

TEACHING-LEARNING CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

Despite the continuous efforts of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to enhance the quality of higher education and research by investing a huge amount of money to expand education opportunities, provide considerable infrastructure, spread regional higher education institutions and establish accreditation councils, the quality of education and research remain a major concern. The two major challenges in these countries are the quality of higher education and research. Much has been written on the quality of higher education, but the concern is what are the needs and issues in teaching-learning process to overcome challenges of quality of higher education. The objective of the paper is to identify and analyse the factors that affect the quality of higher education teaching and learning in the GCC countries. The paper is based on the literature review and personal academic experience in the existing education system. The paper concludes that the quality of higher education (learning achievements) cannot be improved unless it focuses on the needs and characteristics of students, teachers, curricula and pedagogy.

Keywords: Challenges, GCC, Higher Education, Teaching-learning, Needs, Research

Introduction

The quality of higher education is a major and complex issue in the GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Oman). Various causes and

factors which contribute to this concern can be found in the literature. Generally, the factors influencing the quality of higher education can be grouped into three broad areas. These are quality of administrative support services (management, funding, infrastructure, support services etc.), quality of academics (teaching – learning environment) and quality of research (knowledge creation and dissemination).

In the case of quality of administrative support services, the GCC countries have made significant developments during the past few decades. There is a considerable improvement in the education infrastructure (Davidson, 2010), an increased university enrolment through public and private institutions (Mukerji & Tripathi, 2008).), a reduced gender gap in education (Al Masah Capital Management Limited, 2013), an ensured equity in education through the regional spread of higher education institutions of all types with diversified programmes (Lamine, 2010) and established institutional accreditation councils for quality assurance (Darandari & Carbew, 2013). Similarly, a number of foreign universities or their branches / campuses have been established in the GCC member countries (Damaj & Chaaban, 2014; Alan, 2011). Various mega projects such as ‘Free Education Zones’ in UAE (Quality Assurance Agency, 2014), ‘Education City’ in Qatar (Alan, 2014), ‘Knowledge Oasis’ in Oman (Al Shmeli, 2009)) have been established where a number of foreign universities are providing higher education in various fields (Deghady, 2008). Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology has been established with a \$10 billion endowment coming directly out of the King’s purse, which makes this university the sixth richest in the world (Romani, 2009). There has been tremendous expansion in the educational facilities in all of the six Gulf countries (Bahgat, 1999).

Despite of all these efforts in providing quality services in education at country and institutional level, which it was assumed would improve the quality of academics and research, the quality of higher education in the GCC countries still remains an issue and does not correspond to the needs of Gulf societies (Bahgat, 1999). The quality of higher education across the GCC region is still not on a par with standards in developed nations and some emerging economies (Sawahel, 2012). A large number of studies and reports have confirmed that higher education in the GCC region has fallen short of expectations and has failed to address the aspirations of younger generations (Dakhli & El Zohairy, 2013). Several national

reports acknowledged that quantitative growth had taken place at the expense of the quality of education (Lamine, 2010). The gap in the quality of education between GCC member countries and other countries at a similar level of development still exists. The higher education institutions in the GCC countries have been criticized as not producing research in terms of quantity and quality. There exists a severe decline in universities and research centres in the region and none of the GCC institutions is prominent in producing significant research (Sabry, 2009). The poor quality of higher education programs in the Arab world and the level of scientific research are the most important challenges that face higher education in the Arab world (Adedalhakeem & Ahmed, 2012). In the whole region, only four Saudi universities are listed among the top 500 universities in 2016 i.e. King Abdulaziz University (150), King Saud University (150), King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (300) and King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals (400) (Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2016).

A good teaching – learning environment is supposed to produce good quality students as per market and society requirements. However, the existing teaching - learning environment in the GCC countries has also contributed to the quality issue and has been widely criticized in the literature. The quality of education - defined as learning achievement (Marlaine & Verspoor, 1991) is not encouraging in Middle East and North Africa region (World Bank, Undated). The higher education institutions in the GCC countries do not produce skilled workers as per market requirements. They have ‘educated’ a growing cohort of students without ensuring that they have desired skills needed by the market and thus are experiencing a shortage of skilled workers in the marketplace (Wilkens, 2011). The higher education sector in the GCC countries has failed to meet the needs of either the public or the private sector. Consequently, strategies for labour nationalization have been largely unsuccessful as a large proportion of the workforce produced is unable to compete the well-qualified expatriates (2010). Thomas & Mathew (2001) confirmed that when the quality and appropriateness of human capital produced align with the needs of society, employment opportunities are expanded and economic actors are better able to achieve their goals and objectives. Similarly, in the teaching – leaning process, besides students, the other important stakeholder and areas are teacher, curricula and teaching pedagogy. However, in the GGC countries, the quality of teachers is a concern (Wilkens, 2011; Barber, Mourshed & Whelan, 2007) and according to

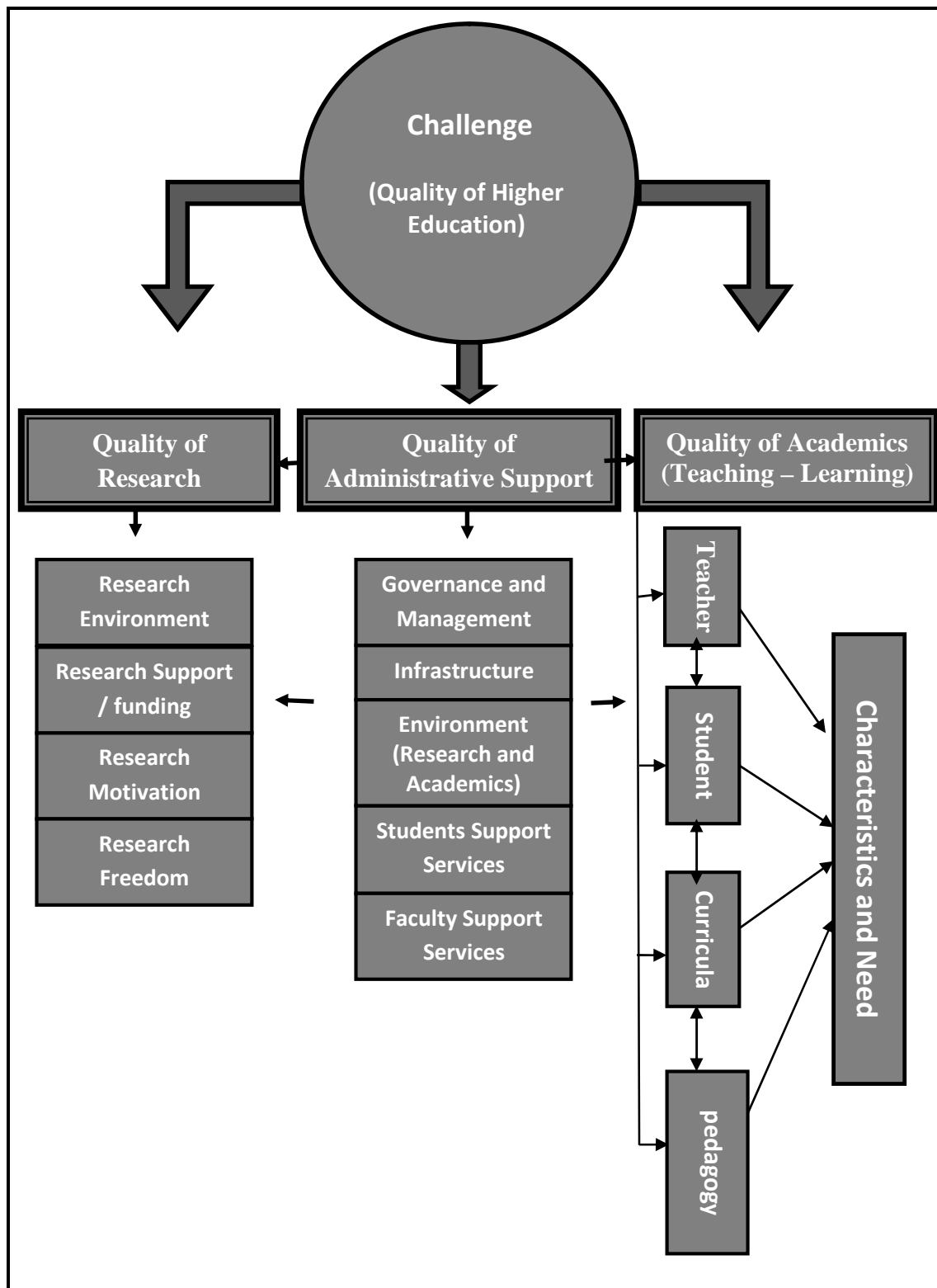
Gulf education officials and researchers, the elusiveness of teacher quality in the Arabian Gulf states has reached crisis levels (Wiseman & Al-bakr, 2013). In the same way, the widespread adoption of foreign curricula in higher education institutions to meet the local market needs, students' learning abilities and skills required for employment are widely criticized in the literature (Shah & Baporikar, 2010). Furthermore, program quality, pedagogy, and other elements related to program standards are extensively criticized (Wilkens, 2011).

This paper is limited to analysing the quality of higher education in GCC countries in terms of teaching and learning. The objective of this paper is to establish the linkage of quality of education in terms of learning by determining the needs and characteristics of the students, teachers, curricula and pedagogy of higher education in GCC countries. The more specific objective is to identify and analyse the factors that affect teaching and learning quality of higher education in the GCC countries.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is presented in figure 1.1

Figure 1.1: Pillars of Quality Education in Higher Education Institutions



Source: Self developed

The quality of higher education in any higher education institution stands on three pillars: quality of administrative support services, quality of research and quality of academics (teaching – learning). The quality of administrative support services in higher education institutions is based on management, governance, funding, resources, infrastructure and other support services. Institutions provide good support services to produce quality research and academics.

The quality of research is based on motivation, freedom, funding and the research environment within the institute. All these factors are directly linked with administrative support services. On one hand, the quality of academics is based on various factors which include quality of faculty, students, curricula and pedagogy and all these factors are linked with administrative support services. On the other hand, they are linked with their own needs and characteristics.

Analysis of administrative support services or how much these services contribute to the quality of academic and research is outside the scope of this paper. This paper is limited to analysing the needs and characteristics of faculty, students, curricula and pedagogy. In other words, how these micro needs contribute to the quality of education, which is a macro challenge for higher education in GCC countries.

Macro Challenges of Higher Education in the GCC Countries

The higher education institutions are recognized everywhere on the basis of quality of research and quality of academics. However, in the whole Arab region, including GCC countries, low quality of education is a primary concern and one of the greatest challenges facing education and government leaders (Chapman & Miric, 2009). Huge amounts of resources are invested but the quality of higher education in terms of research generally and producing skilled human resource specifically has not been improved to the desired level. According to Marour et al (2008, p 2), ‘.....government expenditure on education for the GCC countries has been comparable, on average, to many developed countries when taken as a percentage of GDP. However, this spending has not yielded the expected returns on investment from either quantitative or qualitative.’ Out of 125 countries, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain ranked 97th, 90th, 82th, 51th, and 45th respectively in term of the

Education Development Index (EDI), indicating that the countries' education investment did not translate into the desired outcome (Marour, 2008). The GCC countries have been seriously attempting to promote higher education to replace the expatriate work force with a local workforce through nationalization programs such as Bahrainization in Bahrain, Emiratization in UAE and Omanization in Oman. However, the nationalization programmes of the GCC countries governments have not delivered the desired results and private sector organizations continue to depend on an expatriate workforce because of good skills, knowledge and performance as compared to the local workforce. According to Marour (2008) the GCC governments did not alleviate the problem of unemployment despite expenditures on education reforms which were expected to create skilled nationals who would ultimately replace the expatriate labor force. Although, serious consideration at policy level and implementation level has been paid by the governments to improve quality in higher education, it has been observed that the basic characteristics / needs of the students, who are the future workforce, the teachers, who are involved in producing the future workforce, the curricula, which produce the required skills in the future workforce and the pedagogy which facilitate the process of teaching – learning and transfer the skill / knowledge in future work force has been less focused. Therefore, in section 4 of this paper, the basic characteristics and needs of these factors will be explored, which will help the higher education institutions in policy making for improving academics.

Needs for Improving Teaching – Learning Environment in Higher Education Institutions in the GCC Countries

Teaching – learning is a very complex process and highly linked with the quality of education in terms of supplying efficient and skilled manpower to the market and good citizens to society. In this complex process four variables i.e. teachers, curricula, students and pedagogy are very important. In other words, classroom activities can be linked to the quality of education as quality teaching happens first in the classroom. Teaching – learning quality and the quality of graduates produced in the GCC countries has been widely criticized in the literature. According to Alpen Capital (2012) report, it is difficult for graduates to find a job in the GCC region because they lack the right skills and there is a mismatch between the skills taught to graduates and the requirements of the labour market. Also, the quality of higher education across the region is still not on a par with standards in developed nations

and some emerging economies. However, the reasons why graduates produced in the GCC countries lack skills and knowledge, is less focused in the literature. Some basic characteristics and needs explored are given below, which mostly contribute to the low quality of teaching – learning process.

Student characteristics and needs: In order to analyze the students' learning quality, it is very important to consider and identify the basic characteristics of the students of the GCC countries who enter into the system of higher education to enhance their knowledge and acquire the required skill. Some of the basic characteristics of the students of the GCC countries are reviewed below.

Lack of prior knowledge / skill: Almost all universities and colleges experience that in the GCC countries, the students who enter into the higher education system after completion their schooling (twelve standards) lack basic skills and knowledge including language, IT and mathematics. For example, around 90 percent of public and private secondary school graduates in the UAE who apply to federal universities are not qualified to immediately engage in undergraduate level studies (Moussly, 2010). The most rigorous comparative study of education systems called Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), conducted exams of grade 4 and grade 8 students in 2011. According to the test results of grade 4 and grade 8, the GCC countries fell below the international average out of 45 and 38 countries respectively (Provasnik, Kastberg, Ferraro, Lemanski, Roey, & Jenkins, 2012). This shows that students are not prepared for higher education. In order to overcome this deficiency / gap, almost all universities and colleges in the GCC countries have adopted foundation courses for the period of one year. Foundation programmes, also known as pre-university programmes or remedial courses, are designed to equip students with supplementary skill sets and education in order to successfully enter undergraduate degree programmes (Moussly, 2010). However, the educational standard of students entering into various degree programmes after completion of foundation courses still remains an issue. Therefore, some of the higher education institutions (for example Colleges of Applied Sciences, Ministry of Higher Education, Oman) extended the foundation period to up to two years to overcome the problem. However, the results remained the same as the basic characteristics of foundation year students are not properly addressed when designing the

courses for foundation years. Moreover, in most of the institutions, an environment has not been created where students speak and practise the language skill. Even when students are required to process their request for any issue or requirement, local language is adopted in applications. Similarly, various forms designed by the institutions for students for official purpose (such as registration forms etc.) are in local language or both local and foreign language which reduce the foreign language practice. The language of instruction in most of higher education institutions in the GCC countries is English. However, few academic staff have English language skills which may increase the students' interest in acquisition and improvement of their language skills.

Students' attitude toward hard work, study and reading: It has been observed that students entering into higher education institutions lack motivation towards hard work, reading and study. Students' book reading interest is very low and few students will be seen in the libraries of the institutions. According to Shannon (2003), there is a lack of reading culture or reading habit in Gulf societies. A UN survey revealed that the average Arab in the Middle East reads approximately four pages worth of literature a year, whereas Americans read an average of 11 books a year (Ahmad, 2010).

Mostly they prefer power point presentation and readymade notes which reduces their work and is seen an easy way to pass exams. Similarly, students prefer group assignments to reduce their work. The students enter into higher education institutions with low motivation and commitment toward study. They spent four years or more, obtain a degree and join the market with the same commitment toward work. Therefore, the private sector employers prefer expatriate workers who are more committed, productive and progressive (Naithani, Jha, & Ranchi, 2010). The higher education institutions have given very little attention to this issue. A course or some kind of workshop at foundation level may help in solving this basic problem.

More cooperative rather than competitive: It has been observed and studied that the prevailing environment among students community is that of being very cooperative. There is no competition among students for studies or even for higher grades, which is very important for students' motivation and learning. Verhoeff (1997) (who is a strong supporter of students

competition and its benefits), claimed that competition enhances student motivation and learning. Lawrence (2004) also agrees that competition encourages active learning and increases motivation. However, in the GCC region, the concept of 'help' among students means brotherhood and is considered as legal and ethical even in unethical matters. For example, it is very common that some students try to share / show answers during exams and consider this as help to another weaker student. Leki (1992) also explained that Arabian society is a group-oriented one where people help the weaker members. In this context, helping a friend or a relative is not considered cheating but a moral obligation. Similarly, working together as a group, even when the assignment is to be done individually, is not considered cheating in Arab countries (Fawley, 2012). Thomasa, Raynora,& McKinnonb (2013) also argue that cheating in Arab Gulf is likely to be fairly widespread thanks to deeply ingrained cultural reasons. Those reasons include the reluctance to call out suspected cheats owing to Arab society's 'collectivist ethos', in which individuals from the same social group protect each other, and the greater tendency of students to work together on assignments. This comprehension or interpretation of help of cheating is not only unethical and not legal but also reduces learning and self-reliance. The cooperative environment among students is good if used in a positive way such as team work in various academic and non academic projects and programmes. It has also been observed that no competitive environment has been created for students inside the institutions or outside. The reason being that education is free of cost and students do not pay any fee. Moreover, students are provided monthly stipends irrespective of their marks, ability and performance. A competitive environment needs to be created among students, which will compel them toward studies and hard work.

Memorization habit: One of the most important characteristics of the students is that they have a memorization habit. They will not bother to understand but will use an easy and short cut way to memorize and pass the exam. The World Bank (2008) in its report criticized education in the Arab World (GCC States are a fundamental part) for implementing the knowledge delivery, repetition and memorization approach. According to Rapanta (2014), when Emirati students come to University, they are not ready to think critically and independently, as they are used to learning through memorization. Fawley (2012) also pointed out that 'in many countries in the Middle East and Asia, teaching is by rote memorization and imitation. The only book used in class is a textbook and students are expected to memorize and repeat it verbatim for an exam'. In some cases the students prefer

to memorize because of a lack of language skill. Communicating original thoughts involves selecting and organizing words and phrases that may be beyond their level of language development (Fawley, 2012). Preparation of lecture notes by the teacher is one way which increases their motivation toward memorization. In this regards special attention is needed to find out some methods at foundation level to stop this practice. Preparing question papers in such a way that students write from their understanding and not from memorized items is one of the methods which can be used. According to Wilkens (2011) the traditional memorization methods, rather than critical thinking techniques, have produced a pool of students who are unprepared for higher level learning which, in turn, has created a greater burden on the system and required additional resources.

Lack of critical thinking: One of the main objectives of the higher education is to improve the skills of critical thinking among their students. However, it has been observed and widely criticized in the literature that students lack critical thinking ability. They memorize their lessons and pass exams. Al Eisa (2010) criticized higher education institutions for not contributing much to the cultural and intellectual activities in the GCC countries; their role is seen as being limited to providing instruction and granting academic certificates. According to Al Shmely (2009), the lack of independent thinking and questioning and problem-solving capacity in students was found to be a recurring concern. This is largely attributed to teaching approaches in schools throughout the region where the custom is for teachers to deliver information in summarized format for memorization and faithful repetition in examinations. According to him, this method leaves students poorly equipped for studies in higher education as well as for work in private enterprise where problem-solving and innovation are valued. According to the World Bank (2008) report, the main classroom activities are copying from the blackboard, writing, and listening to the teachers. Group work, creative thinking, and proactive learning are rare. Education in the region does not effectively impart the higher order cognitive skills such as flexibility, problem solving and judgment needed by workers in a challenging and competitive environment. Instead, the systems teach students how to learn and retain ‘answers to fairly fixed questions in problem situations with little or no meaningful context,’ and thus reward those who are skilled at being passive knowledge recipients (World Bank, Undated, p. 13).

Faculty characteristics and needs: The second most important stakeholder in the teaching – learning process is the faculty. It is a well known fact that the GCC countries are highly dependent upon expatriate faculty. Reliance on non-citizen expertise for teaching specialized and professional courses is one of the weaknesses of GCC countries (Mukerji & Tripathi, 2008). There is a mixed faculty from all over the world which has created a multi- culture in the institutions. However, a gap exists between the expectation of the expatriate faculty and institutions due to socio-culture differences. The faculty does not understand the local culture and specially students psyche which is a hurdle for them to change students' behavior. For example, Rapanta (2014. p. 1) very rightly said that ‘as part of the orientation for a Western teacher before entering a classroom, the main differences between Western and Middle East culture are often highlighted without an effort to explain how these differences are manifested in students’ behavior in courses, or to suggest how the teacher could address them.’ Similarly, policy differences toward local and expatriate faculty and contract based job de-motivate and reduce faculty interest toward academics and research. An unstable faculty also has an adverse affect on students learning. According to Wilkens (2011, p. 10) ‘investment in teachers is crucial, both to address the shortage of teachers in the region and to improve the recruitment, quality, and training of university faculty.’

Curricula characteristics and need: In teaching – learning process, the importance of curricula cannot be ignored. It is a central point in which students and teachers interact to efficiently transfer knowledge and skills to the students. According to Acedo (2013) curriculum is at the heart of quality education. However, little attention has been paid in the GCC countries to develop local curricula to meet the local needs in terms of learning and skilled human resources. According to Shah and Baporikar (2010, p. 280),

..... in the GCC, the curriculum is considered as a package of educational materials purchased from American, British or Australian universities for local use. By purchasing foreign curricula GCC countries believe that they adopt quality education of international standards ignoring to a large extent the characteristics and abilities of their students and the specific requirements of their local market.

Most of the higher education institutions in the GCC countries are affiliated with well-known universities in the USA, Britain and Australia and adopted their curricula as a sign of high quality in tertiary education. They attract students on the assumption that they are using the

curricula of advanced countries and their education standards are equal to that in advanced countries of the world. This raises a question of whether the widespread adoption of foreign curricula in higher education institutions meets the local market needs, students' learning abilities and required skills for employment. In a study which was conducted to ascertain the suitability of foreign curricula to the local students in Oman, it was found that the students and faculty showed their dissatisfactions in terms of learning and local requirement of the foreign curricula adopted in the management and economics courses (Shah & Baporikar, 2010). Some national reports have also identified the weakness of educational curricula and their unsuitability in terms of time scale (United Nation Educational, Scientific and Culture Organization., 2009).

Pedagogy characteristics and need: Teaching and learning is a complex process. There is no single and universal strategy that suits all situations. There are different strategies with different combination for different groups which improve learning outcomes. Pedagogy is the art and science of teaching, and it is 'how' the teaching and learning occur.

In the GCC countries, no specific teaching – learning methodology is used. It has been observed that in the teaching – learning process the focus is to prepare students for exams and not for the market. Students' outcomes are measured in terms of grades which they get in exams and less focussed on achieving the learning outcomes and graduate attributes. There is a lack of strategy which develops a teaching – learning environment where two way communication between students and teachers develop. Teachers deliver a lecture and students are passive recipients. There is no question-answer, discussion, creative thinking and problem solving exercise or discussion in the classroom. The teacher – learning environment has less focus to develop student interest and confidence. At institutional level there is lack of faculty development to train academics in pedagogy or to upgrade their educational competences over their professional life span. At the same time adopting a student centered approach, project based learning and case method will only be achieved if the students are prepared for these methods which call for hard work and self-directed learning.

Conclusion

The quality of higher education stands on three pillars: quality of administrative support services, quality of research and quality of academics. Institutions provide good

administrative support services to produce quality research and academics. Quality of administrative support services is based on management, governance, funding, resources, infrastructure and other support services. Quality of research is based on motivation, freedom, funding and a research environment within the institute. Similarly, quality of academics (teaching-learning) is based on various factors which include quality of faculty, students, curricula and pedagogy and all these factors are linked with support services on the one hand and with their own needs and characteristics on the other hand. Despite good administrative support services, the quality of academics is a challenge for the GCC countries.

The quality of higher education in terms of learning achievements has been a challenge for the GCC countries. This challenge has been linked with various basic characteristics and needs of students, faculty, curricula and teaching pedagogy. This research paper concludes that the quality of higher education cannot be improved unless it focuses on the needs and the characteristics of students, teachers, curricula and pedagogy which are necessary for the best teaching – learning environment in the higher education institutions. Various needs and characteristics of the students, faculty, curricula and pedagogy identified include lack of students' prior knowledge, students' attitude toward hard work, lack of competition among students, a habit of memorization rather than understanding, lack of critical and analytical skills, weak English language, logical and numerical abilities, a socio-culture gap between local culture and expatriate faculty, a lack of local curricula to meet local market and students need, a gap between foreign curricula and student level, less focus on teaching pedagogy and market needs etc.

The higher education institutions must focus more on the student learning to strengthen their capacities to work progressively through the acquisition of relevant knowledge, useful skills and appropriate attitudes. The ultimate goal of higher education institutions should be learning achievements. Education policies of the higher education institutions will be effective if better educated, qualified and skilled people are produced. The higher education institutions must consider and address the basic characteristics of students, teachers, curricula and pedagogy while making policies. The paper may be useful for the policy maker of the higher education in the GCC countries.

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