Quality Concepts: Perceptions of Stakeholders at Two Saudi Arabian Universities

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Abstract

Saudi Arabian Universities have been facing pressures to implement quality assurance. Given that quality perception is an important factor in any attempt of quality assurance implementation, this study, a qualitative case study undertaken at PSU and KAU, examines perception of quality assurance concepts. Semi-structured interviews with both meso and micro levels have been conducted. Results specific to each level are situated accordingly and then presented for discussion. It is concluded that knowledge – or the lack of it – played a crucial role in attempts to implement quality assurance. In addition, having non-qualified staff in charge of quality assurance means the university will struggle with micro level resistance in implementing quality assurance

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Saud Arabia, NCAAA, PSU, KAU

1. Introduction and Background

Accesses to education and ensuring quality educational outcomes continue to be two of the difficulties facing education systems in developing countries (UNESCO, 2008). The education system in Saudi Arabia, as in other developing countries, is under immense pressure to provide educational opportunities as the population grows and its desire to be literate increases. At least 50% of the population of Saudi Arabia is under the age of 20 and Saudi Arabia has one of the highest birth rates in the world. The resulting population increase has led to a tremendous increase in the number of universities. At present, Saudi Arabia has 22 government universities, 18 primary teachers' colleges for men, 80 primary teachers' colleges for women, 37 colleges and institutes for health, 12 technical colleges, and 24 private universities and colleges (Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). This expansion of higher education has brought about increased demands for quality assurance. In 2004, one of the initiatives of the country's Higher Education Council (HEC) was the establishment of the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) (Almusallam, 2012).

In 2007, NCAAA conducted a pilot study with the objective of testing the system prior to implementation (NCAAA, 2007c). Two institutions, King Abdul-Aziz University (KAU) and Prince Sultan University (PSU), a public and a private establishment respectively, participated voluntarily in the pilot study. While these two institutions have been attempting to utilise quality assurance practices to improve their operations and outcomes, only PSU has been able to consolidate its efforts into building an institution-wide system and was successfully granted the institutional accreditation (NCAAA, 2012). Surprisingly, KAU failed to achieve the accreditation. Furthermore, interestingly it was found that there are still challenges to implement quality assurance as the NCAAA Assistant Secretary General announced that 30 Saudi universities out of 33 failed to pass the Saudi Quality Assurance Standards (Al-Arabiya, 2012)[1].

Perception of quality has a potential impact when it comes to institutionally implementing quality assurance (Giertz, 2000). According to Harvey and Williams (2010), one reason for the failure of quality assurance is based on the perception of academics about inconsistency between the quality of their everyday work and the performance that come to life in quality assurance processes. Thus, greater attention needs to be paid to exploring the internal stakeholder's perception of quality in order to minimise the potential challenges in the implementation. This problem has raised the question: how do internal stakeholders perceive the quality assurance?

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[1]Al-Arabiya is a Saudi Arabian newspaper.

This issue is examined in a considerable volume of literature on quality assurance in higher education around the world, especially in developed countries such as UK (Newton, 2000, 2002; Cartwright, 2007), Australia (Carmichael,2001; Watty 2003, 2006, Anderson,2006), Portugal (Rosa, Tavares, & Alberto, 2006; Cardoso, Sónia, Rosa, andSantos,2013),Finland (Huusko & Ursin,2010) and in Turkey (Nurdan, Watty, and Hayirsever,2012). However, given its recent arrival in Saudi Arabia, almost no studies have been carried out thus far that specifically focus on the perceptions of quality assurance in the country's higher education system.

According to Bredo and Feinberg (1982), one purpose of research is to understand the perspectives of participants involved in a particular process. By conducting case studies on each of these institutions, this study intends to develop an understanding about the present state of quality assurance in each of them. Thus, two cases, instead of just one institution, were selected in order to maximise the application of the methodology within the bounds of the resources of the study. They were both selected for the study to allow for wide variability in data gathering, which can enable the study to capture a more extensive range of experiences about the phenomenon.

2. Brief Literature Review

Notwithstanding the fact that the literature on quality concepts is extensive(Lomas,2002; Idrus,2003; Lemaitre,2002; Saarimen,2005; Van Kemenade, Pupius and Hardjono,2008 ;Iacovidou, Gibbs and Zopiatis,2009; Middlehurst and Woodhouse,2009), there is still room for investigation as contemporary literature to explore stakeholders' perceptions of quality is still ongoing (Carol AzumahDnnis,2012),particularly in the Saudi Arabian context. Further, in the work of Nurdan, Watty, and Hayirsever (2012), they emphasised the need for further research regarding perception of quality concepts. Therefore, the review of the related literature focuses on the definition and the purpose of quality assurance.

2.1 The Definition of Quality

Quality is considered as a relative concept (Harvey & Green, 1994), and its definition is a controversial issue (Dill, 1995). It is relative to the user since the variation of stakeholders who should be considered in any attempt for defining the quality (Ceroeigenstijn, 2006). For several decades, many scholars have attempted to define the term quality. Among those attempts, many authors have quoted the discussion on quality by Pirsig (1974) who noted the complications arising in defining quality, p184):

"Quality you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about it. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes, it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist...…So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding anyplace to get traction. What the hell is Quality?" Although Pirsig's discussion expressed that defining quality is not a simple task, various researches have been conducted to conceptualise quality. For example, Lindsay (1992) classified the term quality into two distinctive approaches: "production-measurement" view and "stakeholder-judgement" view. The former hold the view of quality as a "performance" and the argument goes around the definition and measurement of resources and outcomes. The latter relies on evaluations by different stakeholders, which may include 'Imponderable elements of our conceptions of educational processes and outcomes, and their dependence on contested value positions' (Lindsay 1992, pp 154-156). In the same vein, a great deal has been found with regard to the definition of quality and there has been some consolidation of its concepts from a variety of sources(Harvey and Green 1993 and Green, 1994 and Harvey and Knight, 1996 & Baker, 1997). Accordingly, they outlined a framework in order to categorize the different perspective on quality. The five categories are illustrated as following: quality as exceptional, quality as perfection or consistency, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money and quality as transformation.

Quality as Exceptional:

According to Harvey and Green (1993, 11), quality is perceived as something special. In addition, exceptionality can be identified through linking the concept of quality with the notion of distinctiveness (Harvey and Green 1993 and Green, 1994). That is, exceptional denotes a high-class educational system. According to Harvey and Green (1993, 11), this concept is worthless for assessing quality in higher education since this notion does not offer benchmarks against which to measure quality and it does not attempt to define quality. This concept of quality is checked based on an "absolute benchmark" (Harvey and Green, 1993).

Quality as Perfection or Consistency:

This category aims to minimize defects through complying with strict specifications. It is related to quality control which is highly used in industry. According to Harvey and Green (1994), perfection refers to "Zero defects and getting things right first time". That is, the quality of the product or service is always free of defects. However, Watty (2003) and Parri (2006) pointed out that, while this approach can be achievable in the industry context which has standards that is set for the product, it is inappropriate in the higher education context due to the difficulty of conformance of all products and ensuring the "Zero defects" in their graduates.

Quality as Fitness for Purpose:

It differs from the exceptional approach of quality by fixing upon when the product and service functionally has the potential to fit its purpose (Harvey and Green, 1994, 17). This approach is based upon determining the purpose of the product or service. Harvey and Green (1994) point out two priorities, which are customer specification and mission. The priority of customer specification is focusing on customer requirements. However, this concept raises the question of who are the customers of higher education: the student; the service user or government; the one who pays for the service). Furthermore, if students are considered to be the customer, they are not usually able to specify the requirement very well. In the priority of mission, higher education institutions take the responsibility for specifying their purpose, thus quality can be defined in terms of the institution fulfilling its mission (Harvey and Green, 1994.17-19). According to Parri (2006), this approach is adopted commonly in higher education contexts. It enables the institutions to define objectives in the mission statements (Woodhouse, 1999).Furthermore, putting the onus on the institution to specify and fulfil a mission can resolve the problem of customer specification. However, assuring fitness in higher education contexts can be done by quality assessment procedures (Harvey, 2006). Another issue can be raised to the question about who should define the purposes of higher education (Green, 1994) and the problem of identifying whether the institution is achieving the purposes (Harvey and Green, 1994). Yet, this can be judged indirectly through accreditation agencies which determine a set of standards and evaluate its implementation.

Quality as Value for Money:

This approach describes quality in term of investment and cost. According to Harvey (2006), quality as value for money has a different view. While the first one perceives quality when the identified outcome is achieved at lowest cost, the other perceives value for money as gaining the specified outcome for a predetermined cost. Therefore, there are external pressures on the higher education system to be efficiently and effectively accountable to whoever paid for their needs. On the other hand, students and their parents expect to receive high quality as return on their investments (Harvey and Green, 1994).

Quality as Transformation:

This approach sees a quality as "qualitative change" (Harvey and Green, 1993), and reflects the ideas such as perfection and efficiency and concentrates on the outcomes of education. Therefore, quality is measured through adding value to the participants as an outcome of the educational experience. The transformation can be measured through improving the knowledge, skills, and values of students. Transformation refers to the development and change occurring to students during the learning process (Harvey, 2006) and under any educational circumstance (Parri, 2006). Harvey (2006) emphasised that transformation can be assured by focusing on the standards of all factors that facilitate the learning process such as services and facilities, which in turn enhances studentattributes and empowers them as critics. Thus the students' feedback about their abilities and progress through survey or discussion evaluates the service provided.

2.2 The Purpose of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance in higher education is not implemented haphazardly. While several authors enumerated a number of reasons why quality assurance is important for higher education institutions (Harvey,1999; Schwarz and Westerheijden,2004;Adegbesan,2011), accountability and improvement have been seen as the core building blocks of quality assurance in higher education institutions. Accountability refers to "the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect" (Trow, 1996, 310). According to Adegbesan (2011), higher education institutions have responsibilities to uphold not just to their students, but to various socio-political and economic institutions.

To that end, it is important in conducting quality assurance within a higher education institution that all stakeholders are made aware of their responsibility in maintaining quality. In the past, colleges and universities have mainly relied on knowledge transfer from mentors to students in order to maintain the quality of education that they are able to provide. However, as pointed out by Coates (2010), there is a need to develop and implement more scientific and consistent approaches in determining appropriate standards of practice and assessment in higher education. In relation to this, quality assurance measures are also necessary in order to identify problem areas in an institution's operations and correct them. The second significant purpose is improvement. According to Harvey (1999), such an approach is to assist institutions to examine and therefore improve their practices. As explained by Brown (2011), establishing strong quality assurance protocols can raise employee motivation and morale. If people in the institution are made aware of the institution's commitment to maintaining high standards of quality, they are more likely to work to the best of their abilities in order to help the institution remain consistent with those standards.

3. Methodology

For this study, a descriptive multiple case study was selected as the most appropriate research design. A total of 24 university employees participated in the study. Interviews were conducted to gather relevant data in order to address the research questions of the study. Based on the utilisation of institutional theory, participants were also divided into two groups to compare both the MESO and the MICRO levels' perception. While the deans were considered to be at the MESO level along with quality assurance staff and top university management, the MICRO level encompasses heads of schools and academic staff. Results specific to each level respectively are situated accordingly and then presented separately for discussion. Participants represented different positions within their university, number of years associated with their university, and qualifications. The participants' roles in the university ranged from teaching and department chair responsibilities to administrative and quality assurance staff. In addition, the participants' length of association with the university ranged from less than 5 years, 5-10 years, 11-15 years, and more than 15 years, with representation in all groups. Likely due to the academic nature of university work, nearly all participants held high level qualifications of a Ph.D. or Master's degree.

Table 1 : Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 24)

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency	
	PSU	KAU
Role at the University*		
Teaching	6	9
Department chair	3	4
Quality assurance	2	6
Administrative staff	1	1
How long associated with the University		
< 5 years	2	4
5 – 10 years	3	5
11-15 yrs	1	3
>15 yrs	2	2
Qualification		
Phd	6	13
graduate of international studies	1	0
masters	1	1

Note. Participants were allowed to respond with more than one role at the university, such as teaching and department chair.

The first step in the data analysis was development of codes for the analysis. This entailed coding and categorizing of the participants' responses to the interview questions to reflect the open coding categories, with codes with similar content being grouped together (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Additional codes were added throughout the data analysis where necessary to represent emerging data concepts. The third stage of the process necessitated further categorization of the grouped concepts from the prior step, in which the open-coding categories were used to determine the selective coding categories related to the emergent themes of the analysis.

The various common selective coding categories represent the perceptions and experiences of the group as a whole (Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The final step involved a comprehensive review and narrative interpretation of the data to provide the conclusions, or theory, generated from the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). From the thematic, selective coding categories and the constant comparing of elements and categories throughout the analysis, several overarching themes were devised. These themes represent the perceptions of the group as a whole and are therefore used to present the study's conclusions according to the associated research questions.

4. Findings

The thematic categories are presented individually and include (a) description of quality and (b) purpose of quality assurance. Each of these thematic categories contained sub-categories and key themes revealed from the analysis. Tables 3 and 4 provide schematic summaries of the results in this regard for PSU and KAU respectively, and each thematic category is then presented individually for discussion.

4.1 PSU

Table 2: PSU; Perceptions of Quality Concepts

Thematic category	Subcategory	Key themes	
		MESO LEVEL	MICRO LEVEL
Quality concepts	Description of quality	- Meeting specified indicators. - Meeting certain standards.	- Empowerment of students. - Meeting stakeholders' requirements. - Value for Money.
	The purpose of quality assurance	Continuous improvement. Compliance to external body (NCAAA).	Competitiveness continuous improvement accountability as serving people

4.1.1 The Definition of Quality

The key theme of this thematic subcategory was the MESO-level participants' perception of quality as relating to reaching performance indicators or meeting standards specified by an external quality body, to ensure the attainment of a certain standard of performance. This was expressed clearly by the dean participant, who stated: Quality is a very relative term. I would say it's a subjective term meaning that you have to come up with those standards of practices which are compatible with the wording you must use in education. And you're comparing your university with the other universities, I think then your students should be at par in terms of the quality and also the faculty should be at par with those who – which is all over the world. So we try to be at par with the other universities in the region, as well as internationally" (Participant D2 PSU). This concept of quality is rooted in meeting a specified set of standards and being able to compare the institution and others against that standardas described by Participant QM01 PSU, who continued explaining that: Quality has something to do, of course, again, meeting certain standards based on a certain quality agency like the NCAAA, making sure that a particular area of both academic and administrative factors are in place. And in this regard, you can do some benchmarking against other – other institutions of parallel, you know – parallel institutions. (Participant QM1 PSU)

This measure according to standards was mentioned by another participant who described quality assurance as a process of assessing and meeting key performance indicators: They [NCAAA accreditation] require us [to implement] quality assurance, right, in order to make sure students are learning, for example. So we have to measure that students are learning. So there are key performance indicators– 36 of them. So many as a matter of fact, we have to prove that those quality indicators are reflected [in practice]. . . . [We] measure certain learning outcomes in the course. So – and then we grade this across all our students and we try to figure out whether learning outcome is satisfied or not satisfied (Participant V.C1 PSU). At the MICRO level, several definitions of quality were described. Quality was seen as a transformation and described in terms of empowerment of students. For example, Participant TCH01 PSU described: Quality means that – to me, the customer satisfaction, and right? And [the] customer, in our case, is the students. We need to provide them [with] the best knowledge, which is available [and] which we acquired from different sources and satisfy them. Not satisfying on compromising standards.

Satisfying in terms of they are given the best knowledge, which is available up to the same international standards. This is to me, quality assurance is [that] we are going to assure that the student; they are having the right kind of content or competencies. (Participant TCH01 PSU) Another theme related to meeting stakeholders' requirements. This is described by academic staff who stated:

Quality in the perspective of education means that um you – there are different types of stakeholders. So for instance, let's say if we talk about ___ you know, I'm a stakeholder. Students are stakeholders. Their parents are stakeholder. ____ is their stakeholder. Management of this university, they are stakeholder. And the industry where our students will go, they are also stakeholder. So you bring in a requirement for multiple stakeholders and very carefully, you advance them – the requirement of different stakeholders. (Participant TECH03 PSU) Viewing it as an indicator of value for money means that quality is focused on efficiency and effectiveness. The employability rate of graduates is a mechanism for assessing this perception.This is emphasized by a quality manager who stated: Quality is having satisfied your customer. So here in the university, uh of course, the quality that we measure is in terms of our graduates if they will be employed within graduation or within six months. So that will be our gauge of quality – if our students are marketable. So if our students are not employable, I think we don't have quality. But I think in my opinion based on our statistics, our graduates are sought graduates here in the kingdom. So once they graduate, then they are employed already. And because we have a program called CO-OP or cooperative education wherein the students can practice what they have learned in the university from six months so they will be in the workplace. And after that, they will be offered for a job. And this is very success program with the university. (Participant TECH02 PSU).

4.1.2 The Purpose of Quality

The second subcategory in this thematic category was that of the perceived purpose of QA. The responses indicated some common themes between the two groups. At the MESO level, two themes were revealed in regard to the perception of the purpose of QA. The first common theme was simply the achievement of continuous improvement. As stated by (D2 PSU): I think the main essence of quality assurance for the university would be for improvement, for continuous improvement, because if there's no quality assurance, there's a tendency for the university and the people in the university to be complacent. So, it's important to have our department [Quality Assurance] to prevent this. (D2 PSU)

This perception is also shared by another quality manager how stated: The main purpose of quality assurance here is because, you know, the university has a vision – we want to be the best university in the region of GCC. Not just in the kingdom, but in the whole uh Gulf region. We want to be the best private uh nonprofit education. So with that principle, we have to make sure that we attain that. And that's the purpose of quality assurance here in the university (Participant QM2 PSU). This notion of continuous improvement was echoed by another participant, describing the relationship with quality assurance and continuous improvements: It is helping you out actually, to improve your program, to help, a very good sense, right, of where you're going, what's your performance, right, in key performance indicators. So this is as a matter of fact, right, benefits for us – it improves performance and – to make us better. (D1PSU).

 The second common theme was of the purpose being compliance with the national quality agency (NCAAA).For example, one participant clearly explained, "Currently, we are standard-based. Accreditation, as a matter of fact, [is] putting lots of pressure on us, so we want to watch our performance in order to get accredited" (QM01 PSU). Another example is provided by participant who stated: it is based on NCAAA, they have identified those certain standards and they – each university is expected – each program is expected to use those standards. We are in the process of taking the program accreditation by the NCAAA. (Participant D1 PSU). Themes revealed at the MICRO level were control and addressing the comparability of standards, improvement, and accountability of serving people. Control is seen as a main purpose of QA. Participants suggested that QA was aimed at offering a set of standards with which to compare one with others. For example, when asked to describe the purpose of quality assurance, Participant TCH01 PSU explained quality assurance as a tool of control to compare what you produce to a set of standards:

"So quality assurance means that you have standards and then whatever you are producing, you see that they are up to the mark or not" (Participant TCH01 PSU). The second theme revealed was that of the purpose of QA being simply the achievement of continuous improvement.

This was described by one academic who stated: We are working on ___ the levelling outcomes of the students and making the – making us more – more comparative with institutions in the region – in Saudi Arabia as well as in the Middle East. (Participant TECH04) Accountability was also stated as playing a role the promised vision as stated by Participant PSUH.S1: This is basically a private university. Um what you can say – it's a private university. And uh the purpose is of course to uh serve the people in the kingdom. And uh I can also tell you in terms of our vision and mission that uh we are looking for – to become the best university in the Middle East (Participant H.S1).

4.2 KAU:

Table 2: KAU; Perceptions of Quality Concepts

Thematic category	Subcategory	Key themes	
		MESO LEVEL	MICRO LEVEL
Quality concepts	Description of quality	Performance improvement. Availability of documentation. customer' satisfaction	- achieving specific standards - Meeting stakeholders' expectations. - Reduction the cost and the time. Empowerment of students.
	The purpose of quality assurance	Continuous improvement. Competitiveness	Achieving accreditation

4.2.1 The Definition of Quality

The MESO level, quality according to many participants is considered to be more of a performance improvement. For example, Participant KAUQM01 stated that the quality concepts are concerned with upgrading the performance level which means providing the best service, either in teaching, research or in community service. These 3 things which the university based on are included in the quality concept that focuses on providing the best services according to the recognized mechanisms (KAUQM01).

The conception of improving performance is also mentioned by a dean who stated:

My concept for quality is to improve performance. It is assurance to the saying of the Prophet, Peace and prayers of Allah Be upon Him "Who, he does a work, should perfect it"(KAU.D1). The term of quality was described by participants as accountability oriented and requiring the availability of documentation. This was exemplified by participants KAUQM02and KAUQM03, who stated: It means being subjected to the accountability, to set up a certain specification and to make it known, to carry out a kind of evaluation process. Indeed quality does exist, but what we have been lacking is the documentation. Everyone used to apply quality at his discretion, and according to his own capabilities and perception. The missing link to strengthen quality was the existence of documentation …. Thus, the quality in the higher education depends mainly on the availability of documentation (KAUQM02). I mean there should be some restrictions, not just putting procedures and follow them without being subjected to the accountability. Otherwise, the quality did exist, and we applied it, but in the absence of a documentation system. In fact, some people dislike documentation and try to keep away from it because it is binding and restricts actions (KAUQM03). It was interesting to find that a different perception of quality as it is related to customer satisfaction was revealed by only one of the MESO level participants, stating that:

I tend to the definition that says: "Quality is the ability of the product or service to satisfy the costumer's needs", that is all what it is, satisfying the costumer (KAUQM04). On the other hand, at the MICRO level, several perceptions of quality were described, with no strong themes evident from the coding of the data. Participants offered the opinion that quality means achieving specific standards. Quality was seen as set of standards. For example, Participant AC01 KAU stated that:

... it means a set of standards and specifications , which should be available in the educational environment in the various branches and domains with respect to the educational environment as buildings, and technical, administrative and educational services to the members of teaching staff and their quality regarding students and conditions of admission .(Participant AC01 KAU). Another theme was of quality definition in term of meeting stakeholders' expectations.

This is described by the academic staff who stated: It means fulfilment of expectations and meeting the client in the shade of existing of Specifications of a systematic plan understood by all parties trying to achieve it through the establishment strategy.(Participant AC04 PSU). Quality is also seen as accuracy of results along with reduction in cost and time. This is emphasized by two participants, as demonstrated in the following examples: The quality means the limitation of time, the accuracy of results and the costs decreasing, but in our society we have increasing in time and increasing of costs and consequently the accuracy decreasing of the product.(Participant AC03 PSU). Through my experience whether by reading the theoretical literature and through practice, quality is: performing the correct work properly from the first time and each time. (Participant AC02 PSU). Quality is also seen as transformation, as its process centralized on the students' learning including curriculum, courses, and teaching methods. This is stated by a head of school, KAU.H.S01: It is a process where the student is at the center, and is the main focus. For this reason, it was supposed that in all what have been set up, the student should have been at center. The idea of curriculum, courses, teaching methods….etc. Therefore, the experience will vary from person to another, and that is why the quality should be applied from the beginning of all matters such as classrooms, learning environment and all student-related things all these matters interfere with the quality.(KAU.H.S01).

4.2.2 The Purpose of Quality Assurance

At the MESO level, the first theme in regards to the quality assurance purpose was associated with improvement. This was Participant KAU.D1's view:

There is no doubt, first improving performance is one of the basic demands-this is my view, in short time and effort in the long processing, instead of you disperse , there should be rationing and certain mechanism for work decreasing researcher's time and effort. The superior goal is development.

Applying quality assurance was seen commonly as a competitive and student capability tool as stated in the following examples:

The goal is to ensure the provision of the market with a viable product. Such product, which is by the way the graduate, should be competitive; it means someone who can fill a position in Australia, in UK or in USA as per the required criteria (KAUQM02). The said criteria, which we make by ourselves, are nothing more than the skills that the graduate should acquire. These criteria allow us to expect what the level of our graduates will look like (KAUQM03).

Quality Assurance is the whole process that happens before releasing the product, in an educational institution for example before a student is graduated, he need to learn certain courses in those 5 years, skills, the standard things that students must have before graduating, so I put my whole effort in it to make sure the product is good before letting out to the light, same thing in cars for example… there must be contact with agents (KAUQM04). Another theme was the purpose of quality assurance in terms of achieving accreditation. This was expressed by Participant: KAUQM01 who stated:

It seems that in King Abdul Aziz University we work on the two sides: improvement and compliance because the university here is committed to higher education rules and regulations, at the same time it seeks for evolving the academic quality systems according to international standards, so it is possible to have the two sides(KAUQM01). At the MICRO level, the key theme revealed the perception of the purpose of QA as seeking academic accreditation and certification. For example one participant explained:

For the university, its main goal is the academic accreditation. This main course belongs to the university that the academic accreditation shall be our basic strategies in quality assurance and the academic accreditation that we shall see the other experiences, what they did and we come nearer in destinations between them on the level of the course, resources or system on all levels. Developing professors, developing the course, the curriculum. (Participant AC04KAU).

Another example is provided by Participant AC03 PSU who stated:

Most of the establishments consider the concept of the quality as a certificate or a document they seek for, and not for the quality itself, especially those in the Arab countries.

Seeking certification was echoed by another participant, describing the main objective of implementing quality assurance:

The purpose I feel in the institution as a whole that quality is not the purpose in itself, the purpose after quality is applications of maintaining the establishment reputation, obtaining a good classification among universities. This means that there is true endeavour from the interior /local universities to get accreditation and we have got credence from that and that regardless of quality.(Participant AC02 PSU). Such direction has caused a conflict on the main purpose of quality assurance implementation. While the majority sees the international accreditation as the end, a head of school see the accreditation as a means. The academic accreditation is the goal at the university. We are working on getting a foreigner accreditation; we applied models that met all the NCAAA requirements. By the end, all the standards of the academic quality and accreditation revolve around the same axis. The second point is that when we met with the dean, we told him that our goal is not to get accredited, as the accreditation is a means and not an end. The end is to set up a mechanism to develop ourselves, our goals, our teaching methods….etc. During the period we spent working on this project, acceptance of the faculties' members began to appear (KAU.H.S01).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

There was some mismatch between participants' perceptions at PSU. The variation of quality concepts perceived differently by different participants at different levels may be conceptualised inherently and practically depending on the positions of the stakeholders and their objectives. The findings of this study are consistent with Harvey and Green's (1993) implying the difficulty to define quality in higher education. The variety of definitions exists for different stakeholders due to the difficulties in finding a clear definition (Elken, 2007). However, the result revealed form the data indicates that at PSU the maturity in understanding the quality concepts was an important factor that is having a significant impact on enhancing quality assurance implementation. Therefore, it is argued that these two, the meso and the micro perception, may have complemented one another, allowing the university to implement quality assurance, as the awareness and acceptance of change was enunciated by the grassroots (Newton, 2002; Watty, 2003). For the purpose of quality assurance, the MESO perceived the purpose of quality assurance as an improvement. It is assumed that people at the MESO level expected to be more positive in the assessment (Stensaker et al, 2011).At the micro level, on the other hand, participant shared the improvement approach with an emphasis on accountability. This corresponds with the argument of Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) that it would be appropriate to focus on the accountability and compliance aspect of quality assurance when 'addressing the introduction of new types of institutions or qualifications' (p. 20); On the other hand at KAU the findings showed that there was immaturity and ambiguity regarding understanding of the quality concepts. Immaturity was revealed by the lack of knowledge of quality, as was evident with the participant who described quality as process, which is considered to be "quality in danger"(Harvey& Green, 1993). Ambiguity is interrelated with multiple understandings between the MESO and the MICRO levels (Anderson, 2006). It was found to be a factor that is hindering implementation. In addition, it is notable that there is no distinction between accreditation and quality assurance. The former is a type of quality assurance that is utilised to validate the quality procedure. Further it should not be the ultimate goal, particularly for the public universities, as their funding is fully provided by the government. As such, this notion has to be changed, as accreditation has to take place as a tool that enhances quality, and to cope with this problem much attention needs to be paid to training transformation within the university to address individualized conception issues.

The data demonstrated that not only was a conflict between the MESO and MICRo levels, but there is also a tension between the MESO level and the NCAAA. The inability of KAU to be granted the NCAAA accreditation certificate is a result of this situation. That conflict, according to Anderson (2006)'s argument, can create "confusion and heighten animosity between university management, quality agencies" (166). This can lead to increased conflict internally, and also to a symbolic response from the institutional perspective rather than a genuine, substantive response. It can be concluded that the analysis makes it clear that lack of knowledge played a crucial role in problems with implementing quality assurance. In addition, having unqualified staff in charge of quality assurance means the university will struggle with micro level resistance in implementing quality assurance.Thus, serious attention must be given to managing quality by staff who understand quality principles. As such, those appointed to manage quality must be professionals.   Finally, this result supports the findings of other studies that demographic variables of participants impact on perceptions of quality (Papadimitriou et al., 2008; Veiga et al., 2012; Rosa et al., 2006; Stensaker et al., 2011).

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