APPRAISING HIGHER EDUCATION FACULTY IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM A DIFFERENT WORLD
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“If I can’t be a good example, I shall have to be a terrible warning!”

Introduction
The research documented below investigates the impact of faculty appraisal at two higher education (HE) institutions, located about 15 kms apart, in the same Middle Eastern country. It has been motivated by two beliefs. The first is that the faculty appraisal system of an educational institution is particularly indicative of its more general approach to leadership and management; in other words, “the kind of appraisal system which an institution adopts reflects and reveals both the value system and the internal structures of the organisation” (Hutchinson, 1997:166). The second is that “the development of appraisal systems is part of the development of a more managerial approach to education” (Walsh. 1988, p. 365) and consequently, appraisal systems provide useful windows through which to examine claims of rising managerialism in education.

Specifically, the research investigates the systems of faculty appraisal at ‘Rihab’, a newly-established university, and at ‘Al Fanar’, an older, more established vocational college, in order to determine firstly, how far each particular system embodies paradigms (meaning goals and values, key assumptions, and management ethos) of
professionalism and / or managerialism, and secondly, how far each particular system is seen by informants as appropriate to an educational context.

On a more general level, the research also looks at the extent to which changes in HE in ‘the West’, principally, the United Kingdom, North America, Australia and New Zealand, find resonance in a Middle Eastern context, where HE institutions are staffed almost exclusively by faculty and administrators from those same Western countries, but are subject to quite different employment laws and practices, and, in so doing, upholds Grace’s (1985:3) contention that “assessments and evaluations [of teachers] in education have … implications for the distribution of power and the principles of social control” and therefore need to be located “in relation to wider structural, economic and political frameworks”.

The research began with a pilot study in 1999, and was conducted over a period of four years, using two different sites. During that time, the focus of the research was reshaped and refined many times. What began as a rather vague investigation of perceptions about faculty appraisal ended, four years and 38 interviews later, as a systematic exploration of the seven quite specific research questions set out in Table 1.1 below:

Each of these seven questions will now be considered in turn, and the findings of my own study contrasted with relevant literature. Throughout, I will argue that there are certain unique contextual features affecting perceptions of the two appraisal systems. Most notable amongst these are the alleged power of the students to get teachers sacked, resulting from their position as an indigenous minority group; and the alleged power of the leadership to fire people, resulting from the system of sponsorship that skews the expatriate labour market very much in favour of the employer. At the same time, I will also argue that, despite the very different context, the tensions highlighted by the research are present in all educational institutions, and the underlying dilemmas are encountered by academic leaders everywhere. In this way, I hope to provide a lens through which leaders operating in a less extreme environment can better analyze their own appraisal policies and practices.
1. How is appraisal, in general, perceived by faculty and managers? How far are accountability models acceptable to either group?

2. Is appraisal perceived to have any effect on the quality of student learning?

3. What connections, if any, do teachers make between student evaluation of teachers and grade inflation?

4. How much time do faculty and management devote to appraisal? Do they consider that the time devoted to appraisal is time well-spent?

5. To what extent is appraisal said to focus on either basic technical competencies or flexible, creative practices?

6. How far is the specific appraisal system at each institution perceived as developmental and/or evaluative? How far is it seen as embodying a paradigm of professionalism and/or managerialism?

7. To what extent do teachers suggest they feel under surveillance?

Table 1.1

How is appraisal, in general, perceived by faculty and managers? How far are accountability models acceptable to either group?

In studies conducted in the public school sector, almost all teachers are reported to have accepted the principle of appraisal. According to the work of Fitzgerald (2001:12), 98% of respondents agree that some form of teacher appraisal is essential to raise standards of teaching and learning. Likewise, 80% of the people in Middlewood’s (2001:131-132) study saw appraisal as “essential for teachers’
accountability” leading Middlewood to conclude that “the case for some form of assessment of teachers is accepted by the profession”.

The position in tertiary education, however, is less clear-cut. Many studies in this sector point, not to the widespread acceptance of appraisal on the part of teachers, but to deep-seated divisions between faculty and management over the issue of professional accountability. According to Randle and Brady (1997a: 232), “85% of respondents believed that the college management did not share the same educational values as staff”. Elsewhere, they write of “a conflict of paradigms” (Randle and Brady, 1997a:237) and “the emergence of a new type of manager in FE operating with an apparently different value system from that of the academic staff” (Randle and Brady, 1997b:135).

Similarly, the case study of an FE college conducted by Elliott and Crossley (1997:89) is said to have highlighted “a fundamental difference between lecturers and senior managers over the definition of quality, value, and improvement”. These studies came soon after incorporation, and relate to further education, but the same point has also been made more recently, about higher education. Thus, for example, we find Deem (2000:15) drawing attention to “some sharp contrasts between more optimistic stories of achievement and change told by manager-academics, especially at senior levels, and the more pessimistic accounts given by some support staff, Students Union sabbaticals, and ordinary academics”.

Such a sharp dichotomy between the educational values of managers and faculty finds very little resonance in my own research. On the contrary, the range of opinion expressed by managers and faculty is almost as wide within each group as it is between each group. Faculty and managers at both institutions commented on the need for appraisal in academia. They did not voice any opposition to the principle of accountability, and, although perceptions differed on how to measure quality and how to balance accountability and professional autonomy, these differences were not split along partisan lines, providing little evidence of a management / faculty divide over educational values.
Is appraisal perceived to have any effect on the quality of student learning?

According to much of the literature, appraisal *ought* to improve learning, or, at the very least, teaching. Thus, for example, Powney (1991:172) contends that “improving the quality of the learning process is surely central in the objectives of the appraisal of teachers”. Similarly, Mortimore and Mortimore (1991:127) argue that “appraisal ought to have an impact on the quality of student learning as well as the organisation skills, planning, and teamwork of the school staff”, while Fidler and Cooper (1992:xiv) claim that appraisal “should lead to improvement in the learning experiences of pupils and students”. The same point is made in the 1991 DES Regulation, cited in Cullen (1997:181), which states that “appraising bodies should aim to improve the quality of education for pupils”. A little less ambitiously, Magennis (1993:235) links appraisal to improved teaching rather than learning, writing that, “whatever the origin or stated purpose, the only reasonable justification for the existence of an appraisal system is the enhancement of the quality of teaching”.

Whilst much of the non-empirical literature, like that cited above, espouses the benefits of appraisal, in terms of better student outcomes, some dissenting voices can still be found, along with some contrary empirical data. Turner and Clift (1988:173) write that “there was no shortage of evidence to suggest that little or nothing tangible seemed to have resulted [from the appraisial system]”. Indeed, “it is clear that in many cases, appraisals did not seem to have much direct relevance for teaching techniques” (Turner and Clift, 1988:179). Other studies concur, suggesting that for a significant number of teachers, appraisal does not have any direct impact on teaching, let alone learning. Campbell (2002:160) cites two studies (one by Bennett, 1999, and the other by Wragg et al., 1996) in which 35% and 51% of teachers, respectively, reported that appraisal had no effect on their classroom practice; the figure for Campbell’s own school was three out of eleven. Similarly, Kyriacou (1995:112) reports that “about two-fifths of the teachers felt the process had led to changes in their classroom practice”, implying that 60% felt it had not. Cullen (1997:196) is more vague about the actual percentage, but her point, with reference to headteachers, is the same: “When asked about the effects of their own appraisal on the quality of teaching and learning in school and more generally on children, *many* of the heads thought that their own appraisal had little direct impact” (Cullen, 1997:196, italics added).
Thus, it would seem that, contrary to much of the rhetoric on appraisal, the causal link between monitoring teacher performance and enhancing student learning remains tenuous at best. Winstanley and Stuart-Smith (1996:68), cited in Campbell (2002:176), argue that, “There is no conclusive evidence that the use of performance management systems results in improved performance”. This certainly reflects the findings of my own study, where only six out of 29 teachers reported that any aspect of the appraisal system had resulted in any kind of improvement in their teaching. More worryingly, six other teachers claimed that the appraisal system had actually had a negative effect on their teaching in that it either made them more tired and stressed, or else it encouraged them to keep the students happy by giving them what they wanted, rather than helping them learn by giving them what they needed.

What connections, if any, do teachers make between student evaluation of teachers (SET) and grade inflation?

The literature on student rating of teachers is huge, particularly in the United States. It can be divided into two types. The first includes empirical studies that use statistical analysis of SET results and student grades in order to highlight correlations between the two. The second includes studies (both empirical and non-empirical) that use interviews, surveys and / or personal reflections in order to interpret these correlations.

The consensus from the first group is that students who achieve higher course grades give more favourable evaluations. Greenwald and Gillmore (1997:1210) point to “the widely observed phenomenon that course grades are positively correlated with course evaluation ratings”. The consensus from the second group is that this correlation exists not because teachers inflate grades to get a higher score, but because teacher effectiveness influences both student grades and teacher ratings. (See, for example, Marsh and Roche, 1997, and d’Apollonia and Abrami, 1997). In other words, good teachers are given better scores precisely because they help students learn more, and student ratings neither result from nor contribute to grade inflation. The work of Greenwald and Gillmore (1997) does present a well-argued challenge to this line of reasoning, but theirs remains a minority view. In most of the literature, student ratings
are seen as an unbiased, valid and reliable guide to teacher performance. “Dozens of scholars in the United States and abroad have agreed for years that student evaluations are a good measure of a teacher’s skills. Nearly 2,000 studies have been completed on the topic, making it the most extensive area of research on higher education” (Wilson, 1998:2).

Again, these findings concur with my own research, in which four out of 29 faculty members said they did inflate grades, compared with 14 who categorically denied this, and 11 who made no specific reference to the issue. Obviously, the motivations of the four teachers who did admit to grade inflation are worthy of further investigation, but for our present purposes, it is enough to conclude that my study, like so many earlier studies, provides little evidence that student evaluation of teaching is seen as leading to grade inflation.

**How much time do faculty and management devote to appraisal? Do they consider that the time devoted to appraisal is time well-spent?**

In much of the literature, considerable concern is expressed over the amount of time that appraisal requires. Many teachers in the study by Turner and Clift (1988) complained that not enough time was allocated to appraisal, with the result that other activities had to be curtailed. Likewise, amongst teachers in Kyriacou’s (1995:114) study, “the most common complaint” was that appraisal was “very time-consuming”, whilst in Campbell’s (2002:161) study, “lack of time was regarded as the most difficult obstacle to overcome”.

Similarly, amongst the headteachers interviewed by Cullen (1997), “the overwhelming majority” (Cullen, 1997:191) “found the appraisal process very time-consuming, and as a result experienced some stress as well as concern that time was being taken away from other important school activities” (Cullen, 1997:200).

In higher education, the same concern is even more apparent, though here it is most often linked to accountability in general, rather than appraisal systems, per se. Trow (1994), Randle and Brady (1997b), Elliott and Crossley (1997), and Currie and
Vidovich (2000) all mention the increase in bureaucratic procedures, burdensome paperwork, and form-filling that has come about as a result of managerialism.

In comparison to the studies cited above, the data from Rihab and Al Fanar appear rather more complex. The system of appraisal at Al Fanar was considerably more elaborate than at Rihab, involving, as it did, individual faculty interviews and summative reports. At Rihab, there was some suggestion from some managers that the time was not particularly well-spent, but at Al Fanar, management spoke repeatedly of the importance of appraisal and the great need to find sufficient time for it.

By contrast, most faculty members at both institutions said they spent only small amounts of time on appraisal, a finding somewhat at odds with the studies cited above. Nonetheless, four teachers at each institution still said appraisal was a waste of time, either because it had no discernible impact, or because management failed to even read the data they had collected.

**To what extent is appraisal said to focus on either basic technical competencies or flexible, creative practices?**

A number of authors have commented on how most appraisal schemes are competency-based and as such limit teaching to a narrow set of observable skills. According to Peaker (1986), appraisal procedures in the US encourage “safe” rather than creative, flexible teaching, focusing on highly specific competencies at the expense of a more holistic assessment of a teacher’s overall contribution to the institution. Similarly, Wragg (1984) and Elliott (1983) both suggest that competency-based appraisal in the UK ignores the need for imaginative and reflexive skills. More recently, Troman (1996:22) has argued that contemporary definitions of a ‘good’ teacher place greater emphasis “upon the technical competencies that facilitate the administrative and management aspects of the … teacher’s work” with the result that “teacher quality is now defined in terms of technical competencies as opposed to personal qualities”. Quality is reduced to observable facets of student learning and only the predictable and measurable is valued, making what is non-observable, non-quantifiable or unintended irrelevant (Elliott and Crossley, 1997:84). The more teacher appraisal is concerned with “managerial control”, the more quality will be
“defined in terms of minimal competencies … [meaning] … the most generic of technical skills” (Ko, 2001:35).

Without doubt, aspects of the appraisal schemes at Rihab and Al Fanar were said to focus on basic technical competencies. Particularly at the latter institution, the observed lesson was described as an opportunity to perform at one’s best rather than as a chance to engage in collaborative experimentation. There was also some concern on the part of both faculty and managers about the reduction of the complex teaching process to a series of numbers on a feedback form. However, for the most part, teachers suggested this was preferable to anything more nebulous and open to subjective interpretation, and there was certainly little evidence that teachers linked either the use of numbers or the focus on basic technical competencies to a desire for greater managerial control.

How far is the specific appraisal system at each institution perceived as developmental and / or evaluative? How far is it seen as embodying a paradigm of professionalism and / or managerialism?

Many commentators point to the apparent contradiction between an appraisal system that is simultaneously evaluative and developmental, whilst many empirical studies, such as those by Peaker (1986), Fitzgerald (2001) and Middlewood (2001), report no such tension in the eyes of teachers.

In my own study, management and faculty at both institutions agreed that the same appraisal system could, in principle, be simultaneously evaluative and developmental, although they disagreed over whether the specific system in use at their institution was predominantly evaluative or developmental. Most faculty and about half the management said it was evaluative, with the other half of the management saying it was both evaluative and developmental. Given the fact that only five managers were interviewed at Rihab and only four interviewed at Al Fanar, I would hesitate to interpret this difference as evidence of a clear management / faculty divide.

In addition, there was considerable variation between faculty and management over how far the specific system at each institution was negatively skewed in favour of the
administration, or open to misuse. At both places, around half the faculty made very negative comments about elements of the system, whereas none of the management were quite so openly critical. Here again, though, it is not clear how far this finding reflects a genuine difference of opinion, between the management and staff, and how far it is merely indicative of differing levels of interviewee candour. I suspect the latter scenario is more likely.

Several teachers, particularly at Rihab, said they were not adverse to being judged, but did not think the specific appraisal scheme currently in use at their institution was a fair instrument with which to assess their performance. As one of the informants put it, “I think it’s necessary – for any institution to function, it has to have some system of evaluation. But that doesn’t mean to say that I approve of this one”. In other words, an appraisal system that was seen as highly evaluative but very fair would not be considered an imposition of managerial control. Fairness was the key factor, not evaluation, per se.

**To what extent do teachers suggest they feel under surveillance?**

Randle and Brady (1997b:132-133) write about how the student-lecturer relationship that was once based upon “notions of common enterprise, co-operation and mutual responsibilities” is now being used by management as a “surrogate surveillance device”. In similar vein, they argue that a formal complaints procedure may seem like “a reasonable and democratic mechanism designed to protect the students”, but is, in reality, “a potentially destructive instrument that could undermine the authority of lecturers in the perception of the student”. Likewise, Cullen (1997:189) writes of a concern amongst commentators “that appraisal would be used as a means of surveilling and controlling educator behaviour”. In fact, the headteachers in Cullen’s study seem to have overcome this concern and speak very positively of the experience. Their reported enthusiasm for the process and their professed belief that appraisal was not being (mis)used in this way finds considerable resonance with the views expressed by the management in my own study.

With regard to faculty, however, the picture is rather different. It is unclear whether the faculty in my own research ever enjoyed the “traditional” kind of student-lecturer
student relationship described by Randle and Brady (1997b:132), but undoubtedly, many of them were now very concerned about the amount of power apparently wielded by the student population. Randle and Brady (1997a:238) attribute this development to the process of “marketisation”, but, in the country in which I conducted my research, all public HE is free for nationals, and therefore, other factors, relating to the specific social, political, economic, and cultural context, seem to be a more likely cause.

When discussing appraisal in general, or the power of the students, in particular, many interviewees made reference to two particular contextual factors. The first relates to the demographics of the country in which around 20% of the population are indigenous citizens afforded all the social standing and legal status such a term implies, and the remaining 80% are temporary ‘guest workers’ and their dependents, afforded comparatively few rights. The second relates to the system of sponsorship, which allows employers to cancel expatriate work visas, at any time, for almost any reason, thereby forcing people who may have lived in the country for several decades to leave within 30 days. These two factors make the position of higher education faculty in this country very different to the position of higher education faculty in Britain, North America, Australia or New Zealand.

Indeed, a manager from Rihab, and a faculty member from Al Fanar both noted how difficult it was for leaders in North America to remove people who persistently under-performed. One of them told an anecdote about how her spouse, a senior academic at an American university, had tried to dismiss a member of faculty who was “out of control”, and then been sued for sexual discrimination in a suit that “dragged on for years”. She suggested “it is literally impossible to dismiss anybody in the universities now in the States. Now that’s going a little bit too far”. Likewise, the other interviewee described her experience in Canada, where “in a union environment, appraisal becomes fairly meaningless because it’s almost impossible to get rid of anybody … [even] … horrible, completely lazy, horrible, horrible, useless workers”. Both these people contended that it was a good thing for management to be able to dismiss people whose work continued to be substandard, despite repeated opportunities for professional development. The crucial point, however, was that such
freedom must be exercised with extreme caution and complete fairness. In other words:

The system here of being able to get rid of people is good, but being able to get rid of people for no reason without criteria, not explaining, not knowing, the people themselves don’t even know why they are fired, that’s not okay, that’s going too far … the system they’ve got here could be great … because they’ve got the power to do a great job, but they have to take that power and turn it into an altruistic humanitarian way, and not just for the purpose of amassing their own power and maintaining that hierarchy.

Obviously, most people who are asked to leave their place of employment do not publicly admit that their performance was inadequate, or even that their profile was unsuited to that particular educational context. It is unrealistic to expect people who are sacked to agree openly with the decision. On the other hand, it is vital for the sake of staff morale that any such decision is seen by the rest of the staff as fair, rather than arbitrary, and motivated by pedagogy rather than politics. The more power the administration has with regard to dismissal, the more important it is for them to ensure that justice is not only done, but seen to be done.

Clearly, it would be unethical for managers to discuss with co-workers the specific reasons why a particular colleague was asked to leave. The fairness of the appraisal system would need to be demonstrated in other, more generalised, ways, and its credibility in the eyes of faculty would depend more upon the overall organisational context than upon the specifics of the particular scheme. Simons and Elliott (1989:94) argue, rightly in my view, that if an appraisal system is seen as fair, faculty have no problem with management linking it to disciplinary measures. My point, however, is that whether or not faculty perceive the appraisal system as fair depends not so much upon the actual instruments appraisers use, and the specific procedures they follow, as upon the more general preconceptions appraisees hold about the management of their institution.

According to Poster and Poster (1997), the way in which appraisal is approached will vary according to the school climate and culture. In this way, as was mentioned
previously, “… the kind of appraisal system which an institution adopts reflects and reveals both the value system and the existing internal structures of the organisation” (Hutchinson, 1997:166). As many interviewees noted, the key issue is not which appraisal procedures are to be used, but whether faculty have confidence that management will apply whichever procedures they adopt fairly and equitably.

References


