Quality Assurance in Sudanese English Degree Research

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Introduction

• This presentation tries to assess the Sudanese English degree research practice from quality assurance (QA) perspective. The QA concept is a recent addition to the academia. Originally, it has been associated with business, focusing on the excellence of products and services in order to the satisfy of the customer. Currently, most academic institutions worldwide are applying QA principles to all aspects of their academic and non-academic activities in order to achieve academic accreditation. Needless to say, research stands out as an academic activity to which measures of QA are strictly applied. Since Sudanese degree research has for decades been locally assessed, this presentation will look into its relevance to QA principles known to the international research communities.
It is not the intention of this presentation to require Sudanese postgraduate researchers to produce research that can be accepted for publication in international periodicals. The academic topics that they investigate are local in nature, and could not, therefore, be of interest to the international readership. However, these same local research topics can still be conducted in such a way that world renowned academic referees can recommend it for publication in local or even regional journals.
The rationale for emphasizing the degree research emanates from the fact that it is almost the first practical training that candidates receive in their research career. Now given the fact that it is through research that we communicate with international community, such training has to consider principles of quality assurance in terms of form and essence. Moreover, since even colleges and universities in the Middle East are currently working to achieve academic accreditation with the Sudanese universities being (as if) unaware of these academic developments, researchers should individually seek accreditation through production of research acceptable to the international research communities along the lines indicated above.
• The subject-matter of this presentation is multifaceted. Thus, we will address ourselves to three questions that are conceived to provide guiding principles for discussion:
• What are the measures needed to achieve QA in academic research?
• What are the institutional and individual responsibilities for achieving QA in Sudanese English degree research?
• How committed are the Sudanese English researchers to the research traditions known to the international research communities?
• These questions will be discussed under two headings: QA in academic research and Sudanese researchers’ commitment to research traditions in humanities.
QA in academic research

• According to a report on research quality at Utrecht Institute of linguistics, Netherlands, in 2005, there are three assessment criteria for any research: quality (measure of excellence), productivity (total output of a group which is publicized through bibliometrics, i.e. indicators of publications and citation of publication), and relevance (scientific and socio-economic impact of the work). It is the consideration of quality measures that qualify research to appear in bibliometrics. Thus for an author to guarantee presence of their work in the relevant bibliometrics, they must have their research published in an international periodical.
• Assessment of academic quality can take place at different levels. For instance, the examination of an MA research proposal by a panel of professors is one way to assure quality in that proposal. Talking about quality assurance in Africa, Materu (2007: 15) reports that “the history of quality assurance in higher education of Africa goes back to the founding of first universities in Africa, all of which were affiliated to partner universities located in the colonizing countries”. A case in point is the University of Khartoum which as affiliated with the London University until late 1950s. However, the concept of quality assurance has recently ceased to be an end in itself; viz. it has become a means of achieving academic accreditation as shown at the beginning of this presentation.
• Thus, institutional self-assessment of quality of its transactions does not automatically renders it accredited. Assessment must meet a number of conditions set by international accreditation agencies. Yet, it has to be pointed out that these conditions do not have to be international necessarily since they are basically intended to satisfy local customers, who in the Sudanese case can be researchers, policy-makers, educationists, academic institutions, etc. Integration of efforts made by individual researchers and research institutions as represented by supervisors is an important guarantee for commitment to the measures of research quality.
The British Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education coded a detailed regulations for the responsibilities of each party. Six responsibilities have been associated with the individual researchers as can reported below:

- Taking responsibility for their own personal and professional development;
- Maintaining regular contact with supervisors ...
- Preparing adequately with for meeting with supervisors;
- Setting and keeping to timetables and deadlines, including planning and submitting work as and when required and generally maintaining satisfactory progress with performance of research’
- Making supervisors aware of any specific needs or circumstances likely to affect their work;
- Attending any development opportunities (...) that have been identified when agreeing their development needs with their supervisors (...);
- Being familiar with institutional regulations and policies that affect them, including the regulations for their qualification, health and safety, intellectual property, and the ethical research guidelines (...);

(p.12)
As for supervisors, the code lists a number of responsibilities, including:

- Providing satisfactory guidance and advice;
- Being responsible for monitoring the progress of the student’s research program;
- Establishing, maintaining regular contact with the student (...), and ensuring his/her accessibility to the student when s/he needs advice, by whatever means is most suitable given the student’s location and mode of study;
- Helping the students to interact with others working in the field of research, for example, encouraging the student to attend relevant conferences, supporting him/her in seeking funding for such events, and where appropriate to submit conference papers and articles to refereed journals;

(p. 16)
• Both types of responsibilities are the same all over the world. But the degree of commitment to them differs greatly from place to place. It is uncertain whether there has been a Sudanese candidate who has been fully released for his/her research assignments. Supervisors also share this defect, so to speak; for there have always been complaints about their inaccessibility.
Commitment to research traditions in humanities

• As members of a research community, we know that scientific research has one of three objectives to fulfill:
• Discovering knowledge
• Adding to knowledge
• Revising knowledge
• Research in humanities informs us that certain procedures should be followed to realize these objectives. Other things being equal, research communities across the globe refers to these procedures as “research methods”. The plural form of the term “method” gives us more freedom in the way we perform a variety of research tasks.

• However, a close examination of some of Sudanese postgraduate research shows that our research practice suffers from a number of irregularities at sections that are central to the value of the whole study; these are the research assumptions, objectives, significance and findings. In the remaining part of this presentation, some examples will be reported to illustrate this claim:
Many studies did not differentiate between research objectives and significance as can be shown in the following table:

- Research objectives
- Research significance
- To identify ...
- To find out ...
- To explain ...
- To provide ...
- To measure ...
- To revise ...
- To provide ...
- To help ...

It is virtually impossible to draw a dividing line between research objectives and significance from the wording on each list. In fact, all phrases can appear on the same list.
• Many studies made some assumptions that were never tested.
• One study included an assumption saying “there is no significance” but ended up testing it using percentages. Another study reported a strong correlation between variables while the whole study was qualitative in nature with data analyzed in percentage terms.
• Some studies did not have research problem, objectives and significance.
• Many studies did not have clear results.
• Needless to say, such research practice does not prepare candidates to be future researchers.