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Consultation Proposal on Alpha College's operations management – Investigative study

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Abstract:

Purpose This research project examines the faulty practices adopted by Alpha college which is a distance learning center providing higher education in the UAE. The first step includes identifying the operational malpractices, the second step includes providing a consultation on how to resolve the current issues faced by the college. The college will be named under the pseudonym or alias “Alpha College” and the orthonym will not be mentioned throughout the research to protect the organization’s identity.

Methodology Interviews were conducted with students. 9 students are chosen to provide primary data regarding the issues they encountered throughout their program.

Implications The recommendations are proposed to solve malpractices in the field of operations management only.

Findings We found out that Alpha college didn’t prioritize their capacity management function causing loss of IT resources and disturbance to their students as they used the partner college’s applications. Secondly, the college failed to forecast the programs that will be demanded in the future and ended up partnering with subpar universities. Quality wasn’t delivered to their students throughout the program.

Originality: This research applies the operations management functions in the higher education scope, specifically in distance learning centers that offer undergraduate and post graduate education. To our knowledge this is the first study in the region that has examined this issue to ascertain the effectiveness of this approach.

Keywords:

Higher-education, operations, capacity, forecast, quality



Introduction

Research context

In comparison to the traditional school system, the educational system has undergone a radical upheaval in the previous 15 years. To provide a knowledge exchange mechanism that is both efficient and effective, the contemporary educational system relies heavily on state-of-the-art technology. Information and communication technology (ICT) have influenced all tiers of education, from elementary and secondary schools through colleges, universities, and other specialized learning institutions (Komljenovic, 2021).

Research problem

The research problem revolves around identifying the operational malfunctions as reported by the students of the same institution and adding more context from the secondary data as well. The researchers will rely heavily on the primary data collected.

Research objectives

To study the operational problems of Alpha College then provide a consultation proposal that includes Operational management models that suits the problems. The models will be derived from academic journals, textbooks, consultation sites and other peer-viewed publications. However, the models will be adjusted to suit the context of the study.

Importance of the study

The study is considered important by the researchers as it exposes the operational issues with distance-learning colleges and provides them with suitable recommendations. The researchers noticed literature gap regarding Higher educational institutes. This research will contribute to operational perspective in distance-learning colleges in the UAE.

Validity of the information

The college will be named under the pseudonym or alias “Alpha College” and the orthonym will not be mentioned throughout the research to protect the organization’s identity. As the aim of this consultancy project is to identify and solve existing problems rather than publicize the discrepancies in the college’s operations.

Literature Review

Different environmental elements and their effects on student learning and faculty effectiveness in higher education have been the subject of several research (Berenguer, & Shen, 2020). Several claims made in the

research literature suggest HEIs (*Higher Education Institutes*) might gain by educating themselves more thoroughly on service quality and its components. Due to decreased state funding and increased consumer demands, competition for business programs is severe, as observed by Oke, & Fernandes, (2020). Oldfield and Baron (2000) claim that the necessity for HEIs to achieve a competitive advantage has emerged as a primary concern. Similarly, Komljenovic, (2021) noted that retaining students has become a significant concern for the academic community. That's why many groups and academics are attempting to figure out what's going on and where things may be improved, and why there are so much research being done on some of the most serious problems (Demir, et al, 2020). Second, the past decade has seen a change in the higher education sector's priority from serving prospective students to serving "participating customers," or actual students (Okafor, 2022). There are many stakeholders in the educational system, including potential students, employees, employers, the government, and industry (Okafor, 2022). As things are in higher education now, it's possible that students are HEIs' primary customer base (Demir, et al, 2020). Higher education institutions (HEIs), according to Li, (2022), educational institutes must correlate the quality of education and student satisfaction which is positive in nature.

Finally, studies done since the mid-1990s have discovered a variety of factors that influence HEIs' productivity and economic success. Several "university characteristics" proposed by Abbas et al., (2020) may be useful in explaining students' perceptions of a university's quality. These characteristics include an institution's commitment to competent teaching, the availability of staff for student consultation, library services, computer facilities, recreational activities, class sizes, the level and difficulty of subject content, and student workload. Komljenovic, (2021) identified nine total quality management (TQM) important success factors affecting the performance and commercial excellence of UK HEIs (after leadership and continuous improvement). Oke, & Fernandes, (2020) drew the conclusion from their study that American and New Zealand universities should focus on enhancing their standing in the community, students' employability, the quality of their programs, the quality of their facilities, and the quality of their surroundings.

The results of an empirical study conducted by Yu et al., (2021) among UK business and management students revealed three dimensions of perceived service quality in higher education: "requisite elements" (critical to students'



ability to complete their coursework), "acceptable elements" (desirable but not necessary), and "functional elements" (practical or utilitarian). Few studies have examined the high-end of higher education service delivery (Dutta, et al., 2020). While there has been much research into how undergraduates evaluate service quality, Abbas et al., (2020) and Yu et al. (2021) pointed out that less conclusions have been formed on how postgraduates evaluate service quality. According to their own research, the service is falling short of the needs of graduate students. The "academic" and "industry links" components of service quality are the most valued by graduate students, according to research by Yu et al. (2021). Demir et al., (2020) also studied doctoral students and concluded that attentive instructor listening is crucial for student success. Dutta et al. (2021) examined international graduate students studying at a variety of Malaysian universities and found that overall, their experiences were quite negative compared to their expectations. Considering the apparent complexity of LM (*Learning Management*) adoption and the need of doing it right the first time, the question of whether LM is appropriate for HEIs arises. The success of high education's (HE) attempts to use quality management strategies originally established for other sectors have been uneven (Abbas et al., 2020). The authors Abbas et al, (2020) were the ones who distinguish between service and education, say that a clear distinction must be made between the two. They also note that misunderstanding the distinctions between these roles leads to incompatible implementation tactics. Statistical Process Control (SPC), Lean Six Sigma (LSS), Total Quality Management (TQM), and the Theory of Constraints are some additional methodologies that may be used to achieve continuous improvement in addition to LM (Oke, & Fernandes, 2020). Picking and putting into action the best strategy may be a challenge. There is a lot of information on LM in general, but surprisingly little about how LM is being used at universities. Demir, et al, (2020). investigates LM's role in university management.

Methodology

Research Method

Primary data was collected from conducting a series of personal interviews. Total of 9 students were chosen for the study.

Please refer to the interview questions in **Appendix 1**

Sample Size

Occupation	Program	Code
Undergraduate Student	Bachelor of Business Management	B1
Undergraduate Student	Bachelor of Business Management	B2
Undergraduate Student	Bachelor of Business Management	B3
Postgraduate (Taught)- Student	Master of Arts in Education	M1
Postgraduate (Taught)- Student	Master of Business Administration	M2
Postgraduate (Taught)- Student	Master of Business Administration	M3
Postgraduate (Research)- Student	Doctor of Management	D1
Postgraduate (Research)- Student	Doctor of Business Administration	D2
Postgraduate (Research)- Student	Doctor of Business Administration	D3

Figure1: The code "B" stands for Bachelors. The code "M" stands for master and the code "D" stands for doctorate followed by a serial number "1-3". The codes were introduced to keep track of the interviewees.

Findings and Discussions

Findings

The researchers used thematic analysis to divide the findings into three sections, each section highlights a certain theme.

The Operational issues	Operational practices (Themes)
The Learning systems doesn't connect properly with the partner university and sometimes operates independently	Capacity management
IT supports are not available late at night although it is a college that supports adult learners and working professionals	Capacity management
Limited seats in Doctorial Program due to maximum capacity set by the providers. Less resources are allocated for doctoral students as they represent a small percentage.	Capacity management
Partnering with subpar universities instead of established ones.	Forecasting
Affiliated with unknown accreditation bodies instead of ministry of education	Forecasting
Less AI based programs options and limited resources to support	Forecasting



Certificate delivery and administrative services are below student's expectations	Quality Management
Rude staff and the customer service (student services) are not fully available during classes	Quality management
Surveys and student feedback are not taken seriously by the staff	Quality management

Figure 2 Table shows the issues that must be tackled by the researcher divided into topics and common practices in Operations Management.

Discussions

The discussion section will include a definitions, quotes, and interpretations.

Capacity Management

Capacity Management is described by Bloomenthal (2020) as the process of ensuring that a business is maximizing the potential activities and output in a certain period. The Capacity includes the designing, production, and delivery process.

1. “We use our own learning information systems, but it is well-connected to the partner university. We end up using the partner’s system instead of Alpha’s occasionally. So why are we spending extra money to Alpha if we can’t use the in-house services” stated M2. The researcher found out that the capacity of the IT resources is not meeting the expectations of the students. “In-house services include Microsoft office, SPSS, Grammarly, etc.” added M2. The students are paying extra for the facilitation services by the college instead of enrolling directly to the universities abroad. The student is dissatisfied with the lack of internet-based resources that are promised. The Dependability performance objectives of operations is not fulfilled.

2. “We are working professionals and fulltime employees; our self-study times might vary from a student to another. We do expect minimal IT support outside operating hours, we know the IT services are outsourced to India.” Complained D3. The researchers comprehended that the IT support services is not available to students and their working times are inconvenient to the working professionals.

3. “Limited seats offered to Doctoral students” Stated D1. The researcher thought that the admissions criteria might be strict. However, the student complained that it is due to

limited resources left offered to doctoral students. “We are 15 students only in the classroom” added D1. D1 claimed that it is limited due to limited funding of resources given by the administration and in that case the company will not match the external demands and will end up losing potential students.

4. “The college is evidently not performing to its full potential due to frequent complaints about poor IT systems, low-quality management and unfavorable partnerships.” Added M1 which indicates although the operations are invisible to the students, they could still detect the problems with the program and its capacity.

Forecasting

Tuovila (2022) described forecasting as the act of predicting future trends based on historical data. The important quotes will be mentioned in this section for the sole purpose of interpretation.

1. “Alpha used to partner with top-notch universities including Liverpool John moores and Cardiff Metropolitan but now programs from well-known universities are limited and subject to cancellation and now unknown American and Spanish universities are dominating the list” groaned M3. The researcher noticed that the university partnered with universities that are unknown although previously it is recorded that the British programs are popular. It is a forecasting error.

2. “We don’t really care about the Forbes awards and the praises they receive in the newspaper; we want proper recognition like MOE and SPEA (Sharjah Private Education Authority), they should be taking our feedback seriously throughout the years. Our feedback is enough to forecast I believe” stated B3. The student still believes that the steps taken to secure their future are still unknown. The student wants the forecasting process to be more transparent and fulfil their needs for a local recognition.

3. “We need more AI based programs from established universities” stated B2. The universities did record how popular their last Computer science programs and offered AI program. However, the students wanted better providers (Universities). The researcher notices that the forecasting process was done right. However, they couldn’t fulfil the variety criteria.

4. “The institution's partnerships with other organisations are also worthless as they are not British and must catch up to British standards. A product/service redesign in bound

to occur” added D2. The researchers noticed how a doctoral student is using his/her knowledge to forecast how the service should be

designed to match the students’ needs.

Quality Management

Barone (2022) described quality management as the function responsible to enhance customer satisfaction to existing and potential customers. In general, the theory focuses on long-term goals through the implementation of short-term initiatives.

1. “Certificate was shipped through the next building and when I went there to get it, I found out that they have printed the wrong spelling, I waited a whole year after completion for the certificate and I feel really angry, I posted on every review site to spread the word” stated M3. The administration couldn’t provide customer satisfaction in the post-service phase, which lead to a disappointment expressed by the student as negative reviews shared throughout the internet. “The institution’s substandard services are further highlighted by the delivery of degrees to wrong addresses and misspelt names” added D2. The researchers noticed that the issue is recurring.

2. “The academic and administrative staff are rude and recurrent usage of unprofessional language is quite common here “complained B1. The transforming resources (lecturers and admins) are not providing service to the student that meets their expectations which leads to potential loss of the student in the short run. Customer satisfaction is not taken seriously here.

3. “Surveys and feedback are done as a tradition. However, it is never taken seriously” Stated D2. The researcher found it difficult to perform the forecasting strategy and provide satisfaction if the feedback on the services is not recorded.

4. “The college is trying to perform to its full capacity but seemingly cannot manage to due to partnerships with blacklists colleges, lack of proper IT infrastructure and poor-quality management.” Added D1. The researchers believe that this comment summarizes the main issue with Alpha’s Quality management.

Interpretation

This section will add context to the research by combing both the primary and secondary data.

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Dimensions of Operation Management

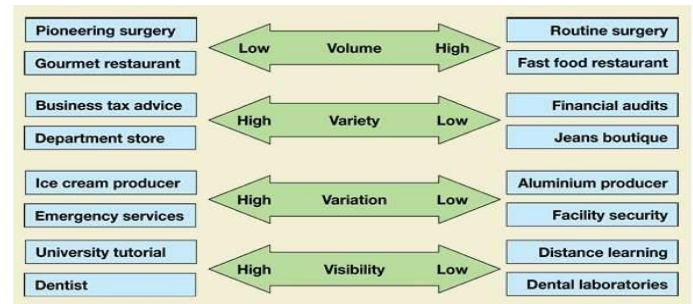


Figure 3 illustrates what constitutes as high or low giving examples. Essay (2018) was pushing to measure the performance objectives as it is difficult to manage what the organization can’t measure.

1. High Volume of output: the researchers will identify this dimension as high. Yearly 400 graduates complete their programs online and on campus. For a two-story building 400 students yearly and limited publications are considered high. Gulf news (2021) described the convocation in their yearly report as high.
2. Low Variety of output: the college offers multiple programs in Business, IT and Education. However, the degree programs are limited, and the partner university offerings are not as they used to be.
3. There is a low variation of demand: The distance learnin centers usually cater for adults who want to skip the management ladder and want some academic guidance accompanying their experience. Keystone (2023) have listed similar programs from their sister university.
4. Low Visibility of demand: From the researchers understanding the classes are either hybrid or online which shows high emphasis on ICT integration. The operations are mostly online and invisible to the students.

Performance Objectives



Figure 4 identifies the performance objectives, and the text below will indicate Alpha's position. The table is derived from a study that focuses on how software drives the performance objectives (Ayodele, 2013). The same diagram will be used as an abstract to fit the research's narrative.

1. Quality: The quotes indicates that the students are not satisfied with the service and the post-service provided by the college. Which indicates that higher costs might occur in the future to implement new programs that matches the current needs.
2. Speed: The college did offer programs that are demanded on time and as it is mostly online. The college didn't face problems achieving this objective. The students did demand better partner universities so the faster the college offer the demanded programs the less risk will be exposed to.
3. Dependability: The programs offered weren't from prestigious partner universities. This objective is crucial as the researchers believe that it will override the other objectives and it will influence student loyalty (postgraduate or post doctorate).
4. Flexibility: The college could provide product/service flexibility by partnering with better universities for the upcoming academic year and achieve "product/service flexibility".
5. Costs: The dimensions of operation management did prove a reduction in cost as the volume is high but all the other 3 dimensions are low.

Recommendations

Capacity management elements and processes

The researchers believe that the organization should use a lead capacity management process which might be an aggressive approach.

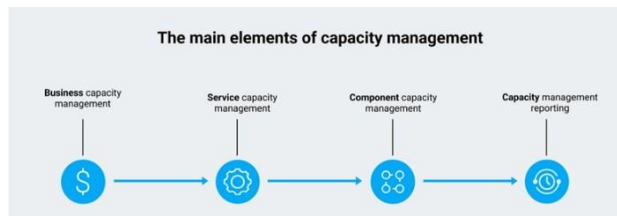


Figure 5 identifies the main elements of capacity management. This is the first part of a two-part plan as proposed by Coing (2017).

1. Alpha College should identify the business needs regarding IT and ICT resources. The researchers recommend providing a package of Microsoft, Grammarly, spss and other software's that will students connect with the partner universities freely.
2. The IT team should provide a documented detailed predictions if the in-house team can perform well and if the detailed predictions show that the lows and greater than the peaks then the researchers would recommend considering outsourcing some of the IT tasks with a sub-contractor.
3. The IT team should measure the limitations of both the hardware and the software.
4. The management teams in the college including the IT team should record the data including the individual feedbacks from the students and present it. The report must be called service capacity report.

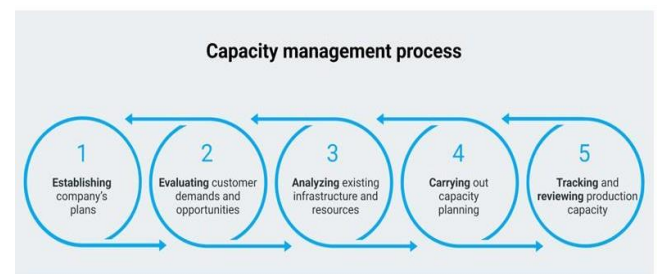


Figure 6 shows the capacity management process that Alpha College should follow to use their resources efficiently. This is the second part of a two parts plan as proposed by Coing (2017).

1. Alpha College must predict the number of students that might join the programs which will create a clear plan to offer both transforming and transomed resources (Computers, software, and maintenance teams). Every convocation consists of around 400 graduating students. The researchers believe that the capacity must exceed 400.
2. Based on the current demands of the students, the college forecasted that the students wanted more cost-efficient programs hence they partnered up with subpar universities. The current students were not pleased with the drop in quality. The students want to match the job market with above average British education as offered by the college before the transition to cost effective programs.
3. The college will need to develop the current

infrastructure and provide better IT services. A special learning

management software must be fully equipped to give the students some extra edge before joining the partner university's learning system. The researchers propose to outsource a 24-hour service for the working professionals. 4. It is evident that the college needs an improved IT infrastructure which will cost the college and a subcontractor must offer outsourced service to attain student satisfaction throughout the program as the technical errors will cause disturbances to the students. 5. The final step is to keep documented progress reports to compare and analyze with every period. The documentations are the only source the researchers believe should be internally audited.

Forecasting Method

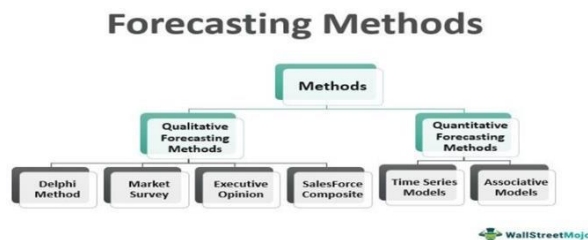


Figure 7 shows the forecasting methods. Ramachandran (2022) proposed two forecasting techniques that seems suitable to fit the Alpha college context.

The researcher believes that the college must take the surveys seriously from the students. The students vouched for the quality of the survey however, the college doesn't take the data under consideration. Ramachandran (2022) did provide several methods of quantitative and qualitative forecasting methods. However, we find the market survey the most appropriate and convenient. The students as we can see would prefer British programs.

Business redesign process

Hayes (2022) described this technique as a complete redesign of the organization's key business process to achieve a jump in performance. The results will vary from cost reduction, higher return on investment (ROI) and improved quality of business. The term also means redesigning or reengineering the company's activities to

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achieve efficiency. Berg, G. V. den (2015) offered a diagram that the researchers recommend that the college follows:

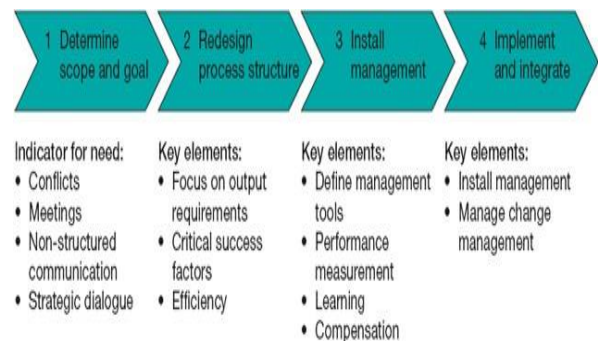


Figure 8 shows the business redesign process that the college shall use.

1. The previous obstacles occurred when the Information systems offered to the students by the college were not as expected, hence they only use the partner's learning systems. This caused the students feel dissatisfied. The management team must meet to decide on choosing new partners and outsource the expensive IT maintenance services.
2. The required output is providing British above average programs with developed learning systems with around the clock technical support. The requirements are MOUs (Memorandum of Understanding) with British Universities that are willing to partner up.
3. The performance management objectives that must be set are quality, speed, and dependability.
4. I recommend immediate integration from the next batch which will start in September 2023 and the next 7 months will be sufficient to integrate the redesigning process.

Quality management

Barone (2022) described quality management as providing the customers with satisfaction as we can observe from the findings section the students are dissatisfied with the services provided in most spectrums.

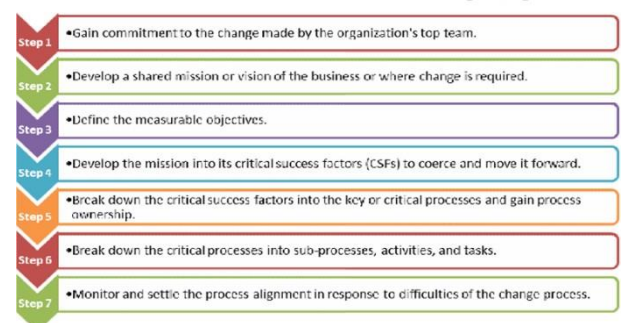


Figure 9 provides a 7-step process as provided by Elsaraiti (2019) in his article Libya: Implementing Total Quality Management in Ceramic Industry.

The quality model will be adapted to meet the college's context.

1. The top-level management in the college must realize that the students are dissatisfied due to operational malfunctions in the college and implementing change must be done to avoid such upsets in the future.
2. The shared vision must include providing quality educational programs and setting an environment that encourages and supports the students throughout the journey.
3. The objectives defined are providing quality, speed, and dependability to the student.
4. The critical success factors must include customer satisfaction, customer focus, employee commitment, quality data and employee involvement.

5. CSFs	6. How to implement
Customer satisfaction	By providing data on monthly surveys to get the students feedback and to measure the satisfaction rates.
Customer focus	A team of student services must provide modified services to students that satisfies their needs including IT support and any general concern
Employee commitment	The employees must be professional and never show rude gestures to students who expect a certain level of quality
Employee involvement	The management must support the employees by partnering up with subcontractors to

	outsource some IT services
Quality data	The surveys must be designed to attain useful data that can be analyzed and interpreted by the management

Figure 10 steps 5 and 6 are shown in a table form.

7. A proper documentation process must be implemented to record all the changes and their effects to provide flexible approaches to mend the situation.

Risks and Limitations

The research follows a single case study design. Future studies can collect data from multiple higher educational institutes must be collected to contribute knowledge in that field. As the literature review didn't mention any local study regarding distance learning colleges in the UAE.

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Appendix 1 (Interview Questions)

The interview questions are as follows:

- Q1. Could you please state what program are you currently enrolled in?
- Q2. How much fees are you expected to pay for your program and how would you describe the cost? Is it reasonable?
- Q3. Describe the quality of the program? Did it meet your expectation?
- Q4. How do you describe the dependability of the academic staff offered to you?
- Q5. How were the classes delivered? Please explain the process.
- Q6. Did the college own enough IT infrastructure to offer you a smooth distance learning process?
- Q7. Do you think that the college performing at full capacity? From your own observation
- Q8. Was there any incident that required an immediate change in operation from the management? Please elaborate more.
- Q9. Hypothetically speaking if you were occupying the dean's position. How will you design the program?
- Q10. Do you have any recommendations on how will the college provide a better student experience

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