sample size is small (Upton, 1992; Chen, 2011). The data was retrieved from the websites of the business schools and published data from the Centre of Educational Research and Development.

The p-value associated with the Fisher's test at the 95% level of confidence, revealed that the type of business (p= 0.249), the age of the school (p=0.071), the number of programmes (P=.465), the number of branches (p=.136), and the tuition fee level (p=.282) are not statistically significant in predicting the implementation of quality assurance.

Whereas, the business school size (n>609, p=.001) and the level of conferred degrees (doctoral, p=.033) are statistically significant. Goodman and Kruskal's gamma test confirms that there is a strong, positive correlation between the size of a business school (G = .928, p =.0005) and the level of conferred degrees (G = .846, p= .042) and responsiveness to quality assurance. Therefore, in this research large business schools and/or those offering doctoral level degrees are more likely to implement quality assurance. Nevertheless, out of the 16 large

Lebanese private business schools (3 offering a doctoral degree) 11 have implemented a degree of quality assurance.

Discussion and conclusion

The research results suggest that large business schools that offer a doctoral degree and that are engaged in international academic agreements and partnerships tend to be more responsive to quality assurance implementation. The results are in line with previous other research in higher education investigating the influence of organisational characteristics (Csizmadia, 2006; Papadimitriou, 2011). In particular, small business schools may struggle financially to cover the expenses tied to the process. Hence, the government is encouraged to financially support the implementation of quality assurance by providing funds and setting up a financial incentive scheme through which institution are supported and rewarded for implementing quality assurance. This would mitigate their profit generation concern and motivate implementation. Training, seminars and workshops on quality assurance implementation should also be provided free of charge. Not only will they lift the financial burden but would also help build the knowledge and skills of higher education stakeholders.

The study has practical implications. It provides pertinent and timely information concerning the existing systems of assuring quality to the Lebanese public, to higher education institutions and to business and governmental organizations. Additionally, the study helps to raise the awareness to key stakeholders of the factors that converge to influence the implementation of quality assurance. To the Lebanese public (particularly students and their parents), this research may serve as an empirically-founded base of information about the current state and the future prospects of quality assurance in business schools in Lebanon; it may assist student in making an informed decision when choosing a university or business school. To higher education policy makers, this study has the potential to inform the reform of the quality assurance policy specifically in terms of providing funding and financial support.

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