The MENA Business Context and Indigenous Assessment

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Abstract: Objective: The purpose of this qualitative research paper is to evaluate perceptions of indigenous assessment in business institutions in Lebanon.

Methodology: The survey was administered to 66 participants employed in local industry to explore perceptions of the practice of indigenous assessment in the local marketplace. Two research questions were posed: (1) How do you perceive indigenous assessment in your work context? (2) What is the impact of indigenous assessment in your work context?

Results: Based on the qualitative data drawn and assessed, the descriptive findings hold promise; even though not all of the complied results reflected positive perceptions on indigenous assessment in the business context, over half of the participants indicated that their institution engaged in indigenous assessment; moreover, some included it as part of strategized development, thus connecting the institution to society.

Implications: The result of the study and its main limitations imposed by time and space indicate that more comprehensive research is required in this area in order to better understand the impact of indigenous assessment in the Middle East and North Africa, focal emerging countries. The study is particularly useful for practitioners as it clarifies local perceptions of critical forces in the marketplace. This paper gives valuable reference to the role played by indigenous assessment in crafting sustainable organizations in the Lebanon.

Index Terms: Keywords: Business Context, Indigenous Assessment, MENA Leadership.

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has made the world more accountable.

Business institutions are called upon to be accountable (European Commission on Growth, Internal Markets, Industry, Entrepreneurship, and SMEs, 2016; Deming, 1994). Multinational corporations claim to be transparent. Small and medium sized enterprises broadcast that they have adopted an open book policy. This research study evaluates perceptions of assessment in local business contexts in order to better understand the critical role that accountability plays in sustainable development of business institutions in emerging countries.

In the developed world, when assessment is called to the forefront in the business world, managerial leaders, divisional and departmental decision makers are evidence-based. However, the picture may be murky in

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emerging countries because when in tall centralized

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structures the president, the vice president, or divisional heads are held accountable: the picture is not always transparent. The evidence tends to be ambiguous; the numbers may not measurable (Deresky, 2017; Hofstede, 2010).

These leaders tend to be perceived as "Royalty", "Sovereign", and isolated hierarchically from those who manufacture products and deliver services.[2] In emerging countries, presidents of institutions generally are the central authority, the main decision-makers, reigning over rank and file, generating long term strategy, forecasting objectives, embracing plans, and allocating institutional resources (Robbins & Judge, 2017; Wild & Wild, 2016; Danials et. al, 2015). In short, in emerging countries, like Lebanon, these high ranking business individuals tend to lead indigenous assessment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The business context is one marked by change. Institutions adapt to the varied and multiple challenges of technological breakthroughs, security alerts, broad ethical issues, global, regional, domestic, economic and political uncertainties through environmental analysis and competitor intelligence, increased their knowledge bank in each of these areas. Moreover, institutions increase their focus on customers, innovation, and accountability.

Changing technology has shifted organizational boundaries, created virtual workplaces and more mobile workforces, engendered flexible work arrangements, empowered employees, and led to work-life personal life balance. Moreover, wide ranging security threats have also impacted modern businesses. Business leaders have created risk management systems, restructured workplaces, dealt with employee resistance,[1] discrimination and globalization concerns, as well as uncertainty over future energy sources and prices. Furthermore, increased competitiveness has led to customer focus, innovation, and efficiency /productivity concerns. In addition, increased emphasis on organizational and managerial ethics have impacted structural change inside businesses. Leaders are redefining values, rebuilding trust vertically and laterally, and taking steps to increase accountability. Studies in the United States reflected on the results drawn by an electronics' headquarters which evaluated 60% of its employees only on tasks. The headquarters adopted an outcome orientation and geared its employees to productivity. It was found that these employees reported better inter personal relationships with their colleagues, more company loyalty, more focus and

[3]more energy; in addition, in

house productivity increased by 35%. These employees worked fewer hours, were more productive and were accountable (Erickson, 2008).

Business institutions need to develop and implement a quality assurance process. Businesses have an inherent responsibility to identify the knowledge and skills needed and to provide appropriate instruction in these areas to assure learning is taking place. Assessment refers to the systematic collection, review, and use of information for the purpose of improving performance. In the review of literature that follows critical factors related to indigenous assessment in the business context are covered: accountability, strategic leadership, and sustainable development.

A. Assessment

"Best Practices" are indigenous; Best practices are engendered when products or services are designed drawing from the best of indigenous culture and tradition.

In the developed world, "best practices" emerge as engaged human capital—leaders and followers—work together to solve small problems that in effect develop into institutional initiatives. These flourish: grassroots practices spread vertically, built from the bottom up--first line, to middle level manager, to top level manager—and they spread laterally, from department to department. Best practices are indigenously assessed, spreading upward and outward across the institution.

Modern government calls for greater accountability of best practices. Such demands for institutional assessment heavily influence institutional practice. Indigenous assessment is an important step in developing institutional strategy, stemming from a people not part of mainline economic theory, grounded in institutional pride and dignity (Ewell, 2002; Mintzberg, 2000).

Empirical assessment is a modern movement, enforcing data collection, analysis, use, and reporting efforts, many times at the expense of the development of best practices. Increased pressures for accountability from municipal and national policy makers in the government and business context has changed the context. Global organizations, prominent regional and local business organizations, small and medium sized enterprises, are enforcing indigenous assessment.

Rigorous validation on multiple fronts is perceived as essential in the modern world. Assessment has come to represent effectiveness, attaining targeted programmatic, instructional, and institutional objectives. Institutions today have an increased focus on internal conditions that might support or prevent sustainable development. Evidence-based practice assesses institutional learning and effectiveness to ensure quality. It is held as "internationally touted as benefial" (Fullan & Skidmore, 2014, p. 10; Ulrich, 1999).

Cultures of assessment are widely advocated by scholars to improve learning through institutional development and maintenance (& Palomba, 2014[5] Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2010). Unfortunately, this genre of research focused mainly on descriptions of effective cultures of assessment also had scope and timing limitations (Fuller & Skidmore, 2014; Fuller, 2013). Only a few empirical studies have explored factors that are the characteristics and conditions of institutional cultures of assessment (Ndoye & Parker, 2010; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009).

Critical questions as to how leaders undertake institutional assessment; how leaders sustain institutional assessment; and how leaders influence learning were addressed in a recent study (Fuller et. al, 2016) relying on nationwide, stratified, random sampling, expertise, from a number of scholars, and copious literature on cultures of assessment. In addition, other equally important studies have been undertaken to understand the different constituencies who affect or are affected by the institution [9][5]; Makumbe, 2016; Fuller, 2013; Iskenderoglu et al, 2012; Roberts et al, 2005; Lakos & Phipps, 2004 [4] Kerr, 1995). Luthans (1989) focused assessment four critical factors: quality of performance, quantity of performance, job satisfaction, and commitment.

Cultures of assessment became grounded in the United States. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) initiated research on learning outcomes assessment. Practical educational institutions headed the call for increased accountability with nearly two and a half times more assessment-based practices (HigherEdJobs.com) whereby evidence-based practices were implemented as cultures of assessment (Fuller et al, 2016; European Commission on Growth, Internal Markets, Industry, Entrepreneurship, and SMEs, 2016).

"A cultures of assessment is an organization environment in which decisions are based on facts, research, and analysis, and where services are planned and delivered in ways that maximize positive outcomes and impact customers and stakeholders. A culture of assessment exists in organizations where staff care to know about what results they have produced and how these results relate to customer expectations. Organizational mission, vision, values, structures, and systems support behavior that is performance and learning focused" (Lakos, Phipps, & Wilson, 2002).

B. Heading the Assessment Process

Leadership is a process of influencing individuals and groups/teams to achieve institutional objectives. A leader's job is to assist these followers in attaining their work-related departmental goals and to provide direction or support needed to ensure that their goals are compatible with the goals of the group and the institution. In doing so, millennial leaders face challenging contemporary challenges and may use different power bases to ensure job completion.

Institutional leaders who head the assessment process tend to lead from a tall centralized structure with cultural factors as power distance individualism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance and time orientation playing a role in how assessment is processed inside the institution. Institutional mission statement, vision, values, ethics, and organizational culture direct the assessment process down the chain of command (Robins & Coulter, 2017; Deresky, 2017; Dessler, 2015; James, 2014; Gardner, 2009) (See Figure One).

Fig. 1: Aligning Indigenous Assessment

Research studies hold that irrespective of their leadership style, leaders influence the assessment process as they gather data on the institutions' critical capability. Their indigenous assessment is formally aligned to the institution's mission, vision, and strategic objectives (UN Responsible Management , 2017; Feser et, al, 2014; Goleman, 2000; Connolly et. al, 2000).

C. The Impact of Assessment

Knowledge of the institution's indigenous assessment is a critical step in determining an institutions' strategy. Planning is the process of identifying and selecting an institution's objectives and deciding how the institution will achieve these objectives. In turn, strategy is the set of planned actions taken by institutional leaders to help an institution meet those objectives. The critical factors to developing an effective strategy is to define its objectives clearly and to plan carefully how it intends to realize those objectives. Primarily, it means that an institution undertakes an analysis of its own capabilities in order to identify what needs to be done to improve internally as well as externally in face of its competition. In addition, it means that the institution carefully assesses the competitive environment, the national and international business environment in which it operates.

Knowledge of institutional core competencies--internal strengths and weaknesses in line with the external opportunities and threats--is part of the six step program of developing long term strategy. The Six Step Program is a structured and systematic program of identifying the institutions' mission, goals, and strategies (Figure One, above) conducting analysis on the internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as the external opportunities and threats, formulating strategies, implementing strategies, and finally evaluating strategies.

Conducting analysis on the internal strengths and weaknesses and the external threats and opportunities (SWOT) is a very important two-step process (See Figure Two). The external environment acts as an important constraint on a leader's future plans. Analyzing that external context is a critical step in the strategic management process. The first step is that leaders take is to conduct an external evaluation so that awareness of competitors activities, pending legislation, or labor conditions in the different sectors do not impinge on future activities. In an external analysis, leaders need to assess both the specific and general environments to assess trends and changes. Having completed the analysis on the external environment, institutional leaders then focus on positive trends--opportunities--that the institution might exploit and negative trends—threats--the institution must counteract.

The second step is to conduct an internal analysis which

provides important information on the institution's specific resources and the institutions capabilities. Institutional resources are what the institution has--its financial, physical, and intangible assets that it uses to develop, manufacture, and deliver products to its customers. Moreover, the institution's capabilities also owns a value creating process-- its skills and abilities in doing the work activities needed in its business. The major value-creating capabilities of the organization are its core competencies. Thus, both the resources and core competencies determine the institution's competitive weapons. Having completed the internal analysis, institutional leaders are able to identify organizational strengths and weaknesses. Activities done well or unique resources are denoted as strengths and activities not done well or resources needed are weaknesses.

The combined external and internal analysis are called a SWOT analysis which is the analysis of an institution's strengths and weaknesses and its opportunities and threats. After completing the SWOT analysis, then institutional leaders are able to formulate strategies that exploit the institutions strengths and external opportunities and secure the institution from external threats as well as work to remove internal weaknesses (Robbins & Coulter, 2017).

Fig. 2: SWOT Analysis

Based on both secondary analysis as well as the data and information drawn from indigenous assessment--knowledge drawn from performance--many business institutions plan their long term strategy and sustainability (Grewal & Levy, 2016; Wheelan & Hunger, 2016; Martoochio, 2015; Kotler & Cohen, 2002; Drucker, 1996; Senge, 1996) (See Figure Three).

A well-defined strategy leads business institutions to contend effectively in an increasingly competitive international market. An well structured strategy serves to coordinate the institutions divisions and departments so that the institution effectively and efficiently reaches its objectives. A clear and aligned strategy focuses on best

performing activities in best

performing industries. Such strategies keep the institution geared to success and buffered against its internal weaknesses and external threats since they are based on the institution's identity--its mission and vision—and hard data—indigenous assessment.
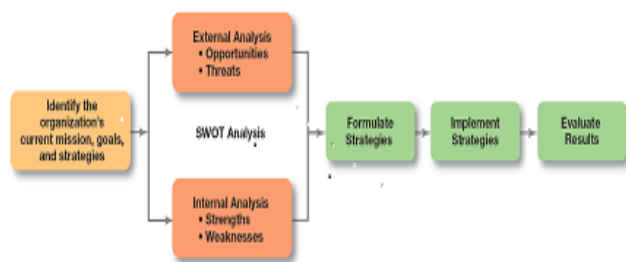

Fig. 3: Six Step Program

Research studies hold that assessment is also grounded outside the United States and Europe (https://byblosbank.com; https://audibank.com; https://alrifai.com; www.chataeukefraya.com; www.aub.edu.lb; https://lau.edu.lb). The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) includes focal emerging countries in which institutions are engaged in business development and growth, connecting institution to customer. This study evaluates local perception of indigenous assessment in the business context.

III. METHODOLOGY

This section covers the purpose of the study, research questions, participants, instruments, procedures used in the study, research design, analysis of data used and rubrics.

A. Purpose

The research study is a qualitative evaluation of indigenous assessment in the local context. The purpose of this research is two-fold: to evaluate local perceptions on indigenous assessment and its impact.

B. Research Questions

Two research questions were posed in order to explore indigenous assessment in the local context:

Research Question One: How do you perceive indigenous assessment in your work context?

Research Question Two: What is the impact of indigenous assessment in your work context?

C. Participants

The participants for this exploratory study were 49 young men and 17 young women. The age range was between 22-47. The participants were mature. They had pragmatic and theoretical knowledge of the concepts being assessed given that they were employed in the business industry and were students in the Graduate School of Business.

D. Instrument

A survey was constructed. The survey began with an assurance of confidentiality related to information shared and a request for honest information related to workplace practices. Preliminary demographic questions were included. Two variables were explored; three questions were posed related to the content area. Two questions required reflection and discussion. The third question asked the

participants to rank variables on the Likert type scale from 1-5 where 1 had the weakest value and 5 the highest.

E. Procedure

The survey was handed out in nine different graduate courses in two Schools of Business on five different campuses in four different districts. Participants were given 20 minutes to respond. Given their understanding of the external context, and assured of confidentiality, the 159 participants were asked to be open, honest, and explicit.

F. Research Design, Analysis of Data, and Rubrics:

In what follows the paper's research design and the research paper's analysis of data and rubrics are discussed.

G. Research Design

The research design applied is an exploration exploring leadership styles and indigenous assessment in a localized context in the MENA.

H. Analysis of Data and Rubrics

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected and to study the participants' knowledge and awareness of the local workplace assessment context. As a result, two variables were explored: indigenous assessment and the impact of indigenous assessment.

- Indigenous Assessment: the participants were asked (1) elaborate on indigenous assessment
- Impact of Indigenous Assessment: the participants were asked (1) to elaborate on the impact of indigenous assessment; (2) to rank the impact of indigenous assessment into four categories: quality of performance, quantity of performance, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization.

A rubric was developed to assess indigenous assessment:

- Rubric One: The rubric is made up of four categories--quality of performance, quantity of performance, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization.

In short, given the reviewed literature and the noted methodology, in what follows, indigenous assessment is explored in the business context.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the qualitative research conducted were positive. Local perceptions of indigenous assessment were promising in that many participants claimed that leadership strategies integrated indigenous assessment to improve best practices and sustain development.

With respect to Research Question One, "How do you perceive indigenous assessment in your work context?" 55% of the participants had positive perceptions while 45% of the participants had negative perceptions. Most of the participants had positive perceptions. They held that it was related to the more rational systematized sense of order and structure within best practices in the institutions where they worked. These participants understood that the local business context in their country was different; it was also different inside companies. This factor was noted by other

participants who held that they perceived indigenous assessment as essentially part of their new day-to-day business at work such as filling out forms, weekly and monthly processed paperwork, HR training courses, workshop, and simulations. The participants stated that much of their day was filling out long and detailed tables. Some asserted that indigenous assessment was an ongoing mentoring process: this learning process was about getting things done in a more efficient and more effective manner. Others held it was a leader-follower, teacher-student set-up in which they learnt new information. They were taught how to use the latest information technology applications to improve their systems approach and to ward off security threats.

On the other hand, most of the participants had negative perceptions on indigenous assessment in their work context. A few said, "The work environment is now daily meetings and continuous assessment." One said, "I spend my day assessing the job and tabulating numbers." A third participant asked a pointed question, "Wasn't I hired because I excelled in my field of specialization. I am here to do my job rather than assess every step I take."

Moreover, with respect to Research Question Two, "What is the impact of indigenous assessment in your work context?" the participants' response ranged from "far more accountability at work on every level of the institution" to adamant "refusal to be accountable." Some were enthused by the ongoing "training and development" whereas other were not. A number of participants held that "as a result of the new shift to increased internal accountability, the work context now had improved management, enhanced service, and more responsible leadership." On the other hand, other participants asserted that "as a result of the shift in leadership strategy", personnel were overworked and had lower morale. Some said, "Unfortunately, this assessment is politicized."

Furthermore, once quality, quantity, job satisfaction, and commitment to institution--the four scaled variables are included in the discussion, the participants' response to "What is the impact of indigenous assessment in your work context?" becomes more meaningful. The results show the following: quality of performance was perceived as 72%; quantity of performance was perceived as 73%; job satisfaction witnessed was perceived as 63%; and commitment to institution was perceived as 66%. For example, one of the participants asserted that the with respect to indigenous assessment in her work context, both the quality and quantity of performance had markedly changed. She stated, "Assessment led to learning how to do a better job: we has a specialist who taught us how to use a new application. The specialist had additional follow up sessions. But you know what gets me? We are still monitored."

One participant angrily asserted, "It is frightening; even indigenous assessment is politicized!" These participants stated the assessment process had changed the work context in many ways and "most of the assessment was pointless because the data was not used." These participants asserted that indigenous assessment in their institution was simply a testimony that the institution was gathering data.

Another participant remarked on the impact of assessment on her level of job satisfaction and commitment to institution. "The quality of my performance has improved, but now I have so much more to do. I am exhausted most of the time. There is too much to do! You know what? I have other work commitments." Others screamed, "I really would like to get

my work done properly?" These discerning remarks were supported by other participants who affirmed that they suffered from a shortage of time to handle both the newly formalized institutional assessment and their job.

Nonetheless, the participants' feedback is promising. Empirical assessment, though positive on one front, as an institutional movement that enforces data collection, analysis, use, and reporting efforts, seems to be at the expense of job satisfaction and institutional commitment of the participants. The hard evidence inside local institutions showed that when indigenous assessment is perceived as formally directed by institutional mission, vision, values, traditions, and ethics and is driven by indigenous leadership, it tends to positively influence job quality, quantity, job satisfaction and institutional commitment though cognitive dissonance was apparent.

In short, proactive business institutions are initiating a new strategy by adopting processes and programs that call for indigenous assessment (See Figure One, Figure Two, and Figure Three). Through calls for accountability and responsible management (UN Responsible Management Education, 2017), many local leaders are actively enhancing "best practices" to sustain development.

V. CONCLUSION

Business institutions were seen to be stepping up.

55% of the business institutions initiated indigenous assessment. Intra-preneurial leaders have turned around business enterprises to create resounding business practices (https://byblosbank.com; https://alrifainuts.com; https://chateaukefraya.com; https://aub.edu.lb); other initiators are taking steps to institutionalize assessment, many adopting the power distance-uncertainty avoidance traditional systems (https://saintcharleshospital.com).

Strategies which began with the general agreement to foster inter and intra departmental collaboration in an effort to achieve institutional missions led the institution into a more accountable business context, into more sustainable development (See Figure One; See Figure Three). Nonetheless, challenges were dealt with as new procedures and policies were formalized. In addition, numerous threats in the external environment from competition, the out-dated legal system, the poor infrastructure, and the out-dated technological system were also overcome.

This MENA research study showed that as other research studies conducted in the developed world have posited, indigenous assessment is centered on accountability (Blount & Carroll, 2017; Fuller et al. 2016; Banta & Palomba, 2014; Kotter & Sclesinger, 2008; Lakos, Phipps, & Wilson, 2002; Bennis[7] in Ulrich, Zenger, & Smallwood, 1999) whether the motivation comes from legislators who emphasize accountability and documentation or from regional accreditation agencies who emphasize assessment as a means to improve.

A. Limitations

Limitations were met in the study—convenience sample, time and space.

The results are clarified by the

participants' humane voice: The participants openly shared meaningful evaluation of what happened in their work context. Given that the research was evaluative, the explored data drawn from nine different business-related courses on five campuses across four districts in the country needs to be more thoroughly evaluated to better understand indigenous assessment.

B. Recommendation

Indigenous assessment is a key lever.

Crafting indigenous assessment in the third millennium is crafting competitive advantage—the institution's essential differential in sustainable development. Institutional leaders' awareness and knowledge related to perceptions of performance may create an institutional culture of inquiry and improvement. As a practitioner-researcher, I believe that additional research needs to be undertaken to better understand how indigenous assessment in this part of the Middle East and North Africa can bring about meaningful indigenous change amidst a country and a region marked by the promise of growth and development.

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