CHAPTER 7

THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: BUILDING ON INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS TO PROMOTE EXCELLENCE

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ABSTRACT

In the present era of the sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2015), what is the trajectory of education and social development in Kenya and other sub-Saharan African countries? What forces are impinging on decision-making and how are these forces in turn supporting systemic development that relies on national policy-making and implementation frameworks? What is the role and purpose of higher education institutions, particularly to underwrite quality and relevance? Finally, what are the intended outcomes, and what benefits accrue to the citizenry?

These complex and contested questions require conceptual, theoretical, and methodological tools to address. This chapter outlines the initiative and mandate of the Aga Khan University (AKU) that has led on quality assurance and enhancement linked to faculty educational development to promote excellence in teaching in higher education institutions in East Africa. AKU is presented as a qualitative case study, building on a descriptive analysis of published work, to

elucidate issues and opportunities that must be addressed by higher education institutions with regard to the SDGs from the lens of quality.

Assessing the initiatives of AKU raises critical questions of the role of education, particularly higher education institutions, to support development that in turn address and advance the diverse needs of global populations. Arguably, this is the transformative function of the SDGs.

INTRODUCTION: THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY – PROMOTING IMPACT, QUALITY, RELEVANCE, AND ACCESS

Established in 1983 as an internationally chartered university in Pakistan, Aga Khan University (AKU) positions itself as "a university of and for the developing world." Currently operating across 3 continents, 6 countries, and 13 teaching sites AKU operates truly as an "international university" that is driven by the core principles of quality, access, relevance, and impact. AKU functions under one governance structure as a single, global university with integrated campuses distributed across Pakistan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and the UK with outreach programs in Afghanistan and before the political unrest in Egypt and Syria. Despite this large geographic distribution, AKU is a small, private, not-for-profit, autonomous university with a small student number (3,000) and a merit-based admission process promoting quality over quantity. The University is part of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), one of the world's foremost development organizations, whose scope encompasses health, education, community development, revenue generating economic enterprise, and culture (Aga Khan Foundation, 2018). Resultantly, AKU serves as one of the key human resource engines for the AKDN, affecting some seven million beneficiaries in the areas of health and education alone.

As stated in its mission, [AKU aims]: "to offer programmes of international quality; prioritising teaching and research that underpin intellectual innovation and change; and developing leaders through its educational programmes" (AKU, 2019a).

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND TEACHING EXCELLENCE: QAI_NET AND TL_NET

In line with its aims to promote quality over quantity (of student intake) and to promote excellence in teaching and strengthen the student learning experience, in

January 2013 AKU established integrated Networks of Quality Assurance and Improvement (QAI_net) and Teaching and Learning (TL_net) including Blended and Digital Learning (BDL_net). Rather than "centers," these globally distributed support networks were created in order to respond to the large geographic spread of AKU.

AKU began with a Medical College and School of Nursing and Midwifery in the early 1980s followed by Teacher Education with an Institute for Educational Development (IED established in 1994). Similar academic units were then expanded to the three countries in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda).[1] With the challenge of diseconomies of scale at AKU, reflected in its large geographic spread and relatively small numbers of students, an innovative and sustainable response was required. It was also evident that with different teaching sites having their own regulatory oversight bodies, quality assurance and professional educational development activities were occurring at the entity/faculty level leading to duplication of efforts, resources, and conspiring against synergies in processes. The Department for Educational Development (DED) has over 20 staff and several PhD faculty members, which largely supports only Medical Education in Pakistan. Similarly, the IED's focus was to support the education sector. Hence, to support the vision of a global university, the Networks, which directly report to the Provost, were established with the following broad aims:

Network Aims

- *TL_net*: To support faculty with on-going continuous educational development "in the areas of pedagogy and curriculum, through short courses, workshops, mentorship."
- *BDL_net*: Situated within TL_net to enhance teaching practices with the "uptake and application of information and instructional technologies associated pedagogies" across AKU's academic programs.
- *QAI_net*: To harmonize and standardize AKU-wide QA policy and procedures, initially for "periodic review of existing programs" but also for the establishment of new programs and later for academic unit reviews (http://www.aku.edu/qtl/).

Thus, the QAI, TL and within that BDL, Networks exist to support academic entities and faculty to achieve a high-quality learning experience for its students through excellence in teaching and program provision. The Networks align with AKU goals to be a research-led, student-centered university:

> AKU … must deliberately support and encourage research by our faculty while at the same time putting the highest value on a student-centred environment where we strive to provide our students with the very best experience… We can quite reasonably strive to create a teaching and learning environment that rivals that of any university in the world. (Moran, 2014)

Based on the above mandate and aims, this chapter employs a qualitative methodology to build a case study of published literature and agreed policy and strategies as well as outcomes of the work undertaken at AKU to investigate,

evaluate, and validate the experiences of the AKU Networks and their impact on quality across the region.

FORMATION OF THE NETWORKS: BUILDING ON INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION AND GOOD PRACTICES

The journey of establishing the Networks was not a smooth one, as would be expected of any change management process. The tradition or models of QA or Education Development units did not exist in the regions AKU serves. Using literature on change management (Kotter, 2012) and learning from the lessons of established educational development centers elsewhere (Randall, Heaslip, & Morrison, 2013; Scott & Scott, 2013) as well as study visits to Teaching Learning Centres[2] and QA units[3] in Canada a concerted effort was made to:

- *Be needs based* to ensure contextual relevance.
- *Be evidence based* to ensure the use of best/good practices.
- *Create safe, non-judgmental spaces* for faculty through being inclusive.
- *Create ownership* of the Networks and through extensive consultation form a shared strategic vision to lead to a change in academic practice and engender a quality culture.

The above principles catalyzed the search for effective ways to support faculty to be more engaging with their learners. The literature warns against one-off cascade workshops in favor of hands-on practical, interdisciplinary, peer-led approaches that develop peer mentoring and communities of practice. The character of the Networks was thus fashioned to be driven by both bottom-up and top-down support in order to ensure viability and sustainability (Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, & Hopkins, 2010).

The Networks faced the significant task of change management; that is, to create centralized support services to academic units in the integrated areas of quality enhancement and educational development for faculty. Within AKU, in order to ameliorate resistance from academic units, wary of centralized control, extensive consultations were held to garner support. This allayed misconceptions as well as demonstrated value-addition of the QA work being proposed, and to be responsive to their actual needs. The consistent messaging was that the efforts would lead to improvement rather than being punitive via surveillance thereby creating safe, non-judgmental, and inclusive spaces for faculty to seek improvement through collegial processes. It was essential that responsive and accessible tools were availed that would demonstrate effectiveness and benefits to academic units to ensure ownership of these processes.

While these areas of quality enhancement and teaching and learning (TL) support in higher education were novel in the countries in Asia and Africa which AKU serves, these capacities existed within partner universities, who enthusiastically shared and supported AKU's efforts. At an international level,

the collaborations focused on averting the reinvention of processes of quality improvement in higher education while embedding good practices; one such partnership was formed with "Academics without Borders" (AWB) (Khamis, Neal, Notta, & Scully, 2018).

AWB identified qualified, experienced individuals, who voluntarily shared their time and knowledge through exchange visits to mentor and build capacity on the ground, while being open to learn and collaborate with colleagues at AKU to understand and respond to the nuances of diverse contexts, regulations, standards, and cultural differences. The resulting impact of this mentoring partnership was facilitated by AKU not reinventing wheels, learning from outside, and achieving enrichment through experienced guidance.

TL_NET: TL FRAMEWORK AND RETHINKING TEACHING

Building on Oleson and Hora (2014) and Gibbs (2010) who hold that teachers teach in the way they were taught, in 2013, AKU identified the need for a TL framework and strategy of effective teaching. This framework and strategy began with the aim to develop a common understanding and promotion of good teaching across the university. AWB worked with AKU to identify an experienced educational developer who would support a process to draft the initial TL framework and strategy. These documents draw upon AKU's established values and graduate competencies, literature on effectiveness and efficacy of various educational development services, programs and support structures, and a faculty needs assessment.

With an iterative process, TL_net identified (i) *pedagogical skills* and (ii) *course design and planning* as a gap, which were developed into programing areas for faculty development. Adapting the Canadian model of Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW), by 2016, with support from Western University, the ISW became a compulsory course for all AKU faculty members (https://iswnetwork.ca/).

To build on the model that faculty best learn from their peers (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2014) as well as thinking about the growth and sustainability of the Networks, TL_net engaged with faculty who had shown an interest and passion in teaching and had self-selected themselves. As a community of practice, TL_net supported their development and engaged faculty from various disciplines as "co-facilitators" to respond to increasing demand from colleagues: both early adopters and laggards. The "teaching champions," who had been through TL_net courses and workshops, became key resource persons and established a community of practice within the TL network across the University's academic entities.

TL_net began working with Simon Fraser University (SFU) who have a successful and transformational "Rethinking Teaching (RTT)" course redesign workshop widely used across North America. This program was identified as addressing the AKU programs' needs for course design that leads to "significant learning" (Fink, 2013). Again, with AWB collaboration and mentoring at a distance, RTT was indigenized and embedded at AKU. There are now regular workshops for faculty across East Africa and Pakistan. Building on RTT and

ISW, AKU became the first university in the developing world to create a professional education teaching scheme for faculty (Teaching Enhancement Accredited Certification of the HEA (TEACH)). TEACH is accredited by the Higher Education Academy[4] UK, and enables AKU faculty to gain fellowship qualifications. These fellowships are a professional teaching qualification in higher education that internationally benchmark and recognize excellence in teaching practices by both AKU and the United Kingdom's Advance HE formerly the Higher Education Academy (AKU, 2019b).

QAI_NET: AN ACADEMIC QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOCUSED ON IMPROVEMENT

The need for quality assurance processes that are harmonized across the University was felt to be necessary for promoting the "AKU one university model" given its operations in multiple campuses. The Network of Quality Assurance and Improvement (QAI_net) began by compiling an evidence-based Academic Quality Framework (AQF) aligned to best practices and international standards (Gibbs, 2010). These standards reflect and respond to the regulatory requirements of respective Commissions where AKU operates. AWB volunteers with expertise in QA processes in the UK and Canada supported the creation of the AQF with commensurate overarching QA standards for the whole University. The established AQF and QA processes articulate with and support continuous improvement in programs through cyclical periodic reviews. A self-assessment review (SAR) undertaken by the respective academic unit leads to a peer-assessment review (PAR) with external university colleagues. SAR and PAR aim to identify and support improvement plans monitored by the Quality Assurance and Review Committee (QARC) appointed by the Provost and chaired by the Vice Provost in East Africa.

AKU's effectiveness of its QA processes that lead to improved teaching–learning are now a model for good practice across sub-Saharan Africa and Pakistan (Khamis & Dhamani, 2017; Khamis, Gyn, & Rarieya, 2019). AKU's leadership in this work merited international recognition with the AKU QAI_net Director appointed as President of the East African QA Network (EAQAN) and on the Board of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

TOWARD SUSTAINABLE IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

The integration of QAI_net and TL_net networks across the University with a network of entity-based faculty teaching champions has supported two elemental process outcomes. Firstly, faculty focus has remained on improvement. Any early apprehension related to supervision and centralized monitoring have dissipated and indeed QAI_net is regularly called upon to initiate program reviews across units. Secondly, capacity and capability development within TL_net has enabled

responsive and efficient support in improvement areas highlighted by PARs. The PARs common concern areas highlight TL; thereby the process embedded continuous quality improvement efforts across programs.

The QAI_net, now in its fifth year, has supported more than 50% of AKU programs' SARs and PARs. Outcomes include embedded periodic curriculum, course, and program reviews; faculty support including accredited in-house professional qualifications by Advance HE (UK); and improved student outcomes as evidenced by external examination councils' results such as the Nursing Council of Kenya.

An overwhelming 60% of faculty have accessed the services of TL_net, with more than half of this faculty attending multiple TL_net faculty development activities. These numbers compare favorably with more established teaching–learning innovation centers reaching a fraction of their after 30–40 years of existence. QAI_net and TL_net impacts in a relatively short period are attributed to the bespoke and responsive input of the partnership with AWB mentors, who supported AKU's requests and respected their capacity to identify their own needs, which, in turn, enabled AKU to leapfrog the development process. Indeed, it could be argued that in setting up these new structures, AKU capitalized on opportunities that more established universities take much longer to embrace and AKU's experience is instructive to the developed world.

Sustainable Development: Contribution to the Eastern African Region and Beyond

In essence, the AKU case study presented above illustrates organizational self-improvement through the agency of establishing partnerships with credible institutions in the context of developing countries. This approach speaks fundamentally to sustainable development goal (SDG) 17: strengthen global partnerships to support and achieve the SDGs that bring national governments, the international community, civil society, the private sector, and other stakeholders to a common platform.

The SDGs are cast in a less linear fashion than their predecessor, millennium development goals (MDGs), which embedded a north to south support relationship to reach pre-set targets. The SDGs, though much more ambitious, are significantly more collaborative and reciprocal in the context of support and welcome a role for the private sector to engage with national governments to provide leadership to meet needs while mindful of downstream resource sustainability.

The above case study reveals four key aspects for meeting the expectations and potentials of the SDGs. These include:

- supporting knowledge transfer on an equitable and mutually beneficial dialogical basis where the developing countries' context and priorities take precedence;
- promote the development of technologies and processes, including policies and their implementation frameworks, to support innovation, capacity-building, and uptake;

- promote global best practices that (i) professionalize the higher education academy and (ii) are outcome focused, particularly in the areas of teaching and student learning; and
- at a national level, enhance and support systemic changes through the identification and advocacy of regulatory bodies' standards.

Intrinsic to all four aspects is the enablement and expectation for inter-dependent partnerships based on equitable multi-stakeholder interests. Also, fundamental is the collection of evidence and data within a monitoring but non-judgmental mechanism of the SARs and PARs to establish accountability, professionalization, adherence to standards, and pursuit of innovation in the best interest of student learning outcomes and optimal faculty development. The Canadian AWB organization and its ethos of volunteer professionals significantly reduced the financial barrier, which otherwise would have limited or at best postponed developments within AKU. The QAI_net and TL_net experience demonstrates the value-proposition of collaboration beyond a material engagement of northern institutions in the south. That is, knowledge generation as the global basis of research communities in higher education (as opposed to competition for resources and students), and the promotion of best practices that are mutually beneficial and collaboratively achieved; removing the power gradient and opening the doors for both the experienced, well-resourced, richer institutions and the innovative, emerging, resource-challenged. Thereby, institutions co-developing and co-benefitting from the innovations and opportunities are embraced.

The critical contribution of the Networks is to have concretized the otherwise ambitious and somewhat abstract SDGs into actual processes and mechanisms for higher education. In practice, the AKU experience reveals how theoretical aspirations of the SDGs can be addressed, particularly in the context of different countries in the majoritarian world.

Contributions of AKU through the Networks to the African Continent

Over the last decade, the establishment of the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) has promoted QA in higher education across East Africa. Working with the various commissions of higher education, IUCEA is seeking to harmonize higher education structures to enable mobilization of students and graduates across the region. In this regard, IUCEA partnered on the Dialogue on Innovative Education Strategies initiative with the German Academic Exchange Service and the German Rectors' Conference to enhance quality of higher education in the East African region. Learning from the Bologna harmonization process in Europe, IUCEA developed supporting materials including a QA handbook *A Road Map to Quality*, which includes four volumes to support universities in East Africa to implement good practices for quality assurance at program and institutional levels. The handbook also provides guidance on establishing effective internal quality assurance mechanisms and directorates for universities within the region to align to international standards (IUCEA/DAAD, 2015).

AKU developed its own IQA framework building on the IUCEA model. AKU, through the office of the QA Director, led a Network of QA practitioners in East Africa and served as the second President of the East African Higher Education QA Network (EAQAN) from 2014 to 2016. Following EAQAN's success, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) encouraged AKU (QA director and EAQAN executives) to support the establishment of other such QA networks in Africa: WAQAAN in Anglophone West Africa; the Commission for Higher Education in South Africa sought EAQAN's support to share lessons for it to strengthen its own network: SAQAN (Khamis & Dhamani, 2017).

DISCUSSION

Educators are particularly concerned with social justice, which is a key motivating principle underpinning the SDGs with expressed targets and indicators based on equality of opportunity and equal treatment of all in society. In the African context, redressing (historical) inequalities that articulate with resource utilization are the essence of academics' concerns (Klugman, Rodríguez, & Choi, 2011; Mazrui, 1986; Sen, 1998). The production function and value of higher education to support national development receive increasing attention. An economic and social justice stance, in the thrust of globalization and neoliberal forces (Mayo, 2015), highlights questions of what African countries must do to address long-standing marginalization and deep-rooted inequalities that have plagued the continent. It is in response to such challenges that the role of universities on the continent is being redefined (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2017).

In the SDG era, building on the MDGs, developing country nation states within a globalized perspective have adopted the available competencies and skills of what is deemed to be good quality education. At present, within higher education, there is no discernible link between quality and sustainable development. At a school level, the struggle to conceptualize educational quality, learning competencies, and equity has been problematic (Martin, Jucker, & Martin, 2010). However, the SDGs seem to be providing the impetus to bridge these areas of education that are inherently inclusive of debates between an open-ended dialogical process and measuring standards (Adams, Jackson, & Turner, 2018). The MDGs were faulted for over-emphasizing standardization and the pursuit of indicators and measurement became a dominant relief of the past two decades. Goldstein (2004) very early on argued that the use of targets in the MDGs, including Education for All (EFA), would lead not only to high-stakes reporting of achievements that could not be verified but would be unsustainable. EFA (MDGs) was thus seriously undermined by its reliance upon the achievement of numerical "targets," which were also perceived to be set by richer donor countries that revealed undesirable side effects and distortions of educational systems. Arguably, this state of affairs spanning a number of decades has led to the crisis in higher education particularly in Africa (Fonn et al., 2018).

Key questions underlying higher education and the SDGs have been broached in this chapter:

- What is the trajectory of development and what role does higher education play?
- What forces are impinging on decision-making at national and international levels?
- How are these forces supporting systems' development of the social sectors that rely on policy-making and implementation frameworks?
- What are the outcomes of such policies; what are the assumptions and ideologies underpinning these policies and outcomes?
- Who are the intended beneficiaries of such policies, and do the outcomes accrue to the citizenry of the country (equitably)?

The experience of the AKU Networks is to promote more collaborative approaches that support outcomes while contending with the implicit power dynamics underpinning global movements and agendas including the SDGs.

CONCLUSION

The AKU Network of Quality, Teaching and Learning (QTL_net) journey and experience highlight how context, relevance, and bridging resources led to quality developments. Such developments have the character of leap-frogging a linear trajectory of development by building on partners' expertise, engaging in a shared and common effort that is underpinned by the value of higher education, a commitment to equity and equality of opportunity for all, and ensuring the processes follow established best practices.

QTL_net leads on program and curriculum review across AKU with the aid of international professional volunteers who act as peer reviewers. Thereby, sustaining efforts of quality improvement, relevance of the curriculum on offer, and importantly keeping abreast of context and responding to evolving national development needs, which are increasingly articulating with the integrated approach of the SDGs.

As QTL_net continues its work and programs undergo systematic reviews, it is now discernible that inter-sectoral offerings are being developed. Mention can be made of special educational needs that combine knowledge from health and education, urban planning, and governance of large cities, and the like that reflect, on the one hand, the University's aspiration to develop into a comprehensive university and, on the other hand, the evolving nature of knowledge generation which necessitate inter-/trans-disciplinary approaches.

Higher education's role must continue to be transformative for the individuals and the societies they serve. This is a gap as well as an opportunity within the SDGs, which will potentiate the broadening of their conception of the role of universities as not just training institutions but as knowledge producers – this is arguably the defining feature of "quality" beyond technical and economic rationales that underpin the SDGs.

The Aga Khan, AKU's founder, Chancellor, and Spiritual Leader of the Ismaili-Muslim community since 1957 represents a plurality of cultures, traditions, and

histories, whose main concern is the challenges of improving the quality of life of the communities that the AKDN serves. Such challenge are quantitative: how to ensure access and equity as defining features of the SDGs; others are qualitative: how to live with dignity and respect in a pluralistic world (Marshall, 2018).

NOTES

1. An East African Institute in Kenya devoted to policy studies, an Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations in England, and a Graduate School of Media and Communications in Kenya are recent additions.

2. Alberta, British Columbia, Calgary, Waterloo, and Western Universities in Canada.

3. Campus Alberta Quality Council, Council for Ontario Universities, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

4. HEA has now been renamed Advanced HE.

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