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Research Article

THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION FOR A WORLD UNIVERSITY: INCREASING CAPACITY THROUGH ACCREDITATION

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ABSTRACT

One of the major challenges of globalization for a developing country is to preserve its unique culture and practices while stepping inside the global arena of inclusiveness. At Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in the Sultanate of Oman, the College of Education has been accepted as a precandidate for National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation. The faculty is facing a series of transformations as they ready for their looming site-visit in a year's time. This project focuses on the early days of the process of adapting a U.S. assessment management system to enhance sustainable growth and development in Oman's leading educational institution. As any process that delves deeply into the practices of an organization, the NCATE accreditation process has quickly unveiled commonly held assumptions and practices with little recognition to country, culture, or creed. NCATE, a highly respected American performance based professional accreditation body for teacher preparation is, in short, making life challenging lately at the SQU College of Education. Our project examines these challenges from three unique viewpoints within the Instructional and Learning Technologies Department in the College— an Omani faculty member, an American Head of Department (HOD) who has lived and worked in the Sultanate for four years, and an international consultant, a former dean from a medium-sized regional Kentucky university who visited SQU's College of Education this past year. Documenting the process through journals, three differing worldviews and perceptions emerge that share common concerns and distinct disquiets. Extending these insights to SQU's larger mission, to become a "world-class university" and to "add something new to world knowledge," carries with it important questions about what is at stake when a foreign educational institution attempts to align itself with an assessment system as foreign as the horse is to the camel. Preliminary conclusions are based on the currently collected evidence and emerging themes from the documentations.

INTRODUCTION

In the Land of Frankincense and Myrrh

The three educators are at differing levels of engagement in colleges of education, from two countries, and with separate, but rich, cultural backgrounds and experiences. All are well-traveled, have varied experiences in rural farm regions, Native American Reservations, American Appalachia with the lowest education attainment in the country, cities situated in a number of countries throughout the world, a Middle Eastern country with a forward thinking leader who supports and encourages an educated citizenry, and with varying background and understanding of the American accreditation system. Of the three individuals, one is an Omani assistant professor at Sultan

Qaboos University (SQU) with prior NCATE experience as a student at an American university going through an NCATE accreditation visit; one is an American serving as an SQU Head of Department and who participated as faculty in a first-time accreditation visit at a regional university in the Western United States; and the third is a former dean of a college of education who is a trained Board of Examiner for her state's joint NCATE accreditation system and who led her college at Morehead State University (MSU) through a successful NCATE visit in October 2011. This triad of scholars realized that SQU's participation in the NCATE accreditation process was a valuable test bed and worthy of documentation as a number of universities outside of the United States are engaging with NCATE for first-time accreditation reviews, especially in the Middle East.

NCATE Accreditation for Colleges of Education

NCATE's Web site provides this description of their mission and work (NCATE, 2012):

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The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is the profession's mechanism to help establish high quality teacher preparation. Through the process of professional accreditation of schools, colleges and departments of education, NCATE works to make a difference in the quality of teaching and teacher preparation today, tomorrow, and for the next century. NCATE's performance-based system of accreditation fosters competent classroom teachers and other educators who work to improve the education of all P-12 students. NCATE believes every student deserves a caring, competent, and highly qualified teacher.

In addition to the questions raised about what will be needed for SQU to be successful in an American-based accreditation first visit, questions will also be raised about what NCATE needs to successfully guide non-American institutions through the accreditation process. NCATE and the other US educator preparation accrediting body, the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), will be merging into a new and combined accrediting body, the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), in 2014. It is unclear as to how this may or may not affect SQU's accreditation process with CAEP and how CAEP will affect those institutions outside the U.S. While it will certainly be a CAEP visit for SQU, for the purpose of this paper the NCATE name is being used as the accrediting organization and what we know of the current NCATE standards and expectations.

Journey by Camel

Case study methodology has been selected for this investigation, realizing that each university exploring accreditation through NCATE, soon to be CAEP, will be a different case and may or may not benefit from our findings and reflections. In Western time, the process appears slow and plodding; however, time is spent on different tasks in this part of the world and is perhaps perceived differently than in the West. Greetings, meetings, and procedures may take longer. There is an enduring sense of historical connection to the present that enters processes that one may not fully experience and appreciate in the West. It is hoped that by documenting the NCATE accreditation process and identifying the potential questions, other countries in the region sharing similar customs may benefit from our analysis. At the same time, it is noted that Oman is one country in the Middle East with its unique history, culture, values, religions, tribes, and languages. Though the West tends to paint the Mideast with the same brush, it is hoped that some of these findings may retain the uniqueness of application that is distinctively Omani.

Yin (2008) calls for a case study, an empirical inquiry, when one investigates "a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context is not clearly evident" (pg. 18). Yin describes the case study inquiry as a way to cope with "many more variables of interest than the data points," especially when results depend on multiple sources of evidence. Using Yin's work as a foundation, data is triangulated as it converges on the "Why" and the "How" -- a methodology that enables the researcher to use prior development of theory as a guide for data collection and analysis. Researcher journals, interviews, and document content analysis are tools that will be used in this study. For example, qualitative methodologies may

include unstructured interviews with stakeholders, where the interviewer and subject can interact on a topic or issue in which the answer yields new questions as a way to probe and to dig deeper into a topic. Yin (2008) also identifies the case study research design as "guiding the investigator in the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting observations" (p. 26), allowing the researcher to draw inferences regarding the investigation. Much of the collecting, analyzing and interpretation for this study to date takes place through researcher journals. We have analyzed three sets of journals written during the 2011-12 academic year. These form the bulk of our inquiries to date. Surveys and interviews will follow during the present school year as we continue our steps toward accreditation and adjustment.

Personal Perspectives

The three researchers determined that keeping a journal of our thoughts/reflections and questions on the process of SQU preparing for accreditation would help them engage in the "notion of creating transparency in the research process" (Ortlipp, 2008, pg. 696). This can have concrete effects on the study's research design, data collection, and analysis. In other words, they are also participant observers in this case study. Shensul, Shensul, and LeCompte (1999) define participant observation as "the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting" (pg. 91). They also realize that this documented experience can serve other institutions going through the accreditation process and can maintain a transparency in keeping with the NCATE accreditation philosophy. The challenge will be to consider our combined worldviews and perceptions together in a way that makes sense and yields helpful information and recommendations through three separate lenses, rather than one.

Baggage and Biases

With the use of participant observation within a research methodology, it is critical that the reader understand what the researchers carry with them to the study as far as belief systems, backgrounds, cultural understandings, education, experiences and biases – sometimes called "baggage." While the word "baggage" used in this context could carry with it a negative connotation, it is such baggage that helps to understand their world and provides context for interpretations of what is seen, thought about, and identified as important in this study. This section of the paper provides a short description of backgrounds as a way to provide an honest disclaimer about their approaches and understandings as they move through the process. This is done in the first person to highlight the ownership of the context which they operate.

Lily

Born and raised in the farmlands of upstate New York, my background is firmly grounded in middle-class values of hard work and high educational expectations. Early in our family life, my parents introduced our family to global interactions by hosting international student exchanges, eventually sending us on educational studies outside the U.S. My educational experiences continued as I chose an educational career that spanned 30 years studying and teaching in Caribbean, Europe,

East Asia and far Asia. Along with a passion to travel, my parents also instilled in us a strong sense of civic responsibility. I often found myself working with foreign, non-traditional and/or marginalized students. My passion for travel continued as I sought out international institutions and investigated paradigms that involve equity and change. I've taught all age groups with my specialty being teacher training, specifically using the new technologies to support high quality teaching and learning. My experience with assessment began in ESL/Bilingual teaching in the 1980s guided by the well-established, internationally recognized TESOL standards and continued throughout my teaching/training career. I was introduced to NCATE accreditation at my previous university where much the faculty's appreciation of the NCATE process low. During the preparation stage, morale among faculty also plummeted. However, the college was successful with the accreditation in the Educational Technology department so the process in Oman is quite familiar to me. I am currently heading the Instructional and Learning Technologies Department at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman as we prepare for our first site visit in 2015.

Samira

I come from a middle class family. My father was among the first few in our hometown to send his daughters to school and then to university. Most of the girls would leave school at 15 to get married or stay at home. After I finished high school, I joined the College of Education at the only state university in my country (Oman). Afterwards, I was offered a faculty position in the College of Education in the area of educational technology and received a scholarship to pursue both Master's and PhD degrees. I obtained my Master's degree from a university in the United Kingdom and the PhD degree from an American university. During my PhD program, the College of Education at the university in the US was preparing for a renewal of NCATE accreditation that it first gained in 1954. It was my first time to work in a very close proximity with the NCATE accreditation agency. First, as a student in the college, I was involved in reviewing the vision, philosophy, mission, goals, conceptual framework and the college's core values. This happened through discussions and seminars as well as through surveys. Then, as a PhD student taking a course in leadership and quality assurance issues, I was involved with my classmates in selecting key assessments, designing rubrics, and collecting artifacts. It was a very rich experience. After graduation, I came back to Oman to work as an assistant professor in the department of Instructional and Learning Technologies at SQU. The college was, at that time, in the process of negotiations with NCATE to become the accreditation agency of choice. I was involved in different committees to revise the college core values and student competencies and skills. I also chaired a committee in my department that is responsible for the process of accreditation. Currently, I coordinate the execution of the college's strategic plan and serve as a member of the TSAC (Technology to Support Accreditation) committee.

Joan

I come from a rural farm background and I've taught in K-12 classrooms in rural Midwest and Chicago. I have provided professional development to teachers in the integration of

technology into classrooms across the US. I have been a professor and worked with Native American populations; a director of a virtual university and a US Department of Education research and development laboratory; a college of education dean in Appalachia; and I have traveled to many countries to provide professional development, including the Middle East, Asia, and Europe, as an expert in educational technology and distance education. I provide leadership as the chair of the Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board, the agency that accredits Kentucky colleges of education jointly with NCATE. As a Board of Examiner, I have been the chair of Standard 4-Diversity for an NCATE visit to a sister institution. I also served as an external evaluator for SQU's Instructional Education Technology program, where I visited SQU and met many of the administrators and faculty working in the College of Education. As a participant observer, I am not working on a day-to-basis in or with the SQU College of Education, but am a distant observer, paying careful attention to the accreditation process from afar.

Researcher Roles

Samira brings to the study a faculty member's perspective and her Omani perspective to the process, data gathering, and reflection/analysis. Joan's role is as an observer, bringing a perspective from a totally American focus, but with a deeper knowledge of the NCATE process and possible issues that may develop through the process that will need to be dealt with by SQU administrators and faculty. Lily is busy in college leadership planning meetings for the accreditation review and plays an integral role in the oversight and implementation of the plan. As an American living and working in Oman, and as a professor who has gone through the NCATE accreditation process in an American college, her role provides a perspective that may help us bridge the two countries.

Timeline

SQU is scheduled for the NCATE visitation in late 2015. The intention is to consider the tasks required for an NCATE visit, engage in data collection from December 2012 until the visit, and to consider the data and analysis throughout. This paper addresses, then, the timeline from December 2012 to December 2013 - the initial stages of the processes.

Preliminary Data and Analysis: Setting the Stage

The three researchers have kept electronic journals beginning in December, 2011 through the spring semester of 2012 and those entries were shared with each other in June for a first round of shared reflection and analysis. A cursory analysis of the journals results in several themes and questions, which provides a way to think about the next steps - the questions to pursue through interviews of key stakeholders at SQU and NCATE and potential themes to explore as the process evolves.

Content Analysis - Themes

Using a content analysis approach to the contents of the journal provides the researchers with a way to reflect on the work going on at SQU to prepare for its NCATE accreditation visit. These thematic patterns can lead to evolving questions to consider as they progress to the 2nd year of SQU's NCATE

planning and implementation. The patterns that are beginning to evolve and have been identified to date include:

- NCATE as an opportunity
- NCATE as a threat or invasion
- Overwhelmed faculty and administrators
- Barriers to success (e.g., language; culture; values; developmental stages within Oman; infrastructure; readiness of SQU personnel; NCATE's terminology and definitions)
- Engagement of faculty and administrators
- Action Planning
- Selection of technology supports such as e-portfolios and website platforms
- Understanding of NCATE philosophies and processes; belief systems of those philosophies and processes
- Buy-in; responsiveness; willingness to buy-in
- Budget; funding structure
- Expectations by stakeholder groups of processes, outcomes, participation, etc.
- Awareness of NATE processes by college administration, faculty, university administrators
- NCATE deadlines and timeframe issues
- Visits with other Gulf-state universities; collaboration among universities pursuing NCATE accreditation
- Reflections by researchers (e.g., history with NCATE; questions; self-examination)

It is believed these sub-themes can be framed into the following broad themes that will assist in guiding the continued examination and reflection of the NCATE accreditation initiative at SQU:

- Awareness
- Planning and Process
- Barriers to Success
- Culture and Beliefs
- Opportunities for Success
- Collaborations and Leadership

For this paper, the researchers are in their first foray of discovery as they continue their journey of accreditation. To date, three prominent themes dominate the journal entries and are addressed in this paper. It is expected that the study will continue to document evolving questions, thought processes, development of a college's NCATE preparation process, and the resulting adaptations that may be made by both the university and the NCATE organization.

We Are Not in Kansas Anymore

Assumptions are made in the U.S. that educational institutions share common goals, values, and language. While these assumptions can be safely made within the confines of Western civilization, NCATE is moving beyond North American borders to partner with countries whose identities are delightfully distinct. It appears there are few mechanisms in place to guide adaption. It has been observed that SQU faculty struggle with understanding some of the aims and processes of accreditation. Even with clarification, questions arise as to what common ground needs to be explored to better fit the adapting country. An example of this has been NCATE terminology,

which is challenging for non-native English speakers. There are assumptions that when using specific words or phrases are used, there is common meaning for everyone. In reality, the English language is spoken all over the world because it allows much flexibility in its usage; words and phrases can take on different meanings within regional areas while maintaining common understanding. However, terms such as goals, objectives, and outcomes have different meanings in the Mid East than how they are used in the U.S. Objectives become goals, outcomes become objectives, and Westerners are often left scratching their heads when trying to understand stated aims in the evolving documents. Considering how these terms are essential building blocks in the NCATE process, from the conceptual framework right through the assessment process, it is critical to clarify alternative usages on both ends of the ocean. Common goals and values are also assumptions that are made by NCATE that makes life challenging in the College of Education in Oman. For example, NCATE's Standard 4 lays out expectations for teacher candidates to work with diverse faculty, peers, and children. An immediate question for the College in Oman is how this standard will translate to a population where there is a national movement of "Omanization" that aims toward increasing the percentage of Omani students and faculty.

Morehead State University, where one researcher serves as the dean of the College of Education, has consistently received Areas for Improvements (AFIs) from NCATE in this standard because of the location of this rural university in the foothills of Appalachia, with a homogenous population of white students who come predominantly from the region, where commuting teacher candidates must travel sometimes an hour or more to get to the university from their home, and where there are no nearby school districts with minority population students and very few, if any, English as a Second Language Learners. They must put their teacher candidates on rented buses and take them at least another hour to the closest mid-size city with some minority population. Whereas US institutions' experiences with NCATE require they increase the numbers and kinds of experiences with minority populations and English Language Learners, Sultan Qaboos University is encouraged as part of its mission to increase the number of students and faculty who are Omani, thus creating more Omani educators and a more educated Omani population. How will this national movement fare with an American accrediting standard that looks to increasing diversity opportunities for teacher candidates?

In addition, there is an expectation by NCATE that data will be collected to serve as evidence to track diversity among its student and faculty population. There is a strong cultural practice in Oman not to collect data on certain differences in their populations in order to maintain a connected, peaceful society. Many countries outside the U.S share this practice of not differentiating tribal and religious differences. In Rwanda for example, it is now illegal to ask if you are Tutsi or Hutu. In Oman, they do not ask on any official form, if you are Sunni, Shiite, or Ibadhi to preserve social cohesion. During a recent interview process of new students, the Instructional and Learning Technology department faculty attempted to ask NCATE-designed questions to the candidates such as, "Have you had experience studying with diverse students in schools?" only to be met with much confusion and some students taking offense. Will the College of Education faculty in Oman be

forced to go against their traditional practices to track these differences? As importantly, should they instigate this line of questioning that is deemed "inappropriate" for its culture?

Who's on First?

As with any long-term endeavor, the complexities of worthwhile ventures are often fraught with false starts and confusing crossroads. All three researchers admitted to often experiencing states of puzzlement and fuzziness when at times, it was difficult to grasp the present state of affairs in the NCATE journey. The researchers observed this on both sides of the ocean, when in the U.S., one of the researchers was unable to connect with the NCATE international groups, as well as in Oman where the process is guided by outdated standards and evolving guidelines. For a College of Education in the U.S. preparing for a successful NCATE accreditation visit, this process may not be any less perplexing for them. However, given the added challenges of language, culture, values, beliefs, development, and distance, the process takes on a surreal quality that often feels fractured and unconnected. Researchers recorded in their journals, many instances of confusion throughout the year that was often compounded by the responses they received from their inquiries. Like a Laurel and Hardy sitcom, the questions around the NCATE process become as ambiguous as the answers that are provided. In turn, the success of the NCATE accreditation process for the College in Oman remains nebulous for its participants.

A Leap of Faith

The researchers also noted specific silences that seemed unfamiliar with past experiences of accreditation processes. A prominent question that surfaced in the Western-sourced journals was whether a Western accreditation system was the best choice for Oman. It was noted that this was not yet questioned among colleagues in Oman. The researchers suspect this may have something to do with the strong beliefs and values of Omani concerning faith. Oman's distinctive culture is influenced by Islamic traditions and regional heritage. For Oman however, Islam is more than a religion; it is a way of life that guides everyday decisions. So it is not surprising that the policies and practices of the Omani educational systems reflect these spiritual values in numerous ways, whether it is the dress code for the students to amount of time expected for greetings and meetings.

One distinction of a good qualitative researcher is to focus on the "lived experience" as explained by the participants of the study (DeMarrais and Tisdale, 2002). Manifestations of the lived experiences may be those things that participants choose to share in discussions, and those things they don't. The lived experiences for this research study were the preliminary NCATE process experience. Obviously, this study cannot cover all lived experiences but the researchers found one notable silence; few Omani faculty members or students openly questioned the quality of the NCATE system itself. While investigating the three sets of journals, there seems to be a marked absence of this line of questioning or collected comments. There seems an unexplored sense of certainty here at the College that an American assessment management system is better than a more regional system and it is a goal worth pursuing and looks to NCATE accreditation as an

opportunity. Perhaps this is because NCATE is often used as the quality assurance standard for U.S. colleges of education, perhaps because Oman seeks out Western schooling for their higher educational pursuits, and/or perhaps the practice of faith is incorporated more firmly into Omani lives. There is an unspoken belief that life, hence, teaching and learning at the College, will be improved, by a stronger assessment system in place. It is a strong distinction that is made within some American college discussions where, in the experience of the researchers, most discussions among faculty were dominated with critiquing the value of the NCATE assessment system itself. These are just a few of many questions that the researchers struggle with the NCATE accreditation process. Other questions are waiting to be discovered as the researchers approach this study qualitatively. For example, how does this highly respected American performance-based professional accreditation body such as NCATE serve teacher preparation in a College of Education whose country is at a different flash point of development? Do the teachers in Oman need a different set of skills at this point of time in their country's development than teachers in let's say, France, or England, or the U.S.?

Conclusion

There is little doubt in the minds of the researchers that the pursuit of NCATE accreditation will continue at SQU. There is also a belief that the college will be successful in its own time. In the U.S., the pace of preparation would be faster as the task lists grow, whereas in Oman, there doesn't seem to be as yet that sense of urgency among faculty that Westerners often feel with due dates looming. There seems to be more fluidity in Oman perceiving time and accommodating due dates. Certainly the administrators and faculty are aware of them but the stress that often drives U.S. colleges seems to be disturbingly or perhaps, pleasantly absent. The Western researchers wonder how this will play out on the NCATE timeline. The position of SQU's College of Education pursuing NCATE accreditation is a valuable opportunity for studying the processes and negotiations among faculty, administrators, and NCATE as an organization that can lead to a successful international partnership. At the College of Education in Oman, investigating policies and practices can assist in designing a more efficient, responsive organization.

Turning inward to explore traditions, values, and beliefs is a more difficult task but new insights can assure the College remains true to its values and beliefs. Additionally, accreditation could be an important tool to help ensure students enrolled in the college receive the best and most relevant education that confirms they are career ready. Simon Sinek is a visionary who describes the "Golden Circle," where the "Why" instead of the "What" leads successful organizations to do the right thing. It will be critical for SQU to visit and revisit the "Why" of NCATE accreditation and the researchers hope this research will provide a window into the process that leads to adding value to the students of SQU. The researchers express hope that this process will be informative to NCATE as well, as it ventures onto the international scene, specifically in the Middle East where historical and political events have, at times, obscured collaborations. The College of Education could greatly benefit with more guidance from NCATE, clarifying language, readjusting policies, and even sometimes, just

reassuring the candidate institution that they are not on this journey alone. It is a process however; the researchers recognize the first steps taken do not necessarily define the experience and all of them look forward to the next year's progressive developments along the accreditation path.

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