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Applicability of A Proposed National Palestinian Excellence Framework in Higher Education Institutes

(Case Study in Gaza Strip Territory–Palestine)

Abstract

Higher education as an academic discipline has continued to grow in stature and significance. Part of the growth of higher education has been in understanding the methodology of evaluating students' performance.The paper focuses on a proposed national prototype framework for''excellent performance in higher education''at Palestine (Gaza strip).

Higher education in Palestine is in a time of immense change and undergoing a process of institutionalization, despite the great pressure to demonstrate their value while expressing an increasing level of severe economic, rare resources, constraints and barriers in a turbulent uncertain environment.

The expected outcomes of the national Palestinian framework are to help the institutions respond to the current fast challenges, transparency in governance, innovation in how to adopt learning knowledge and continuous improvement for sustained development.

The paper presents an introduction and a brief review of the two most well established fundamental excellence representative models, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) and the Malcolm Baldridge National Quality Award (MBNQA), indicating that these are essentially diverse, then enlightenment of the proposed national Palestinian Proto–type excellence framework. The Proto–type excellence framework is linked to both continuous improvement in teaching and learning, mentioning that quality management is the foundation of excellence models.

The challenges and benefits of the national framework are highlighted; its implementation has a positive effect on the financial and managerial performance of the institutions beside the satisfaction of stakeholders and reputation advantage for competing in a national context. Points to ponder with some criticism and limitations are mentioned.

Finally, recommendations for improvements are suggested to facilitate best practice, enable change by encouraging participation of all concerned and suggest others might use to extend current thinking.

Keywords: Higher education, excellence models, self-assessment, institutional context, effectiveness framework, learning and teaching, education evaluation.

Introduction and literature review

As society changes, most higher education institutions also change. Higher education institutes are the main instruments of society for the sustained pursuit of knowledge.

The world of education had changed enormously over the past two decades. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED, 2015) rigorously documented such transformation as the world moves closer to achieving the goal of providing education for all.

Excellence in educational instituteons should provide a set of issues for linking people (students, faculty, researchers), business and industry, processes and management.

Use of excellence models in higher education institutions has been significant, mainly because in the past few years there has been an increase in the pressure over institutions to fulfill requirements through continuous improvement, and resource utilization, taking into consideration the rising cost of higher education and its effect on access, retention, and affordability.

Higher educational institutions are currently facing the challenge of reorienting their approaches in a more business – oriented manner. Excellence denotes the upper limit on a scale of quality.

Excellence models are a powerful diagnostic tool providing performance measurement tool, measuring business excellence, besides providing a learning opportunity for stakeholders to view strength, create value and identify improvement opportunities (Michele and Varia, 2011).

Furthermore, excellence models allow stakeholders to identify "gaps" between best practices and actual performance, as students and stakeholder expectations are growing.

Business excellence is about developing processes and strengthening management systems, processes of the higher educational institutes, to improve their performance. It is much more than having a quality system in place. Excellence models are the driving force for sustained excellence in the higher educational institutes. The use of such models can produce both financial and non-financial benefits to an institution, but it cannot guarantee long-term success (Evans and Lindsay, 2012)

Implementation of excellence models significantly impacts institution's results. Differing perspectives on excellence create a range of different and sometimes conflicting demands of higher education, hence selecting the best strategy to improve excellence in higher educational institutes is a rigorous process.

Until 2002 there was no global university ranking, but national ranking. Moreover, there were no significant global research rankings and assessments of publications and citations were left to a few specialists in research policy and management. A general indicator of the internationally growing interest and concern about excellence in higher education, is the profanations of publications, workshops, and training sessions and models on the topic "excellence in higher education". Ruben, 2007 presented a normative model for structuring

organizational excellence in higher education institutions drawn from the business sector. A second indicator for the emergence of excellence, is the socalled "ranking movement" which is a driver of change in the field of higher education.

Shanghai university publication on international ranking (ARWU 2003) established the ranking movement and referenced to excellence in education. Since then the university ranking movement has expanded, leading in a few years to a popularity of rankings.

Excellence is now a part driver in higher education refered to as, excellence in higher education (EHE), and nowadays the concept is widely emphasized and its meaning has been redefined on the basis of different values and goals.

Excellence has become the measure on which institutions are assessed and public funding allocated, the tool by which worldwide comparisons and rankings of institutions are built, and a marketable brand used by higher education institutions to present themselves, it is a sort of "identify mark" for higher educational institutions.

Many institutions claim that students, employees are the most valuable assets, but it isn't usually reflected in their work environment unless excellence is the prevailing culture. Global world university rankings have generated a growing concern for universities about their position in the higher education field. Thus, international rankings are viewed as "measures of systems and operational performance". Institutions compete for recognition and reputation on the basis of excellence criteria on which rankings are built upon.

Skelton (2015) provided an in depth examination of teaching excellence in higher education, identifying and examining interpretations of teaching excellence. Later Skelton (2007) demonstrated how and why teaching excellence in higher education institutions should be achieved, supported by international perspectives from educational researchers, award winning teachers, practitioners and educational developers. Also in the celebrated book by Ruben (2007), the author argues that self-assessment leads to a stronger performance in higher education, and that it is the premise of excellence.

Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award and framework (MBNQA) as the defining tool for higher education institute's management, defining mission, assessing stakeholders, measuring outcomes, gauging performance against other institutions, and ensuring continuous improvement.

Ruben (2007) presents a significant contribution to the development of education by providing an approach that integrates the Baldrige criteria with the standards and languages developed and used by accrediting associations, together with a scoring guide for facilitators with a solid understanding of the excellence concept in higher education models in each of the seven areas to interpret results and gauge institution's performance;

(1) Leadership;(2) Strategic planning; (3) Beneficiaries and constituencies; (4) Programs and services;

(5) Faculty, staff, and workplace; (6) assessment and information use; (7) Outcomes and achievements.

For each: review and discuss; identify "strengths" and "areas for improvement", then rate and score.

Later Ruben (2016) proposed a framework for the design, assessment and continuing improvement of the institution's performance, program updates and extends the classic excellence in higher education series. The author included a broad and integrated approached to design, assessment, planning and improvement of higher education institutes of all types, as well as individual academic, student affairs, administrative and service units. The proposed framework asks questions: but does not prescribe methods or strategies, hence broaden participation in leadership and problem solving.

Approaches to excellence in higher education

Excellence is one of the many usable concepts in the area of higher education. Michele and Varia (2001) argues that there has been a movement in the last thirty years during which the concepts of excellence and its close related term "quality" have changed in both meaning and context. One may summaryze some complex challenges facing higher education institutions as:

1. Meeting increasing demands with few new resources.
2. Responding meaningfully to external critiques.
3. Developing an enhanced leadership capability.

4. Creating a culture of ongoing self-assessment, planning and improvement.
5. Providing a guide to institutional effectiveness to provide excellent educational services.
6. Increased calls for the definition and review of student learning and for other types of public accountability.
7. Training and development programs aligned to institution's strategies and goals, effective utilization of staff.

More information on challenges facing higher education institutions and definitions of excellence in higher education can be found in (NACUBO, 2007; ENQA;2014).

The first part of the research demonstrated that higher education is in a state of important transition, new educational models and means of delivering educational programs are evolving at all levels. Students call for new teaching methods, modern technology have entered the classrooms, thus modifying the nature of interaction between students and professors, creating cultures of excellence in higher education.

Research led by Linda, (2009) resulted in a reference guide that includes expanded coverage of assessment topics. The book has become the standard reference and practical guide for faculty and administrations that are charged with the task of assessing student learning.

Excellence is not limited to traditional measures of profit/loss or those imposed by external accreditation bodies, moreover, no one approach will work for all higher education institutions, and hence each opted for the approach which best suited them.

Rosalind et.al (2015) in their interesting book enhanced this line of thinking and addressed the challenges, diversity and excellence, then recent developments and issues in higher education, and the impact of challenges on students and functioning of institutions beside the relationship between "diversity" and "excellence". Also of interest the book by Middaugh (2010) where the author proposed assessment and continuous improvement levels:

▪ Program level: information about different course types, formal aspects of continuing education, staff motivate-on.
▪ Institutional level: information about organizational structure and management. Information about quality assurance, funding and participants.

Evaluating the quality of teaching and learning has been a growing concern for academia as a policy standpoint and with its effect on higher education systems.

According to Gregory (2013) a reference approach to excellence implies that there are standards which are commonly acknowledged and are appropriate for a wide class of higher education institutes. Accreditation standards for higher education institutes consists of components which are connected to structural and organizational issues. Accreditation attests to the judgement that an institution has met the standards based upon the results of institutional reviews. At a glance the standards for accreditation are: (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2002)

Institutional Context (Capacity)
Standard 1: *Mission, goals, and objectives*

The institution's mission clearly defines its purpose within the context of higher education.

Standard 2: Planning, resource allocation, and institutional renewal.

An institution conducts ongoing planning and resource allocation based on its mission sustainability and uses results of its assessment activities for institutional renewal.

Standard 3: *The institutional resources*

The human, financial, technical, knowledge and other resources necessary to achieve an institution's mission and goals are available and accessible.

Standard 4: *leadership and governance*

The institution's system of governance clearly defines the roles of institutional constituencies in policy development and decision-making.

Standard 5: *Administration*

The institution's administrative structure and services facilitate learning and research/ scholarship, foster quality improvement.

Standard 6: *Integrity*

The institution demonstrates commitment to ethical standards, provide support to academic and intellectual freedom.

Standard 7: *Institutional assessment*

The institution has developed and implemented an assessment plan and process that evaluated its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals.

Educational Effectiveness

Standard 8*: Student admission*

The institution seeks to admit students whose interests, goals, and abilities are concurrent with its admission policy.

Standard 9*: Student support services*

The institution provides student support services necessary to enable each student to achieve institutional goals for students.

Standard 10*: faculty*

The institution's instructional, research, and service programs are developed, motivated, and supported by qualified professionals.

Standard 11: *Educational offerings*

The institution's educational offerings display academic context that is appropriate to its higher education mission. The institution identifies student learning goals and objectives, knowledge and skills.

Standard 12: *general education*

The institution's curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including oral and written communicateon, critical analysis, technological competency, and information literacy.

Standard 13: *Assessment of student learning*

Assessment of student learning demonstrates that the students have the knowledge, skills and competencies consistent with institutional goals.

Mindful of these standards, an educational reform initiative for excellence in higher education is adopted by the Egyptian Government (NAQAAE) with accreditation standards as:

▪ Institutional Capacity: Strategic planning
▪ Educational effectiveness: students and Alumni.

Criteria for excellence in higher education

The term "excellence" has been used by accreditation schemes in management of higher education, to define the level of quality of services provided by the institutions.

The concept of excellence in higher education implies different things in different contexts and is often applied without a clear specification of its meaning. Excellence is vague enough and may be equated with the reputation, loyalty, the perception of student experience, and the varying missions of institutions. There are numerous definitions and a number of studies (Skelton, 2007; Mark Zhou, 2011; Michele Rostom et-.al, 2011) have investigated different areas of excellence implementation, excellence management, and policies with suggestions for continuous improvements.

It is less easy to define, in the context of academic quality and standards, that excellence relates to the quality of teaching, the capabilities of students, the scale of resource provision, and the level of student achievement.

According to the latest version of the European foundation for quality Management (EFQM, 2013), Excellence is defined as ''an exhibiting characteristics that are exceptional and outstanding practice in managing the organization and achieving results''.

Approaches to excellence in higher education include excellence in management, research, teaching, and student performance. To ensure sustainable growth, institutions must develop excellent services that maximize retention, loyalty and reputation.

The most appropriate two well know representative excellence models in management are:The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM, 2013; Hina, et.al,2009) and The Malcolm Baldrige criteria (Ruben, 2007).

These models establish broad criteria, which any organization can use to assess the progress towards excellence. The two models will be briefly explored from a conceptual standpoint.

Basically, they are based on measurement and orientation approaches to quality assessment and improvement based on a set of criteria that is used to assess organizations. Each organization is assessed according to the same criteria and in the end a global score is given to the organization by a group of external assessors.

Similar models such as in the work done by Ruben (2007,2015) on the use of the Baldrige model in education, and by Zink (2008) using the total quality management (TQM) excellence model in higher education has demonstrated approaches for implementing excellence models in higher education.

The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) excellence model

It is a self-assessment framework for measuring the strengths and areas for improvement of an organization "Institute" across all of its activities. The model focuses on what the institute does, or could do to provide an excellent service to its stakeholders.

The EFQM excellence model does not involve strictly following a set of rules or standards, but provides a board and coherent set of assumptions about what is required for an institute and its management. Each institute regardless of size, structure can use due to its own strategy to manage and develop an improvement. The EFQM excellence model establishes broad criteria that are divided between 5 enablers and 4 results that are not independent or isolated, but these must be implemented together and in a coordinated fashion (Maziar, et.al, 2009). For more in-depth characteristics and detailed information on the reviewed eight fundamental concepts, the nine model criteria, the RADAR logic, scoring matrix as a tool for measurement and how these three elements interact with each other to develop institute capabilities and issues surrounding them (Conti, 2007; EFQM, 2013). The EFQM excellence model is reviewed and updated on a three-year cy-

cle to ensure it continues to reflect reality and relevance of the current "Business" environment. The latest update was published at the end of 2012 and became valid in 2013.

The Malcolm Baldrige criteria for performance excellence

The Malcolm Baldrige is the most comprehensive management framework that looks at all components of the institute and focuses on how each part impacts and links with one another. Research indicates that the framework has been widely adopted as a standard of excellence framework in a higher education context. The framework, when used as the basis of the institutional self-assessment programs, broadens knowledge, clarifies strengths and priorities for improvement, and motivates change, (Ruben, 2016) is considered a milestone in the field of higher education excellence. One of the core values of the Baldrige criteria is managing for innovations for performance excellence, it is considered as an excellent tool to provide a systematic process for driving management change.

The Baldrige criteria cover many of the same areas as EFQM but are more wide-ranging in scope and are more directly applicable to educational institutions. Whether the institution is small or large, is for-profit or not-for-profit, or has one location or multiple sites, the model provides a valuable framework that can help to plan and use to improve overall performance in an uncertain environment.

Generally, the Malcolm Baldrige criteria consist of seven linked categories, the categories are broken down into 17 items each has its score indicating its importance. The weighting can vary, but have a maximum of 1000 points, together they provide the foundation for an institution to integrate key requirements within a result-oriented framework to create a basis for action and feedback.

Whilst scores are important for monitoring progress, the main value of using the Malcolm Baldrige Excellence Model is that it can help institutions clearly understand their strengths and opportunities for improvement for each category and/or item. For more details on the Malcolm Baldrige education criteria and guidance for performance excellence (Baldrige Performance, 2015). A noteworthy feature that use of excellence models can produce both financial and non-financial benefits to an institution, but it cannot be a guarantee for long-term success (Evan, 2012).

Despite a common set of features, among excellence models that are essentially diverse; there is no one approach that will work for all institutions. Moreover, the existing business excellence models are designed mainly for assessment of award applications, and hence do not provide a specific guideline for management control purposes including the application of management tools and techniques. Both excellence models lack guidance for integrations at the operational process level, even if the latest version of the EFQM has been improved.

Applicability of the proposed proto–type national excellence framework

In Palestine, the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission (AQ-AC) has produced a set of quality standards at the program level, that have been designed to be relevant to the circumstances faced by higher education institutes, and according to the ministry of higher education strategic plan, there is a need to create a national framework for continuous improvement to upgrade the Palestinian quality system in higher education from program level to the institutional level. Palestine did not develop a national excellence model, but adopted collective international standards and implements them in the industrial and service sectors; such as ISO certificates, some elements of the EFQM model.

Mindful of this requirement, considering higher education as an investment that could contribute to the national prosperity in the long term, a proposed national prototype framework is suggested by Al Awoor (2014) with the following objectives:

- Promoting the concept of excellence in higher education institutes together with its importance of applications.
- Upgrading leadership to achieve excellence in performance
- Increasing institution's involvement in building and improving sociological needs, as long as excellence is linked to social responsibility.

- Maximizing quality of education and increasing the competitiveness in the national environment despite the stringent barriers.

It is expected that the proposed national proto-type framework will fulfil these requirements within the higher education sector in the Gaza strip Territory-Palestine.

The proposed national proto-type framework starting point has derived its elements from management audits, disciplinary reviews, and strategic planning to be widely applicable across all functions and levels of the higher educational institutions. It consisted of structured and measured set of processes and activities planned to produce a particular output, namely excellence in performance.

As the "culture of higher education" has become increasingly marketable-oriented, demands for excellence for teaching have increased, and teaching methods have also evolved to develop new pedagogical strategies.

The proposed national proto-type framework is considered as a way to benchmark with other higher education institutes to establish competitive advantage and as a guide to identify areas for improvements.

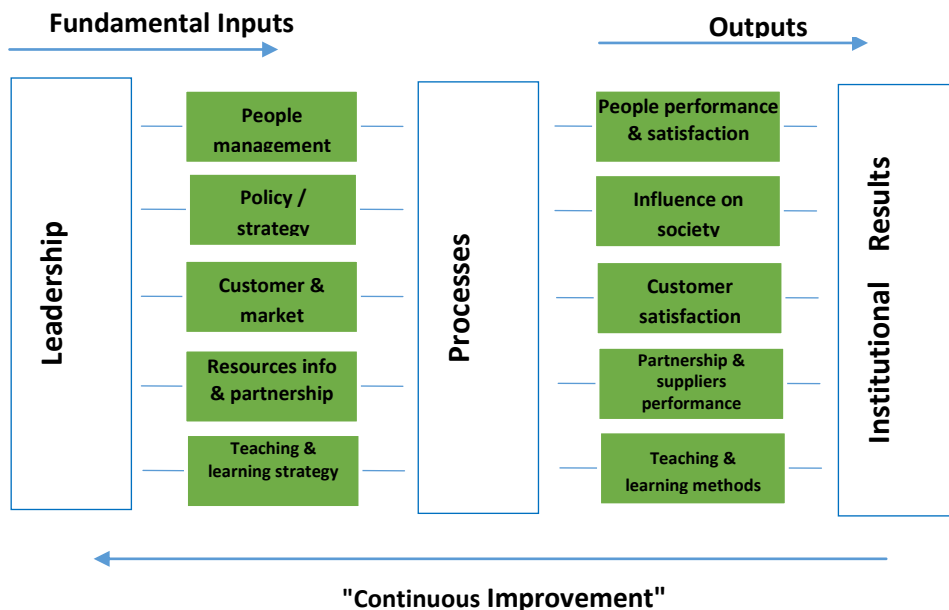Based on the above objectives the proposed proto-type Palestinian excellence model (PEM) is depicted as figure (1).

Figure 1.

The proposed – Prototype national Palestinian Excellence Model (PEM) framework

Each criterion is explained in detail in (Al Awoor, 2014).

Moreover, linking teaching and learning format and linking the continuous improvement initiative for higher education, together with the self-assessment as a part of the continuous improvement process to the proposed national Palestinian excellence model (P-EM) is presented in extensive detail in Al Awoor, 2014) and is represented by a chain of components.

To enable to test out the applicability of the proposed framework a structured questionnaire and interviews were conducted, including a self-assessment against the thirteen criteria (Al Awoor, 2014).

Points to Ponder
(1) Criticism and limitations

Some of the most common criticism and weakness related to the applicability of the national Palestinian Excellence model (PEM) are:

- The proposed framework is not feasible enough to be adopted by small scale educational institutes, it contains more criteria than any other excellence model, there is no evidence between the 13 criteria
- There is no mechanism for outsourcing to update the criteria regularly.
- There are no excellence indicators and measures.
- As the framework did not apply yet, implementation problems may be re-

lated to the following three questions:

a) How to apply self-assessment?
b) How to decide on the weights and importance?
c) How to identify various criteria and measures needed to ensure their effectiveness?

The proposed framework overlooked institutes strategic planning, short and long term goals.

- The framework is not sufficiently persuasive to yield total employee involvement which is the most critical success factor towards excellence.
- It is not clear how are institutions managing their quality and performance.
- The complex structure of the framework invites for expert involvement, hence its use has become dominated exclusively by experts and consultants.
- The complexity of the structure places it beyond the control of any individual, the only efficient way to tackle process improvement is through effective teamwork which relies on the premise that people are willing and able to support and participate.
- The philosophy upon which the framework was built on and developed is not clear.
- Despite having a holistic perspective, the framework lack guidance for integration at the operational level / process level.
- Lack of awareness of the excellence initiative and source of quality measures.
- One possible root-cause of lacking integration may be the inconsistencies between intentions and practices, the

framework cannot be a guarantee for long-term success.

- Another possible root-cause for lacking integration is related to the many criteria and sub criteria in the proposed framework.
- The proposed framework breaks down institute's management into a too excessive fragments that may result in self-assessment lacking integration and focus. It may hinder assessors and the management team to understand the whole management system, and understand the most important relationship between its components specified in the framework.

(2) Criteria and Sub criteria

- It is not clear how the proposed framework is involved in social responsibility in the turbulent environment and increasing financial shortages.
- It is not clear how teaching and learning systems operate to dramatically enhance the quality and the return on investment (ROI) in education.
- There were no data showing how the use of the framework criteria impacted key performance indicators (rankings; student retentions; graduation rate; students and employee satisfaction) for the higher education institutions in Palestine.
- The proposed framework lacks arrays of indicators (whether human and financial resources invested in education) to measure the current state of education.
- The proposed framework lacks indicators and measures to track achievements and progress, it is not clear if institute size matters.

- Student's participation in the future, making institutions is vague.

As for Limitations

- Higher education has been facing continuous changing, turbulent environment, inadequate financial resources, incentives and motivation.
- Workload of faculty and overcrowded classrooms
- Lack of up-to-date libraries, laboratories, and internal search skills and material on higher education.
- Less strengthen workshops and partnership between higher education institutions to exchange knowledge.
- Unwillingness to change (resistance to change) beside lack of leadership support.
- A significant number of faculty academies resisting to adopt new technologies in their teaching practice.

Recommendations for improvement

- With pressure to embrace excellence, faculty members and employees need to be innovators rather than inhibitors.
- Developing pedagogies as a mean for teaching excellence.
- Improve communication across the institution to ensure sustained effectiveness.
- Higher education institutions need leaders who are open and capable of leading institutional transformation and reform of excellence.
- Heads of institutions and institutional leaders should recognize and award higher education faculty who make significant contributions to improve the quality of teaching and learning

- Higher education institutions should encourage and take account of student feedback which could detect problems in teaching and learning environment for more effective improvement.
- Higher education institutes with partnership with students should establish counselling and tracking systems to support students on their way to graduation and beyond.
- All staff teaching in higher education institutions should have received certified pedagogical training, integrated training courses, and continuous professional education should become a requirement.
- Higher educational institutions should develop and implement holistic internationalization strategies as an integral part of their overall mission and function.
- Student performance in learning activities should be assessed against clear and agreed learning outcomes, developed in partnership by all faculty members involved in their delivery.
- Becoming excellent institute implies continuous processes of transformation: management and staff must become able not only to transform their institution in response to changing, turbulent situations and requirements; they must invent and develop institutions that are capable of bringing their continuing transformation by integrating institution's management systems for efficient use of resources and reducing duplication.
- Curriculum should be developed and monitored through dialogue and partnership among teaching staff, students, graduates and labor market workers, drawing on new methods of

teaching and learning, so that students acquire relevant skills that enhance their employability.

- **Institution's management should support the following**:
  - Guidance, counselling, openness, motivation and coaching.
  - Mobility and exchange of academic staff for long term teaching assignment.
  - Systematic and regular data collection on issues affecting the quality of teaching and learning.
- Creating centers of excellence in higher education institutes with the fundamental aim of striving to achieve excellence culture.
- Higher education institutions need to be adaptable and creating a new culture of learning that encourages excellence, this implies restructuring the institution's quality process to promote continuous learning and improvements
- Utilizing all the available national resources to improve operational and economic performance.
- Increasing the number of quality specialists, taking into consideration excellence indicators and measures for educational, administrative, and support processes.
- The most important rule for introducing change is to encourage participation of all concerned likely to be affected by the change.

Conclusions

Palestine as a developing country lacks the access and knowledge to the empirical researches that contribute to the progress and improvement of higher education.

Therefore, a national Palestinian prototype excellence framework is de-

rived to explain effective quality management implementation that should serve the need for practitioners.

The proposed national Palestinian proto-type framework is expected to help institutions continuously improve the way it manages itself, which is at the same time satisfying the demands of the accreditation body (ies). Moreover, it offers benchmarking opportunities with others within the educational sector.

Quality teaching has become an issue of importance in higher education. The student body has considerably expanded and diversified both socially and geographically. New students call for new teaching methods. There is a need to shift from teacher-centered learning to student- centered learning where instructor act as a facilitator focusing on learning to learn taking into account various and changing technological learning approaches for the achievement of excellence (Oliver et. al;2008). As there are differences between deep and surface learning.

The focus of the paper is on the proposed national prototype excellence framework. Some criticism and limitations are focused, then recommendations for performance improvements are listed. These recommendations facilitate positive practice improving and change, suggest how others might use the methodology to extend current thinking.

As resistance to change is a key barrier to innovate teaching, higher education institutes have to deal with resistance by creating a conductive environment, providing incentives to attract and retain high quality faculty, de-

veloping a plan to deal with resistance through understanding the forces pushing against change.

The severe dynamic turbulent challenging environment boost interests in supporting and achieving excellence in higher education. Excellent higher education institutes must build strong relationship and be interconnected with industry, research centers and other institutions to " produce" top quality graduates qualified for employability with adequate skills in the labor market. Major issues which were taken into considerations:

(i)   Excellence is not something achieved easily or without focus, time, challenge and change.

(ii) Perceptions of excellence vary between students, institutions and faculty staff.

(iii) Excellence must incorporate and reflect diversity of the educational sector, not all students will achieve their best within the same framework.

In literature of what might be done to enhance the quality of higher education, many points to the need for more attention to assessment.

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