The Context, Design, and Impact of System-Wide Assessments to Enhance Effectiveness in the Higher Colleges of Technology of the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of System-wide Assessments, an innovative initiative to enhance the accountability, quality, and effectiveness within the Higher Colleges of Technology of the United Arab Emirates. The authors review the historic and contemporary influences on college/university assessments and the key forces or factors which have shaped development and need of Outcome Assessments. The paper summarizes the literature on the best practices for assessment and promoting changes. The paper describes the objectives, structures, and processes involved with random use of System-wide Assessments among the 17 Federal colleges. A survey of 80 Deans and Chairs reports the perceptions and ratings of the process and impact of System-wide assessments. The lessons learned are described and inform recommendations for key components of an effective assessment system to promote accountability and improvement in higher education. Findings have significance for leaders of institutions of higher learning throughout the Middle East and the world.

Keywords: Academic Effectiveness, Accountability, Educational Leadership, Managing Change, Quality Improvement, System-Wide Assessments

INTRODUCTION

During the prior three decades forces and factors have driven changes in the educational culture and practice from the focus on the student and testing to summative assessment and evaluation of systems in higher education, as reported by Boud (1995) and Elander et al. (2006). The emphasis in higher education has, at the same time, shifted from the quality and quantity of inputs to a demand for proof of educational quality outputs, as described by Kimmel and Marquette (1998). Rust (2002) called this a shift in paradigm “from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning” (p. 146). As a manifestation of this new approach, the Association of
American Colleges and Universities (2002) recommended, for verifying the value of undergraduate education, the reorganization of education and review of assessment results of course outcomes.

According to the United States Department of Education (2006), the U.S. Commission on Higher Education’s report in 2006 emphasized for regional accreditation agencies to use assessment to promote performance outcomes over inputs and processes, to use quality assessment data to improve teaching and learning, and to use measures to determine “value added” for students. Dinur and Sherman (2009) reported that “Outcome Assessment (OA) has emerged as the systemic mechanism for academic institutions to demonstrate to their stakeholders their viability as institutions that create and disseminate knowledge” (p. 291).

To contextualize the use of System-wide Assessments in the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), key literature is summarized to enhance understanding for the historic and contemporary influences on development and use of Outcome Assessments in higher education; the distinguishing characteristics, assumptions, and challenges of assessment systems; and the key lessons and factors associated with effective use of assessments. Additionally, the paper describes the innovative design and use of System-wide Assessments in the HCT; reports on the perceptions of the SWA process, value, and impact; and based on experiences in the HCT, recommendations are offered for increasing the probability of an effective assessment process and system in higher education.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

The increased focus on educational outcomes has been influenced by a range of factors. According to Meyer and Bushney (2008), Outcome Assessment has arisen because of the perceived failures historically in properly evaluating higher education systems and programs. Lucas and Weber (1998) attributed the increased demand for Outcome Assessment to lowered expectations and standards. The decline in standards and quality has seen a corresponding increase in student grade point averages from grade inflation, as reported by Bond (2009), Johnson (2003), and Millet (2010). Increased use of Outcome Assessment has become necessary because of the lack of meaningful progress for student learning demonstrated on national exams (Kimmel & Marquette, 1998). The increased focus on accountability and assessment of outcomes likewise has arisen because of continued high attrition rates and differential educational outcomes based on socio-economic status and factors of race/ethnicity (Kimmel & Marquette, 1998). The call for greater assessment of outcomes in higher education is related to the perceived failure of institutional effectiveness and the deleterious implications for communities and societies because of the existence of under-prepared and uneducated populations, as described by Kuh and Ikenberry (2009), Nusche (2008), and the U.S. Department of Education (2006).

MULTIPLE INFLUENCES

Derlin et al. (1996), Kenyon and Barnes (2007), and Kuhn and Ikenberry (2009) suggested that government authorities, educational agencies, regional accreditation associations, the public, and reformers have placed greater demands on colleges and universities for demonstrating objective evidence of student learning outcomes. Pressure from accreditation agencies is perceived as a key influence on use of Outcome Assessments (Kuhn & Ikenberry, 2009). These sources of influence on education, according to Burn and Gabrielle (2000), Lincoln (1990), and Polimeni and Iorgulescu (2009), demand proof of student learning and effective programs and educational quality.

The emphasis on the assessment of outcomes has also been driven by the perceived need for greater accountability (Nusche, 2008) and more effective programs and systems (Lincoln, 1990); that is, which better educate students and instill them with knowledge and skills.
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