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# Leadership in Tunisian Higher Education from the Perspective of the EFQM Excellence Model

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction

Since the early 1980s, the concept of quality has been a central focus of attention in the debate of higher education (HE). Over time, many developed countries have experienced a growing concern for quality in HE such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Norway, and the United States of America, amongst others (Anyamele 2004, Becket and Brookes 2005). The focus on quality leads many developed countries to acknowledge the benefits of the implementation of Total Quality Management (TQM) within their institutions (Kanji and Tambi, 1999). However, quality movement is rather slow in the HE of developing countries. Indeed, some HEIs have established systems of quality assurance and control but in different degrees of complexity and effectiveness (Anyamele, 2007).

In order to achieve excellence, many institutions are turning to the EFQM Excellence Model (Anyamele, 2007). This model was introduced in 1992 as a reference model to assigning the European Quality Award (EQA) prize. The EFQM Excellence Model was continually reviewed and updated over time; the latest update was released in 2009. It is now the most widely used organizational framework in Europe, and it has become the basis for the majority of national and regional Quality Awards (Santos-Vijande and Alvarez-Gonzalez, 2007). It is to note that this study is based on the 2003 version as it was conducted before the release of the 2010 version.

The EFQM Excellence Model is based on nine criteria. Five of these are “Enablers” and four are “Results”. The “Enablers” criteria are concerned with how the organization undertakes the key activities; they comprise leadership, policy and strategy, people, partnerships and resources, and processes. The “Results” criteria are concerned with what results are being achieved; they comprise customer results, people results, society results, and key performance results. Results are caused by Enablers and Enablers are improved using feedback from Results. The EFQM Excellence Model recognizes that there are many approaches to achieving sustainable excellence in all aspects of performance. It is based on the premise that excellent results with respect to Performance, Customers, People and Society are achieved through Leadership driving Strategy, that is delivered through People, Partnerships and Resources, and Processes (EFQM, 2003a).

The EFQM Excellence Model is underpinned by what is termed the ‘eight essentials of excellence’, or the fundamental concepts, namely (1) results orientation, (2) customer focus, (3) leadership and constancy of purpose, (4) management by processes and facts, (5) people development and involvement, (6) continuous learning, innovation and improvement, (7) partnership development, and (8) corporate social responsibility (EFQM, 2003b). It should be noted that these concepts are successfully adapted to HE context as encouraged by the commitment of leadership in achieving academic excellence.

Leadership commitment has for years been recognized as the foundation for building the TQM culture characterized by continuous focus on the customer (Dahlgaard, Larsen, and Norgaard 1997).

Leadership is defined in terms of what managers are expected to do (Mullins, 1999). This suggests that leadership is about “doing right things” and “doing things right”. The first part relates to leadership “effectiveness” and the second part to management “efficiency”, suggesting there is a functional relationship between effectiveness and efficiency ( Osseo -Asare, Longbottom, and Murphy 2005). This functional relationship is confirmed by the EFQM framework which defines “leadership” in terms of: “How leaders develop and facilitate the achievement of the mission and vision, develop values required for long-term success and implement these through appropriate actions and behaviors, and are personally involved in ensuring the institutional management system is developed and implemented” (Sheffield Hallam University, 2003).

This paper aims to evaluate the existing leadership practices in Tunisian HE from the perspective of the EFQM Excellence Model. The rest of the paper is organized in four sections. The next section covers the methodology followed in the research, including details about questionnaire design, sample selection, and data collection. The 3rd section presents and discusses the study results. The 4th section gives some recommendations on leadership practices in Tunisia and similar developing countries. The paper is concluded by addressing the major findings and limitations of this study.

## Methodology

This study is guided by a survey questionnaire administered to all leaders in the 19 HEIs at the University of Sfax.

## Design of the Questionnaire

The design of the questionnaire is based on qualitative questions adapted from leadership criterion of the EFQM Excellence Model. The questionnaire includes 20 closed questions. Some of them are close-ended (yes or no). They are fast and easy to complete, enable automated data entry, and facilitate data analysis and summary. Some other questions are partial open-ended (multiple-choice with ‘other’ option), which allow the respondents to create their own response if none of the proposed answers fits their choice; the new answers added by the respondents generate new ideas about the topic. The remaining ones are ranking questions, which permit respondents to indicate the relative importance of the choices.

The questions are constructed according to the same order as leadership’s criterion parts. Thus, the questionnaire comprises five parts.

The 1st part presents some questions aimed at identifying how leaders develop the mission, vision, and values statements of their institutions.

We note that the mission is defined by the EFQM Excellence Model as: “A statement that describes the purpose or ‘raison d’être’ of an organization. It describes why the business or function exists”.

The EFQM Excellence Model defines a vision as: “A statement that describes how the organization wishes to be in the future”. Values are defined in their turn by the Model as: “The understandings and expectations that describe how the organizations people behave and upon which all business relationships are based (e.g. trust, support and truth)”.

In this part, the respondents are required also to state how they mobilize their staff to ensure the

achievement of the institutional objectives and goals. Thereafter, they are asked to identify how they review and improve the effectiveness of their leadership practices. Such questions aid to verify whether leaders act as role model for a quality culture within their institutions.

In the 2nd part, the leaders are required to identify the processes in which they are personally involved to ensure the development, implementation and continuous improvement of the institutional management system.

The leaders are asked, in the 3rd part, to identify the partners of their institutions and describe the nature of linkages they establish with them. This part presents also some other issues concerning how leaders guarantee the success of partnerships they build with their stakeholders, and how they create networked relationships other than partnerships.

In the 4th part, the leaders are asked to identify the activities they undertake to sustain a quality culture with their staff members.

The last part aims to check whether leaders are able to identify and champion an organizational change within their institutions.

### Sample Selection

This study is concerned with leadership in Tunisian HE. The sample consists of all the institutional leaders of the University of Sfax, which is one of the 13 Tunisian universities. This choice is made for several reasons including the support of the president of the University, the proximity convenience, the size and representativeness of this university. Indeed, the University of Sfax hosts 10% of the Tunisian HE leaders and 12% of students, and encloses 85% of the Tunisian HE disciplines.

All the Tunisian universities have the same common characteristics as they are managed and led by the Ministry of HE. Indeed, the University of Sfax is relatively similar to the other Tunisian universities, especially in terms of culture since the nomination of University presidents and most directors is undertaken by the Ministry of HE. Among many other responsibilities, the Ministry of HE assumes the recruitment, promotion and compensation of faculty members and administrative staff, the design of curricula and instructions, and the assignment of degrees to colleges.

### Data Collection

During February 2009, 19 copies of the questionnaire were hand delivered to leaders. In order to avoid the emergence of any problem during this process, a formal permission was requested from the president of the University of Sfax. No problems were encountered with handing out the questionnaire. All leaders were verbally provided with full description of the study object, its scope and its purpose. The confidentiality of individual responses was assured by informing the respondents of the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. They were assured that the results would be reported and discussed only in the aggregate.

Ten out of the 19 surveyed leaders (52%) supported the study and accepted to take part in the questionnaire without any planned meeting. Some others (four out of 19, i.e. 21%) accepted to fill out the questionnaire, but they failed to respond to the research questions. Six out of the 19 leaders (31%) were not willing to take part in the questionnaire as they were not interested in this study. Several visits

and telephone calls were needed to emphasize the importance of the participation of all leaders in the study. After one month since the distribution of the questionnaire to all leaders, a rate of 100% was obtained.

## Presentation and Discussion of the Findings

The survey findings, which are adapted from the EFQM Excellence Model, cover the five following themes: (1) developing the institution's mission, vision, and values, and role modeling a quality culture, (2) developing, implementing and continuously improving the institutional management system, (3) involvement and interaction with partners, (4) reinforcing a quality culture with staff members, and (5) identifying and championing organizational change.

### Developing the institution's mission, vision and values, and role modeling a quality culture

#### v Development of the Mission

The research findings show that almost all leaders (18 out of 19, i.e., 94%) lack the ability to get involved in setting the mission statements of their institutions since this depends on the Ministry's decision. Most of the developed missions appear to be not clearly identified as they do not relate the purpose of the institution to their stakeholders, e.g., students, staff, faculty, community, funding agencies, etc.

The most common mission statement, which is developed by 17 institutions from different disciplines, is "training of students". However, this statement does not specify the goals to be achieved with regard to the other stakeholders such as administrative staff, teachers, and society.

Otherwise, two missions seem to be the most appropriate and coherent as they clarify the added value of each institution. The first one, mentioned by a leader from an arts institution, is the following: "stimulation of the intellectual curiosity, responding to stakeholders' needs, and ensuring continuous learning". The second mission, specified by a leader from a business institution, is described as follows: "contribution to the entrepreneurship and innovation in a creative way that adds value to the field of business and to society at large".

It should be pointed out that the difference between one mission and another is distinguished by the seniority of leaders in terms of experiences and the number of years spent in the current position. Indeed, the 1st leader has four years in his present position, and the 2nd who is from the business discipline, has two years in his current position with six years of experiences. It should be noted also that a business leader is obviously more familiar with quality concepts and proficient in establishing the mission statements.

#### v Development of the Vision

In contrast to the mission, the vision statements, which describe the targets to be achieved by the institution, are developed by the leaders themselves. Seventeen out of 19 leaders (89%) are until now unable to create and realize a vision that gives a common view on the future of their institutions. Each leader describes the vision of his institution in his own words, but the most common vision statement, already developed by six institutions from different disciplines, is "opening on the national and international environment". Some other visions are listed each with a score of two as shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: Visions mentioned by the different institutions

No.	Vision statements
1	Ensuring the employability of students
2	Ensuring a good national and international reputation
3	Receiving the highest ranking on the national scale
4	Improving student success rates
5	Improving teaching outputs through an excellent training of teachers

It seems that some visions among all those mentioned above are not sufficiently clear and do not take into account the needs of the most important institutional stakeholders. For instance, “ opening on the national and international environment” and “ ensuring the employability of students” are two incomplete visions statements. Indeed, there are no instructions which specify how the institutions should deal with their stakeholders to achieve these visions.

In contrast, “ improving teaching outputs through an excellent training of our teachers” seems to be a clear vision statement, which indicates both the goal to be attained and the manner of achieving this aspiration.

#### v Development of the Values

Although all leaders mentioned that they have already developed the values of their institutions, it seems that 15 of them are not role modeling these values to embed the institutional culture. Among 10 proposed values, “ excellence” has been ranked 2nd after “ confidence”. This shows normally that leaders work toward ensuring the satisfaction of their institutional stakeholders, and thus toward ensuring an excellent reputation. Nevertheless, there are actually 15 leaders who are not familiar with quality concepts, and are consequently not able to satisfy their stakeholders’ needs. It is clear that the values statements are written on papers, but not really applied within these institutions.

#### v Role Modeling a Quality Culture

The results show that all leaders are involved in the development of some examples of good practices as well as in the development of cooperation and empowerment systems that encourage the creativity and innovation. Such beneficial ways allow normally leaders to mobilize their staff toward the achievement of the institutional objectives. However, it has been deduced through a cross-responses that leaders disprove the effectiveness of these ways.

It is worth noting that role modeling a quality culture within an institution is also ensured by reviewing

and improving periodically leadership effectiveness. Although 14 leaders are aware of the necessity of improving the effectiveness of their leadership, only 10 of them actually undertake the review of their behaviors and practices. This is done especially through feedback from staff, students, teachers and industrial partners.

#### Developing, Implementing and Continuously Improving the Institutional Management System

Leaders are required to rank a set of five statements related to the development and implementation of the institutional management system. The development of the institutional management system is undertaken by 18 leaders. Twelve of them are concerned with taking ownership of the agreed targets as the more interesting activity. These leaders accord a great importance to stakeholders' efforts, which are inspired toward a common view. The next interesting activity, ranked 2nd by seven leaders, is taking ownership of the agreed processes. This finding suggests that some leaders ensure the management of their institutional activities through approach-oriented processes. It seems also that the results achieved in some institutions do not happen accidentally, but because their leaders take part in the establishment of the institutional plans. Despite its importance, this responsibility occupies the 3rd rank by only five respondents.

Furthermore, it appears that leaders do not accord much importance to the alignment of the organizational structure. This activity is placed 4th with five mentions, showing that leaders are not concerned enough with ensuring the cohesion of the different parts. Finally, the findings show that leaders do not focus sufficiently on the implementation of the process management system. This leaders' role occupies the last rank with a score of six, suggesting that leaders are not aware of the benefits that could generate from the implementation of an adequate system, which ensures the management of the institutional activities.

Once the institutional management system is implemented, 12 leaders take part in the review and improvement of the strategy implementation. These leaders are conscious to be involved in ensuring and enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of the system implementation. However, only eight of the 12 leaders participate in the review of the pursued policy implementation as well as its improvement/updating. The majority of leaders are not considered as effective policy implementers since they are not interested in reviewing and improving the policy plan.

Only five leaders are concerned with the review of the implementation of key processes. This implies that the remaining leaders do not ensure that the key processes are systematically deployed according to the institutional plan. However, it has been seen that 14 leaders undertake the review of the system results and check to what extent the achieved results give satisfaction for both the institutions and their stakeholders.

Only nine out these 14 leaders get involved in a process for identifying and planning improvements with their stakeholders. Thus, it appears that some leaders are not committed to seek with their stakeholders for new approach and methods, which aim to improve the process management system. Nevertheless, it is shown that the same 14 leaders participate in the process of improving the institutional system. This result suggests that some leaders undertake the necessary improvements without being personally involved with their stakeholders in the planning process. This attitude may not ensure the inspiration of the institutions' parts to participate in the improvement activities.

## Involvement and Interaction with Partners

All leaders prove that they establish partnerships with a variety of constituencies such as national and foreign HEIs, staff, students, teachers, and the State. Other partners are not frequently mentioned by the respondents including industrial companies, 'Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce, et de l'Artisanat (UTICA)', Regional Room of the Insurance Agents, and Civil Company Association.

However, it has been deduced that gaps exist in the partnerships built between leaders and their stakeholders. For instance, despite building partnership between leaders and staff members, it seems that in most of the institutions in question, staff is not yet involved in decision-making. This finding suggests that the majority of leaders are characterized by an authoritarian style.

These leaders underestimate also the cooperation with teachers who are crucial to the success of their institutions. The interaction between them is rather materialized through official meetings such as 'the scientific council'.

In addition, it is clear from the findings that there is no cooperative relationship between the institutions and the State, which is considered as one of the sources of structural change in HE. The lack of mutual interactions between the institutions and their partners could generate a misunderstanding of needs and expectations. This explains why only 4 leaders are able to ensure the entire satisfaction of their partners' needs.

It should be noted that all 100 leaders participate in some activities other than partnership aimed at helping them to develop their leadership behaviors in the interest of their institutions. The activities in which leaders are involved include framing of research activities, participation in internal/external seminars and conferences, and participation in workshops. The involvement of leaders in these activities will bring quality outcomes in which students, leaders, staff, the institution as whole, and society at large will benefit.

## Reinforcing a Quality Culture with Staff Members

The surveyed leaders accord a great importance to the encouragement and support of their staff as this responsibility is ranked 1st by 11 leaders. The following activity is assigned to the communication with staff members by nine respondents. These activities enable the leaders to reinforce a quality culture within their institutions in which a learning environment is created.

Despite the acquired benefits of being available and listening to all staff, this activity is ranked 3rd by seven leaders. Therefore, it seems that staff who is one of the internal stakeholders and considered as one of the institutional partners do not feel appreciated and valuable within the institutions. In addition, it seems that leaders are not sufficiently interested in the motivation of their staff to participate in the improvement activities as a way to reinforce a quality culture. This activity occupies the 4th rank with a score of six suggesting that staff members are not encouraged enough to be active and creative, and feel proud of what they have achieved.

In the last rank, six leaders mention that they recognize their staff members for their contribution to the business results. This finding reveals the lack of awareness regarding the importance of the appreciation of individuals and teams.



## Identifying and Championing Organizational Change

The identification of the needed change within the institution and the development of the change plans are the most frequently activities mentioned by 15 leaders. Fourteen out these 15 leaders communicate to their stakeholders the reason(s) of the change and support them to manage the change process. These findings suggest that most leaders intend to ensure an effective and efficient implementation of the change process.

The measurement and review of the results effectiveness is the last step undertaken by 12 leaders. The latter are conscious that these activities are also indispensable to guarantee a successful implementation of the change process.

It should be noted that only nine out 19 surveyed leaders establish procedures to reduce loss costs, and ensure the investments and resources necessary to the change process. Seven out these nine leaders seem to be unaware to reinforce relationships through communication and mutual confidence between them and the drivers of the process change.

In the following section, some recommendations are made as a result of the findings of this study.

### Recommendations

The proposed recommendations aid leaders to improve their leadership and ensure the success of their institutions. They are adapted from the five previous themes aiming to respond to the following issues:

- a) How to develop the institution's mission, vision, and values and exhibit role modeling a quality culture?
- b) How to develop, implement, and improve the institutional management system?
- c) How to establish partnerships with the institutional stakeholders?
- d) How to reinforce a quality culture?
- e) How to champion an organizational change?

### Developing the Institution's Mission, Vision and Values, and Role Modeling a Quality Culture

Leaders should be personally involved in the development of their institutional missions since they are closer to their internal and external stakeholders than the Ministry. These missions should be described clearly and concisely taking into account the stakeholders' requirements.

The leaders should also capture and create a clear vision, which emerges from collective interests within the institution. Such vision gives the leader and the whole institution a conceptual map for where the institution is headed. Moreover, it is essential for leaders to demonstrate and practice the values and ethics which support the creation of the institutional culture.

In addition, the leaders should prove that they are involved in serious actions that encourage attitudes such as cooperation, empowerment, innovation and creativity. Leaders should also review the

effectiveness of their own leadership to ensure the survival of their institutions. For instance, they could seek feedback on their leadership performance from their internal and external stakeholders. It is also important to encourage the implementation of learning activities such as continuous self-assessment, periodic audits, and organization of seminars. Thus, the leaders would be able to ensure valuable analysis by discussing the most relevant conclusions with the different parts of the institution and undertaking the necessary improvements.

### Developing, Implementing and Continuously Improving the Institutional Management System

Leaders should align the institutional structure to support policy and strategy. They should be also involved in the development and improvement of policy and strategy plans through a clear and integrated set of processes. Thus, leaders should manage their institutions in terms of processes carried out through an adequate system. The latter would be better developed if leaders get inspiration from other institutions either national or international, seek advice from experts, and organize regular (for instance annual) meetings.

In order to achieve sustained continual improvement, the leaders should intervene when they find that a process has not produced the desired results. They should be open-minded and cooperate with their stakeholders to scrutinize new approaches based on creativity, innovation and learning activities in the key processes.

### Involvement and Interaction with Partners

Leaders should build effective partnership with their stakeholders aiming to provide added value for both the institutions and partners. This can be achieved through regular meetings, discussions, visits, etc.

A strong partnership inside the institution may ensure student mobility, staff development, improvement of quality research, and curriculum innovation. Outside, the institutions could establish partnership with industrial companies since graduate students feature as important enablers. This partnership will reinforce more and more the interaction between students and industry, and contribute to good practice knowledge.

Leaders should participate in professional bodies, external and internal conferences/seminars, and workshops in order to influence decisions in the interest of their institutions. Furthermore, leaders should actively support and hold activities that aim to improve the institution's contribution to society.

Finally, it is important to recognize the individuals and teams, including external partners for their contribution to the business results since this has a positive effect on the overall effectiveness and efficiency of both parties. The recognition of the institution's parts for their achievements can be achieved through suggestions and reward systems.

### Reinforcing a Quality Culture with Staff Members

Leaders should personally elucidate the mission, vision, values, policy and strategy, and objectives to their stakeholders. This should be done on a regular and systematic basis. Leaders should use the feedback they receive during the meetings to readjust the strategy, plans, objectives and targets. They can, for instance, do this via communications, videos, general personal parties or meetings, brochures,

newsletters, workshops and also via periodic team meetings.

Leaders should actively listen to their staff members and take into account their opinions and suggestions. Even if they are unattainable, the leaders could leave a message with an alternative phone number, voicemail or email and commit themselves to respond within 24 hours to anyone who has contacted them. The leaders should participate in one-to-one discussions allowing the creation of direct and open communication channels between them and their staff. These communication channels for their part ensure that staff works more efficiently and effectively.

Leaders should be also personally involved in the improvement groups. Thus, they should actively encourage staff members to work toward improvement as a group. They can, for instance, invite someone from each related activity in the co-ordination department to participate in workshop, where a better approach for handling and resolving problems is discussed.

Once the perused objectives are achieved, some actions that staff members will consider as recognition for their efforts can be organized as mentioned earlier in the third theme. Staff members have the right to feel appreciated by their leaders and feel proud of the achievements.

### Identifying and Championing Organizational Change

Leaders should pre-empt change needed in the institution and pinpoint the factors that lead to implement it. To ensure a successful change implementation, the leaders should provide a plan detailing the different stages of change, and secure the necessary investment, resources, and support. Leaders play their role in tandem with the internal/external drivers by integrating quality principles in the institutional culture. They should also participate in establishing procedures to guarantee more success.

It is crucial to communicate to all stakeholders the reasons of the change and its impact on the structure, culture and the effectiveness of the institution. In doing so, the leaders gain the commitment of their staff members to participate in the change process.

The leaders should regularly listen to their staff and encourage it to take part in deciding and managing the change plans. They should also support and enable staff to participate in the implementation of change process. Finally, the leaders should be personally involved in the measurement and review of the effectiveness of organizational change. This can be achieved through assessment methods such as internal/external audits. It is worth noting that conducting an organizational change is a learning process, which generates a shared knowledge.

### Conclusion and Limitations

This study, which aims to evaluate HE leadership practices from the perspective of the EFQM Excellence Model, is the first conducted in the Tunisian context. It is guided by a survey questionnaire administrated to all HEIs at the University of Sfax. The findings revealed some strengths and weaknesses related to HE leadership of the institutions in question. Thus, some recommendations are made as a result of these findings.

Some identified strengths reflect the awareness of leaders of the importance of improving leadership effectiveness, their involvement in taking ownership of the agreed targets and processes, and taking

part in the establishment and improvement of the institutional management system. Some others reveal the consciousness of leaders to establish partnerships with the institutional stakeholders, to encourage and support staff to achieve the perused objectives, and to drive a change process.

However, a number of weaknesses are deduced such as: the lack of ability to develop the mission and vision, and to exhibit role modeling a quality culture, the lack of importance accorded to reviewing the process management system as well as to maintaining strong partnerships, the unavailability of some leaders to communicate with stakeholders and to recognize them.

These findings suggest that a new type of leadership that is aware of the importance of starting excellence journey is needed in the HEIs of Sfax to ensure institutional success and survival.

It is time for leaders, for instance, to be personally involved in the development of their institutional missions, to capture and create a compelling vision, and demonstrate their commitment to anchor a quality culture. It is also time to manage their institutions in terms of processes carried out through an adequate system that is periodically reviewed, to develop successful partnerships with their stakeholders, and to champion organizational change.

It is worth noting that this study has some potential limitations. Indeed, the survey questionnaire deserves to be extended to the other Tunisian universities as well as to the institutional stakeholders such as teachers, non-academic staff and students. Besides this qualitative approach, also a quantitative one should be combined and used simultaneously. Through this combination, it is possible to quantify the quality level of the institution (obtaining a quantitative score for leadership criterion under analysis) and, simultaneously, to obtain a set of 'best' practices and areas for improvement, and to identify which improvement actions need to be implemented.

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