The role of academics in Quality Assurance of Higher Education: A case study of an Australian university branch campus in Malaysia

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Abstract: The Malaysian Quality Assurance (QA) system in higher education has evolved from certain educational legislations and directives that aspired to achieve international recognition and excellence thus making Malaysia as the educational hub in the Asian region. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) was established in 2007 with the overall responsibility for the local accreditation of higher education programs and qualifications, and for supervising and regulating quality and standards in education providers. The Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) is a principle instrument that classifies qualifications based on a set of criteria that is agreed nationally and benchmarked with international practices, and which clarifies the academic levels learning outcomes. There are very few studies which examine the role of academics in the quality assurance of higher education in Malaysia. This paper aims to discuss the role of academics in the quality assurance process in the context of different units such as business management, public relations and marketing units currently being offered in the business school at an offshore
Australian campus in Malaysia. The discussions include the learning and teaching strategies used by the academics to meet the learning outcomes and graduate attributes of the various units which will then lead to the students’ demonstration of the eight domains of learning outcomes as outlined in the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) document. This paper provides implication for the way how academics may play an important role in quality assurance of higher education.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF), higher education, Malaysia

Introduction

In its bid to be a big player in the attractive regional education scene, Malaysia targets to attract about 200,000 foreign students by 2020 as an international hub for world class education (MOHE, 2011). Based on the report by the Ministry of Higher Education on institutions of higher learning in 2009, there are 20 public universities, four foreign branch campuses of foreign universities, 20 private universities and 413 private colleges operating in Malaysia. The sharp increase in the number of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in the last two decades were attributed to the escalating demand for higher education from local and foreign students in Malaysia. Inextricably, private institutions of higher learning have gained significant importance in the Malaysian education dais as they contributed about RM50 million in direct earnings annually. As part of the government’s effort to assure quality in the higher education sector, various legislations such as the National Accreditation Act, 1997 and subsequently, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007, were enacted. This was governed with the setting up of quality agencies – (i) The National Accreditation Board (1997-2007); and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (2007-present).

The paper articulates the ‘dual’ quality assurance challenges that confront offshore universities in Malaysia, that is, to be compliant with the quality standards enforced by agencies in Malaysia as well as the country where its main campus is operating. Here, the focus of the study is on Australian offshore campuses operating in Malaysia such as Curtin University, Monash University and Swinburne University. In Australia, the quality assurance standards are mainly governed by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), under the preview of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) established in 2000. The role of monitoring the quality assurance processes of Australian universities has recently been taken over by the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). The paper presents a case study on one Australian offshore university (referred to as University X in this paper) established in Malaysia for over a decade and expounds on the internal quality assurance processes implemented as well as delineates the milestone successes achieved by the university in the process of meeting both the Malaysian and Australian quality assurance standards. An investigation into its success elucidated the importance of the role of academics in the quality assurance process, a dimension which has been neglected in the quality assurance in higher education literature.
The conceptual model of this study is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**

**Quality Assurance**

Quality assurance may be defined as systematic management and assessment practices and procedures adopted by universities to assure achievement of specified benchmarks (Mok, 2000). This definition suggests that quality assurance involves a series of review procedures designed by the respective universities to safeguard academic standards and promote learning opportunities for students of acceptable quality. The objective is to provide adequate confidence to various stakeholders such as parents, students and employers that the teaching and learning processes of the universities meet the quality assurance standards in the respective countries.

In Malaysia, the Malaysian Quality Assurance (QA) system in higher education has evolved through educational legislations and directives that focused on the government’s goal to establish Malaysia as an educational hub in the Asian region with an international recognition and excellence of its higher education sector. The MQA was established in 2007 with the prime responsibility for awarding the accreditation of higher education programs and qualifications, as well as in the supervision and regulation of quality and standards among education providers. The classification and development of academic qualifications by Malaysian Quality Framework (MQF) is based on learning outcomes and credits benchmarked against major qualifications frameworks such as England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. The eight learning outcomes outlined in the
MQF document are knowledge; practical skills; social skills and responsibilities; values, attitudes and professionalism; communication, leadership and team skills; problem solving and scientific skills; information management and lifelong learning skills; and managerial and entrepreneurial skills (MQA, 2013).

On top of this, MQA sets very stringent requirements for institutions of higher learning operating in Malaysia. The three major indicators of quality assurance processes (i) SETARA rating; (ii) Self-Accreditation Status (SAS); and (iii) ISO 9001:2008 certification are explicated below:

**SETARA rating of universities**
The MQA Rating System for Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia for 2011 (SETARA ’11) is the third rating exercise undertaken at the institutional level for universities and university colleges in Malaysia after the SETARA ’09 (using 2009 data) and SETARA 2007 (using 2006 data). Similar to the SETARA ’09, the SETARA ’11 measures the performance of teaching and learning at level six of the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (undergraduate level) using the same domains. This rating exercise evaluates three (3) major components of teaching quality at the undergraduate level. The following outlines the major components and the weightage allocation in the rating system:-

a. Input (20%) which involves governance, physical and financial resources and talent;
b. Process (40%) which involves curriculum, quality delivery/pedagogy, quality assessment, monitoring and ancillary services;
c. Outputs (40%) which involves quality of graduates and graduate satisfaction.

**Self-Accreditation Status (SAS)**
Self-accreditation signifies the accreditation of an institution’s internal quality mechanisms, with all the processes and procedures for quality assurance. Universities are assessed in nine key areas, viz., its vision, mission, educational goals and learning outcomes; curriculum design and delivery; assessment of students; student selection and support services; academic staff; educational resources; programs, monitoring and review; leadership, governance and administration; and continual quality improvement (MQA, 2013).

**ISO 9001:2008 certification**
In higher education industry, ISO 9000 has been used as one of the indicators for providing quality education (Lundquist, 1997; Sohail et al, 2003). Similarly, Karapetrovic et al. (1998) postulated that the implementation of ISO 9000 quality systems has a positive impact on the programs provided by universities. ISO 9001:2008 specifies the requirements for quality management system which an organization needs to demonstrate consistently in its ability to provide products (or services) that meet customer expectation; at the same time, adhere to statutory and regulatory requirements. The objective is to enhance customer satisfaction
through effective practice governed by a quality management system; as well as assimilating processes for continual improvement of the system.

Based on the above exposition, it is evident that offshore campuses operating in Malaysia are faced with a challenging regulatory climate, while striving to meet the Australian quality standards in tandem. In the following section, an analysis on University X’s quality assurance processes and policies are presented through a comparative mapping with the Australian standards. A critical analysis of Table 1, explicitly connotes that University X’s quality assurance processes and policies, are strongly influenced by the both the Australian and Malaysia quality assurance systems.

Table 1: Mapping quality assurance standards (University X)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MQF (Malaysia)</th>
<th>University X Quality assurance policies and procedures</th>
<th>Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2011 by TEQSA (Australia)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional vision, mission and educational goals</strong></td>
<td>• Strategic Plan 2014-2017</td>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Student selection and support services** | • University X Academic Standards  
• Admission and Enrolment policies and procedures  
• University Life (Orientation policy)  
• Conditional Student Support  
• Student Consultation Hours  
• Learning Centre | • Admission criteria are appropriate  
• Articulation, recognition of prior learning and credit arrangements meet the appropriate criteria  
• Responsibilities to students |
| **Programme, leadership and administration** | • 360⁰ Performance Appraisal  
• Unit Leader  
• Timetabling and class times policy  
• Fieldwork Education policy | Management and human resources |
| **Programme, Aims, learning outcomes, curriculum design and delivery** | • University X Academic Standards  
• Flexible Learning Policy  
eVALUate – Unit  
• Internship  
• Industry collaboration & Talks  
• University X Graduate Attributes | Course design is appropriate and meets the Qualifications standards |
| **Academic staff** | • University X Academic Standards  
• FOLT – to enhance our academic delivery and | • Teaching and learning are of high quality  
• Management and human resources |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adherence to Curtin academic policies</td>
<td>• eVALUate - Teaching Evaluation Report (TER)</td>
<td>• Primacy of academic quality and integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Classroom Observations policy</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• International Commendation Award for Quality Teaching</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Programme monitoring and review</td>
<td>• Unit Pass Rate Comparison Report</td>
<td>Course monitoring, review, updating and termination are appropriately managed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Unit Review</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Annual Course Review</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Comprehensive Course Review (Every 5 years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of students</td>
<td>• Assessment within a Course (Course learning outcome derived from University X Graduate attribute)</td>
<td>Assessment is effective and expected student learning outcomes are achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assessment within a Unit – Marking; moderation procedures, Rubric &amp; Feedback</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Grading system</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Academic Integrity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Board of Examiners (BOE)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Academic Status</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Examination Policy and Procedures</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Satisfactory Course Progress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational resources</td>
<td>• Blackboard (BB)</td>
<td>• Course resourcing and information is adequate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Moodle</td>
<td>• Physical and electronic resources and infrastructure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Online Library</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Physical library</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continual quality improvement</td>
<td>• CASS</td>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• eVALUate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Full Unit Report (FUR)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Complaints and Conflict Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for authorizing ‘self-accrediting authority’</td>
<td>• Accreditation and Audits (External and Internal)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider Registration Standards</td>
<td>• Conscientious objection policy and procedures</td>
<td>Provider Registration Standards Provider Standing (reputable)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Financial viability and sustainability
Corporate and academic governance

Not applicable

Provider Category standards (criteria for using the word “university”)
Higher Education Provider
Australian University
Australian University College
Australian University of Specialisation
Overseas University
Overseas University of Specialisation

Course approval process and procedures & Provisional accreditation
Course Nomenclature

Qualification Standards
Higher education awards delivered meet the appropriate criteria
Certification documentation issued is accurate and protects against fraudulent use


Milestones

An extended inquiry led the study to assess the level of performance achieved by University A in attempting to meet the ‘dual’ standards. It appears that University X attained some remarkable quality milestones:

- SETARA - In the MQA 2013 Report, out of the 52 universities and university colleges rated,
  - 35 institutions (67 per cent) including University A achieved a Tier 5 category
  - 16 institutions (31 per cent) in Tier 4,
  - The rest (2 per cent) in Tier 3
  - None managed to clinch the Tier 6 status

- Self-Accreditation Status (SAS) -
  - In 2008, eight higher education institutions (comprising four public research universities and four offshore campuses) were invited by MQA to apply for self-accreditation status.
  - University X was granted self-accreditation status by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE).
The significance of the SAS status was that the Ministry endorsed the courses offered by University X has demonstrated the quality expected.

- ISO 9001:2008 certification –
  - In January 2013, University A was awarded the ISO 900:2008.
  - The ISO certification was indicative of its commitment to deliver quality education and services, achieved through (i) documented standard operating procedures as well as continual improvement of teaching and learning and business practices.
  - The ISO certification served as another milestone achieved by the University in striving to set a world class operation and establishing best practices.

- Commendation from AUQA (Australian Quality Standards Agency)
  - The AUQA panel conducted an audit in University X in January 2009.
  - The report commended the University for the conceptualisation, establishment and successful development of the offshore Australian university campus in Malaysia with a minor area for improvement, as noted below:

  “The Campus has its own Academic Board which meets four times a year. The Board is represented on the University Academic Board. In terms of academic management, the Panel is satisfied that there is evidence for increased attention to the following: ensuring academic standards and the equivalence of the student experience; entry requirements conform to University policy; ensuring wide external professional accreditation, for example, in the engineering degrees (Australia, Malaysia and the United Kingdom for chemical engineering) and also in accounting; benchmarking with other international universities in the region; student awareness and knowledge of the plagiarism policy and penalties; examples of positive internship experiences, for example, in engineering and design; students awareness of graduate attributes in their units and courses; and differences in pass rates are regularly monitored and interventions made, where necessary. However, the Panel found some inconsistency on whether written feedback was given on formative assessments” (Australian University Quality Agency, 2009).

The milestones achieved by University X, as presented above, warranted some investigation to determine factor(s) that may have contributed to this commendable quality performance in a short period. This following section offers evidence and explication on one contributing factor viz. the role of academics.

**Role of academics in the quality assurance**

According to Fernandez-Chung (2009), quality agencies do not specify details on the minimum standards in teaching quality, as the focus is on the peripherals such as curriculum, minimum teacher-qualification and clarification of all qualifications in higher education which have been benchmarked internationally.

In the case of University X, it was found that academics play an active role in facilitating learning through innovative approaches. The section illustrates the teaching practices
adopted by the respective academics to achieve the units’ learning outcomes in units like business management, public relations and marketing units offered in University X.

**Human Resource Management (HRM) unit**

The following paragraphs describe the teaching strategies adopted by the lecturer to encourage students to adopt the deep learning approach which is needed to achieve the unit’s learning outcomes of developing students’ ability to critically analyze key business issues in organizations and apply relevant business theories and concepts to solve the issues innovatively and critically. The units aim to develop graduate attributes such as apply discipline knowledge, professional skills, thinking skills, international perspective and information skills.

Biggs (1987) has distinguished two common approaches to learning adopted by students. According to the researchers, deep approach is characterized by a personal commitment to learning and an interest in the subject and the student approaches learning with the intention to understand and seek meaning, and consequently, searches for relationships among materials and interprets knowledge in light of previous knowledge structures and experiences. The deep approach to learning is likely to result in better retention and transfer of knowledge and may lead to quality learning outcomes such as good understanding of the learning material and critical thinking skills.

There are basically two basic approaches to teaching which are the information transmission/teacher focused (ITTF) and the conceptual change/student-focused (CCSF). The ITTF teaching approach is the teacher-centered approach with the intention of transmitting to the students information about the discipline. In this transmission, the focus is on facts and skills, but not on the relationships between them. The prior knowledge of students is not considered to be important and it is assumed that students do not need to be active in the teaching-learning process (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). Meanwhile, the CCSF teaching approach is a student-centered approach to help students change their world views or conceptions of the phenomena they are studying. Students are seen to have to construct their own knowledge, and so the teacher has to focus on what the students are doing in the teaching-learning process. A student-focused strategy is assumed to be necessary because it is the students who have to re-construct their knowledge to produce a new world view or conception. The teacher understands that he/she cannot transmit a new world view conception to the students (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). The CCSF teaching strategy includes mastery of techniques, including those associated with transmission, but this is an empty display if the students do not learn anything.

In the classes where teachers describe their approach to teaching as having a focus on what they do and on transmitting knowledge, students are more likely to report that they adopt a surface approach to the learning of that subject while in classes where students report adopting a deeper approaches to learning, teaching staff report adopting approaches to teaching that are more oriented towards students, encourage students to construct their own knowledge, involve the students and challenge the students’ conceptions and current ideas through questions, discussions and presentations (Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999; Trigwell & Prosser, 2004).

The teaching philosophy of the lecturer is “to teach and help students to learn to maximize their potential and grow as global citizens who demonstrate forward looking in the way they
think and do”. He believes in the students’ infinite potential to learn and grow as useful citizens able to contribute towards the nation’s development. This belief guides him in his commitment to teaching by adopting the student-centered approaches to teaching. He believes that this approach is suitable to be adopted as it facilitates student learning and goal setting, recognize and respect their previous knowledge and experiences, inculcate students’ ability to learn and most importantly motivate them to learn. Hence, as lecturer, he is an agent of growth and change for his students to internalize the intrinsic motivation to learn and excel.

He enriches students’ learning experiences which include motivating them to excel and meet challenging learning outcomes. He believes that lecturers teach and engage with students from our the heart, the students will optimize their potential to learn and grow as useful global citizens when they graduate. Thus, he believes his main role as a lecturer is to guide students in their journey of achieving success in life.

He demonstrates his love and commitment to teaching by explaining the lecture topic in simple terms and relate to lots of real life examples of current happenings in the corporate world such as economic crisis, corporate success such as AirAsia and latest development in Malaysia such as the 1 Malaysia concept, Sarawak Corridor of Resource Economic (SCORE) development and the various Economic Transformation Programmes (ETPs). In the tutorial, students have opportunities to actively engage in learning through analysis of real case studies, drawing mind maps, presenting critical analysis on journal articles as well as facilitating the tutorials by sharing their knowledge and demonstrate their preparation for the tutorials by sharing their readings and research about organizations and application of knowledge.

The students’ ability to solve real HRM organizational issues such as diversity and recruiting and rewarding talents are assessed through case studies of prominent organizations such as Rio Tinto and University of Southern California. The lecturer normally gives valuable feedback on students’ assignments, exercises, presentations and exams so that they understand the strengths and weaknesses of their works and what they need to do to get a better grade in the future. He believes in utilizing technological learning tools such as the university’s Moodle program to manage his engagement with the students.

He insists on hard work and best effort from his students as he always told his students that success will only come with hard work and commitment from them. In return, when he knows that his students are putting their best effort into the class, he goes the extra mile to give them the support and guidance that he can during consultation times especially for marginal students who require more academic guidance to achieve the learning outcomes.

It is common a goal in all my classes to continually challenge my students to question the assumptions and preconceptions they bring to the study of the HRM unit. With this as a primary aim, I see the lecturer’s role as one that should be stimulating, challenging, supportive, interactive and most importantly, engaging. In practice, what this means is that while I think the classroom should be a challenging environment, it must also offer a safe and supportive context for discussion and disagreement about management theories. I strive to help my students understand there is no right or wrong answer, management techniques or theory when it comes to understanding and managing people. In sum, my aim is to make sure that no student walk out from one of my classes saying “such- and-such is good for managing people” as I continually stress the importance of adopting the contingency or
contextual perspective in understanding the complexities of managing people issues in organizations.

**Managing Change unit**
The unit’s learning outcomes are to (1) apply the different perspectives of managing organisational change, (2) analyse the strategy-making process and its application within a changing environment, (3) prepare concise and coherent arguments relating to change theory and practice in organisations, and (4) assess and prepare solutions to practice situations in organisations undergoing change. As reflected in the unit outline, the unit aims to achieve graduate attributes such as apply discipline knowledge, international perspective, thinking skills, and information skills and learning how to learn. Students who are able to demonstrate these graduate attributes would then be able to demonstrate few of the eight learning outcomes outlined in the MQF document especially knowledge; practical skills; social skills and responsibilities; values, attitudes and professionalism; communication skills; problem solving skills; information management and lifelong learning skills; and managerial and entrepreneurial skills (MQA, 2013).

The lecturer believes that to be an effective teacher one must create an interactive classroom setting. He also believes that mentoring student one to one (or in small groups) is an important aspect of teaching and allows students to interact in dialogues that would never occur otherwise. He also believes that there are a number of other traits that make an instructor effective. These include flexibility, sensitivity, humor, and charisma. He tries to create this conducive learning environment in every class he taught.

In addition, he believes that students should be taught to question patterns, and think and speak critically, so that they can effectively communicate new ideas. Learning how to think critically about the world and how to communicate those ideas will be important assets regardless of the student’s chosen career path. He believes teaching strategies are secondary to motivate students learning. The most important factor to motivate students in learning is to make students realize the important of learning for themselves. Students will not maximize their learning until they realized the connectivity between what they have learnt and how the learning will benefit them personally.

As a result of good teaching efforts by the academic, he has been given commendation award from the parent campus in Australia in appreciation for the stellar contribution in delivering quality assured program. At the level of offshore campus, the staff has consistently achieved high student satisfaction rate and good comments about students’ learning experiences.

**International Marketing unit**
The unit’s learning outcomes of International Marketing are: 1) To demonstrate their awareness of local, regional and international issues that affect businesses; 2) To demonstrate knowledge of international marketing theory that will assist in research, analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation of global operations; 3) To apply team-building skills that support collaborative work and problem-solving; 4) To interact effectively in multicultural environments. Upon successful completion of the unit, students would have acquired the following University A’s graduate attributes: 1) Apply discipline knowledge; 2) thinking skills; 3) learning how to learn; 4) information skills; 5) communications skills; 6) professional skills; 7) international perspectives; 8) cultural understanding. Four types of
assessments are being designed to assess the students on the learning outcomes. They are 1) individual assessment; 2) group assessment; 3) group project; 4) final examination.

To achieve the above learning outcomes, the lecturer vary the teaching styles due to the nature of the course. It is intended to encourage and inspire students to do their best at all times throughout the semester. Also, varying the teaching styles help students learn, grow and become more independent. The three Ds teaching styles adopted by the lecturer are Directing, Discussing and Delegating (Thornton, 2013).

The directing styles promote learning through listening and following directions. With this style, the lecturer tells the students what to do and how to do it. This is further achieved by imparting information to the students via lecturers and tutorials. For instance, students are told how to go about doing individual assessment and group project. Also, cultures issues both at the national and international world level are explained to enhance the students understanding on International Marketing topics. For example, doing business in China require “quanzhi” approach. This is done at the beginning of the semester and also during the lectures. During the tutorial, students are directed with step-by-step guide on writing a report for individual assessment. To ensure the students grasp the information imparted to them, the lecturer seeks feedback from the students by asking the question, “Do you understand how to go about doing the individual assessment and group project?”

The discussion style promotes learning through interaction. The lecturer encourages critical thinking and lively discussion by asking students to respond to challenging questions. It is noted that this style was practiced by Socrates. To probe students’ high level thinking, he uses Bloom’s Taxonomy thinking skills by asking the question such as “what are the pros and cons of…?”,” how does…apply to…?” and “what should and should not happen…?” Students are encouraged to give opinion and constantly remind to back up with facts and data. In the tutorial, students are encouraged to ask questions and the lecturer facilitates the discussion to a logical conclusion. This discussion style is used by the lecturer in the middle of the semesters (week 3 onwards) especially during the discussion of the case studies during the tutorials.

The delegating style promotes learning through empowerment. The lecturer assigned group assessment and group project to students to work independently. For this unit, students are required to prepare a feasibility study for a company that assesses the company’s proposed entry into one new overseas country. Students choose their own team, select a team leader and define roles and responsibilities. The lecturer leans more heavily on the delegating styles at the latter part of the semester.

Besides the three Ds teaching style above, the lecturer also teaches students on professionalism. A lot of students think it doesn’t matter if they miss the deadlines to submit assignment, come late to class or text while someone else is talking or presenting. The lecturer goal is prepare students for reality, that is, to prepare them for the workplace and not only to get a job but to keep it. To instill professional behavior among the students, he deducted the students’ marks when the assignment was submitted after the deadline. He also keeps strict regime of discipline in class by making sure that those who behave disorderly regard themselves at odd with the class environment.
Public Relations Consultancy
In the case of public relations consultancy, the graduate attributes expected upon completion are the ability to (i) apply discipline knowledge; (iii) professional skills (work independently and as a team; plan own work); (iii) cultural understanding (value the perspective of others); and (iv) information skills (confidence to investigate new ideas). The manner in which the unit is designed, with seminar sessions, projects involving real client briefing and pitching sessions, with numerous case study discussion, effectively engages students at various levels of learning to achieve the learning outcomes as well as demonstrate the expected graduate attribute. One of major impediments observed by the lecturer was the variance in the retention level of knowledge as well as confidence in presenting ideas. The lecturer adopted more group and team-based learning approach during lessons. Here, the lecturer cited short in-class activities on cases for groups to work on. Students were randomly assigned groups or allowed to self-select groups made up of 3-4 members for short activities. High-skill and low-skills students were mixed in groups. The same approach was applied for the long term team-based learning (TBL), with permanent group members. TBL is a proven and effective form of small-group learning increasingly being adopted in higher education. The primary learning objective in both groups and team-based learning was to go beyond content and get students engaged in more interactive discourse through problem solving activities by applying concepts and at the same time, sharpening their communication skills. The lecturer noted that the application of both types of learning approach facilitated higher level of engagement and retention among students as well as increased confidence in presenting ideas. Another striking observation was the transformation of ‘groups’ into teams and student learning experience. Students, in general, remained lively even after 3-hour seminar session each week.

Findings and Conclusion
The revelations on the strategies adopted in the different units exhibited the element of “autonomy” or “expert guidance” demonstrated by the academics. The confidence in applying specific pedagogy or teaching approaches by the academics inadvertently contributed to higher student participation and active learning in classrooms. Active learners retain more knowledge than passive students. In the process of engaging students in the classroom through innovative and creative teaching strategy, the academics directly contributed to the continual improvement of teaching methodology which strengthened and fostered the quality experience for students.

Existing literature on quality assurance often focus on quality assurance standards at the institutional level while the findings from this study connote that emphasis should also be given to the delivery of the quality assurance standards at the individual academic level. The case of University X demonstrated the essence of the quality assurance process which was strongly influenced by the role of academics. Hence, quality assurance should not only be fully dependent on established procedures and systems, but should be complemented with demonstration of greater “autonomy” or “expert guidance” to push an institution of higher learning towards excellence. Another pertinent elucidation from this study is that in order to ameliorate the ratings of institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, it is important to develop a pool of experienced academics fortified with greater “autonomy”.
References
