Leading Institutional Policy Implementation: Negotiating the Complexities of Policy Implementation in Higher Education in the UAE

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Abstract

While it is widely understood that assessment policy and its implementation by actors profoundly affect the quality of student learning in higher education, there is a dearth of research highlighting the institutional factors that influence policy implementation in today's globalized world. Although leadership is an often-cited factor influencing policy implementation, it is not well understood in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Middle East. This paper discusses a qualitative case study that explored how leadership negotiates institutional factors and influences actors' implementation of assessment in a Health Sciences department in an institution in the UAE. Adopting Hans Bresser's (2004) Contextual Interaction Theory (CIT) as an empirically-based conceptual framework, the case study examined how institutional factors and leadership influence motivation, cognition, and power/capacity in a UAE institution. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with key informants in a Health Sciences department and internal and external policy documentation. Findings indicated that the policy design and the institution's top-down approach to governance influenced leaders' implementation of assessment policy in particular ways. In addition, the institutional culture of change and the sizable multi-campus structure impacted the department's policy and leaders' assessment implementation. Finally, there were findings on the nature of leadership and the nuances of supporting and influencing policy implementation that was contextualized in UAE society. The study results offer policymakers, institutional leaders, and department-level leaders (department and program leaders) a deeper understanding of how system-level influences impact policy implementation.

Introduction

Over the past decade, globalization has led to policy reform in higher education in many countries. Indeed, recent changes to the global economy, where intellectual capacity and technical skills take precedence over natural resources, magnified the need for education reform worldwide. Accordingly, governments-initiated reforms to improve the quality of higher education, aligning education policy with the new mandate of meeting the needs of a knowledge-based economy, resulting in a number of changes. For instance, there have been changes to governance models and existing organizational structures (decentralization) at the macro level. Education reform has also impacted institutional governance, leadership, programming, curriculum, and learning outcomes. Additionally, there have been large-scale changes to institutional teaching, learning, and assessment policies, which impacted actors at the ground level. That said, there is a large gap between the formulation of a new policy and its actual implementation, as research has established that policy implementation is complex and influenced by several factors (Honig, 2006; Hudson et al., 2019).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is emblematic of the effect of globalization. Oil offered the UAE its first opportunity to compete and connect globally. In recent years, technological and communication advancements such as the internet have further connected the UAE to the rest of the world. Today, it is well positioned as a part of the globalized economy, offering multi-national companies and start-up businesses favorable economic conditions to invest in the UAE. Its economic-free zones offer large facilities, cheap labor, and tax incentives and have attracted much

investment. As a result, it is now a key economic hub in the Middle East, with a huge expatriate population attracted to the country by job opportunities in different employment sectors.

While the UAE is a part of the globalized economy and a key player in the Middle East, it has recently initiated economic reform as part of its overall strategic plan. It developed a comprehensive economic plan (Vision 2021) which "launched a diversification and liberalization program to reduce reliance on oil, transforming its economy from a conventional, labor-intensive economy to one based on knowledge, technology and skilled labor" (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2022, para. 4). Romanowski and Du (2020) explained that GCC countries like the UAE face the reality that economic goals cannot be achieved individually within a globalized world, especially as oil prices and reserves decline. Therefore, as a result of economic realities to compete in the global knowledge economy in the post-oil boom, the UAE reconsidered the function and purpose of higher education.

In the UAE, the government currently uses education to realize national economic goals. Although education has always been a central tenant to nation-building in the UAE, the government has recently re-emphasized the importance of education and positioned it as one of the six key pillars in its strategic Vision 2021 (The Government of the UAE, 2021a). The governments strategic plan underscored the need to enhance the quality of education. Indeed, globalization has tied education policy at federal institutions to the economic demands of a knowledge-based economy, paralleling trends in the developed world. Accordingly, the UAE has changed its education strategy to focus on developing future competencies and skilled workers for a knowledge-based economy (The Government of the UAE, 2021a). To accomplish this goal, the UAE government has specified that it will create a "first-rate" education system by completely transforming the current education system and teaching methods (The Government of the UAE,

2021a). Comprehensive education reform is further justified because, despite the UAE's previous economic success, it still lags behind most developed countries in education quality and student achievement (Matsumoto, 2019).

Since the initiation of policy reform though Vision 2021, there has been substantial changes in higher education. For example, in recent years, quality assurance has been a considerable initiative impacting institutional policy. Today, federal institutions are compelled to apply for national and international accreditation of programs, which permits greater student mobility for degree holders and provides additional insurance to the government and public about the quality of education. Accordingly, there have been extensive changes to different institutional policies concentrated on meeting accreditation requirements, which aim to safeguard the quality of programs, courses, teaching, learning, and assessment.

Education reform, policy change, and implementation are synonymous. Therefore, with so much large-scale policy change in public higher education, a study of implementation is warranted, given the significance of reforms to the future of the UAE. Moreover, in the wake of globalization and education reform, there remains a lack of research on policy implementation in public higher education. In addition, studies have yet to examine the interplay of meso-level factors and how leadership influences policy implementation at the institutional level in a centralized-decentralized system. Research at the institutional level in the UAE is needed because, as the Mohammed Bin School of Government (2015) reported in a policy paper:

Government entities actively utilize research for strategy setting and policymaking. However, coordination between government entities and academic institutions still needs to improve. There is a reliance on hired consultants and individual researchers to produce policy-related research. Typically, this research remains

with the institution that commissioned it and is not readily available for other entities to benefit from (p. 3).

The death of research should hardly come as a surprise. The literature has long cited the need for policy implementation research in developing countries because specific conditions (macro and meso-level contextual factors) can influence policy actors at the micro level (Honig, 2006; Fullan, 2007; Viennet & Pont, 2017) in particular ways. In countries like the UAE, there needs to be more understanding of institutional factors influencing policy implementation in higher education. An examination of policy implementation could help improve performance and the quality of specific educational policy areas, especially those which affect students, such as teaching, learning, and assessment.

An Overview of UAE and its Education System

Today, the UAE is a small, economically prosperous country. It sits in the middle east and is part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It is a relatively young country, having joined into a federation in 1971. The government is a federation of absolute monarchies from seven different Emirates where rulers have considerable autonomy over laws and reforms in their Emirate. There is a strict political and social hierarchy that is deeply rooted in the history of tribal society, where citizens looked to tribal leaders for economic support, moral guidance, and mediation over jurisdictional conflicts (Heard-Bey, 2005). To a certain degree, many Emiratis' citizens revere and respect this political and social hierarchy, which is reflected in many formal government institutions. While strides have been made toward development, it is still developing educationally, socially, and economically, especially in terms of equality and women's rights.

The UAE has three main sectors in the public educational system. This first sector of the system is Kindergarten to Grade 12 education, or primary and secondary sectors, overseen by each Emirates education authority (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Education System in the UAE
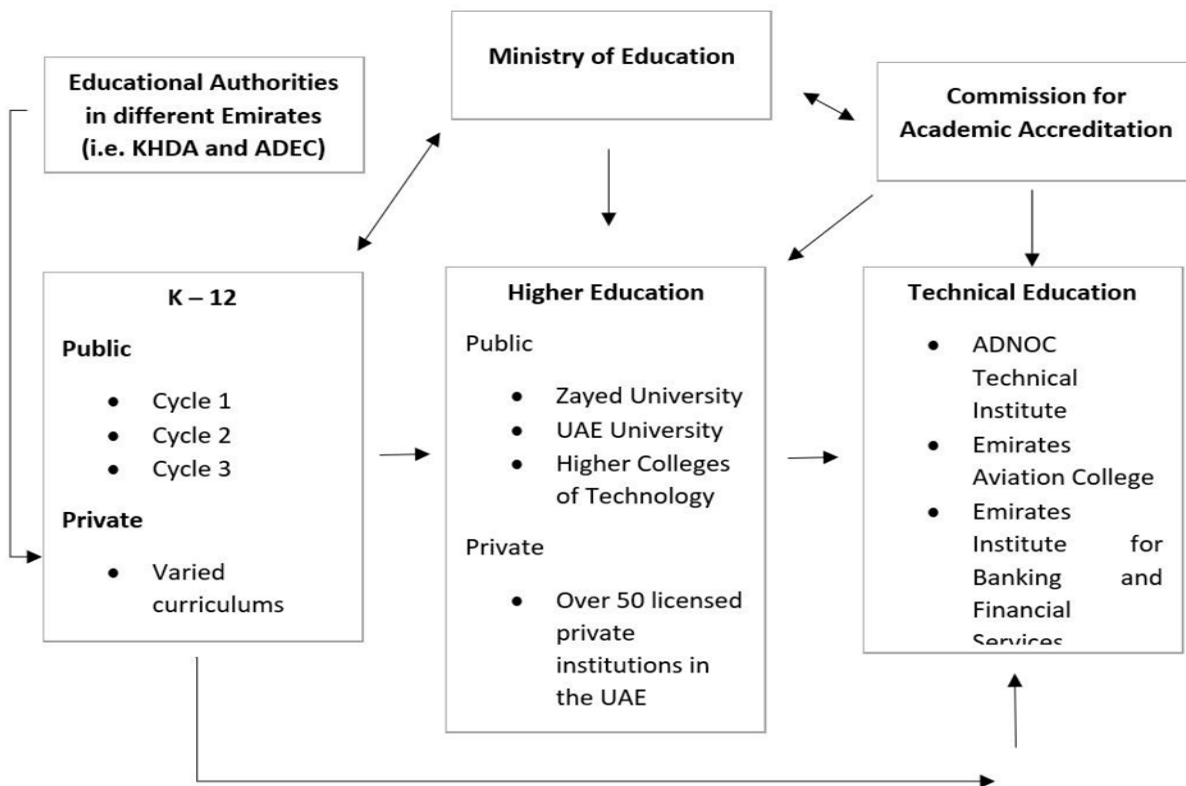
As illustrated in Figure 1, Emirati education begins with KG1 at age four, although this is not compulsory. After this, public education consists of three cycles that prepare students for tertiary education. Cycle 1, which is – primary education from Grades 1 to 5; Cycle 2, which is middle schooling from grades 6 to 9; and Cycle 3, which is secondary schooling from Grades 10 to 12, and following a new law introduced in 2012, high school is now mandatory (The Government of the UAE, 2022). The second sector comprises many different private schools serving the large

expatriate population from other countries and living in the UAE. Finally, the third area serves students who can attend college or university as part of the tertiary (HE) sector after secondary school.

Currently, the tertiary sector encompasses a public and a large private sector. There are three central public or federal institutions available to local students. At federal institutions, UAE citizens receive free tuition; accordingly, the federal higher education sector has one of the highest application rates in the world (The Cultural Division of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2011, para. 1). The publicly funded institutions include Zayed University, UAE University, and Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) that offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in addition to diplomas, certificates, and postgraduate diplomas. The government education system has also developed a specialized technical sector with universities, colleges, and training programs that feed primary industries such as oil and gas, public service (government), and aviation. Additionally, several private institutions, some are affiliated with western colleges and universities, serve the large expatriate population. Since its beginnings, higher education has been critical to growth and is reflected in the current state of education in the UAE.

A Centralized-Decentralized System

The UAE's higher education system is centralized-decentralized. As shown in Figure 1, the Ministry of Education (MOE) is at the top of this structure. It sets the strategic goals on behalf of the central government. Another branch of higher education is the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), which was first created in 1999 to oversee private higher institutions; its mandate was to ensure institutions met international quality standards. However, in 2012, the powers of the CAA were broadened to federal institutions to ensure standardized quality across all

institutions. In 2014, a strategic plan was established as part of Vision 2021 and included eight strategic objectives to improve the quality of education in the UAE.

Similar to many developed countries, the educational policy established by the MOE is unspecified and broad. According to DeBoer et al. (2005), this is done by governments "to do justice to local situations and allow for detailed decisions to be made during the implementation" (p. 98). In higher education in the UAE, each school and administration have considerable power over governance, operations, policies, and curriculum, as long as they align their mission and goals with the MOE and CAA's vision and standards. The CAA sets out to "safeguard academic standards, and to assure and enhance the quality of learning opportunities provided for students in UAE's higher education institutions (HEIs)" (Commission for Academic Accreditation, 2021, n.p.).

Policy Implementation Research

Researchers have discussed the complexity of educational policy implementation (Fullan, 2007; Honig, 2006; Viennet & Pont, 2017). Policy implementation refers to the actions taken by policy actors on behalf of a policy (O'Toole, 2000). The complexity of the process led to the development of different models to explore policy implementation - often aimed at predicting the success or failure of policy implementation.

Top-down vs. Bottom-up Policy Implementation Process

Top-down implementation views the policymakers as the central actors and studies policy implementation from the top-down and how these actors prescribe administrative processes and identify different barriers to reaching policy goals. Top-downers prioritize clear policies and examine how they are carried out by policy mandates (Matland, 1995). In addition, top-down

policymakers emphasize developing policy advice on successfully negotiating policy implementation. Matland (1995) noted that top-downers believe that there are patterns that exist which allow policymakers to formulate highly prescriptive plans, which concentrate "on variables that can be manipulated at the central level" (p. 147).

In juxtaposition, bottom-up theorists believe that policy implementation should be examined from actors' perspectives at the local level (Berman, 1980; Hjern & Porter, 1981; Sabatier, 1986). As Sabatier (1986) stated, "rather than start with a policy decision, these "bottom-uppers" started with an analysis of the multitude of actors who interact at the operational (local) level on a particular problem or issue" (p. 22). In their view, the stakeholders most affected by the policy are the most important. Therefore, they should be involved in the planning stages, including definition and policy formation. Researchers also argue that policy implementation should be studied from the bottom-up because actors at the ground level have the most influence over implementation, even in centralized governance systems.

While there are different perspectives on studying policy implementation, researchers have long agreed that context influences the effectiveness of policy implementation (Honig, 2006; Gornitzka et al., 1991; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975; Viennet & Pont, 2017). For example, Viennet and Pont (2017) identified a multitude of institutional factors which can impact the implementation of internal educational policies. Specifically, inclusive stakeholder engagement, smart policy design, and a conducive context. Still, this framework has yet to be proven empirically and has not examined the relationships between different factors. Indeed, many traditional studies of policy implementation need to discuss the relationship between factors.

Within many studies, leadership is often identified as a factor that influences the achievement of goals and objectives in any policy sector (Becker & VanHeningen; 2011; Cerych

& Sabatier, 1986; Viennet & Pont, 2017). The identification of this factor can be traced back to Sabatier and Mazmanian's (1979) study on policy implementation conditions, which specifically identified leadership as a determining factor impacting policy implementation success. Even the Higher Education Academy (2012), in their study of the assessment in higher education, identified leadership as an essential factor to assessment change, aside from just addressing the policy. Subsequently, considering the multitude of policy reforms worldwide, specifically in the UAE, understanding leadership as a critical implementation component necessitates exploration because departmental leaders are often central to communicating, unpacking, and enacting policy in higher education. Using Contextual Interaction Theory (CIT) (Bressers, 2004) and multi-level analysis (Fulmer et al., 2015), in a study conducted in higher education in the UAE, this paper explores how meso-level contextual level factors and aspects of leadership influences policy implementation at the micro level.
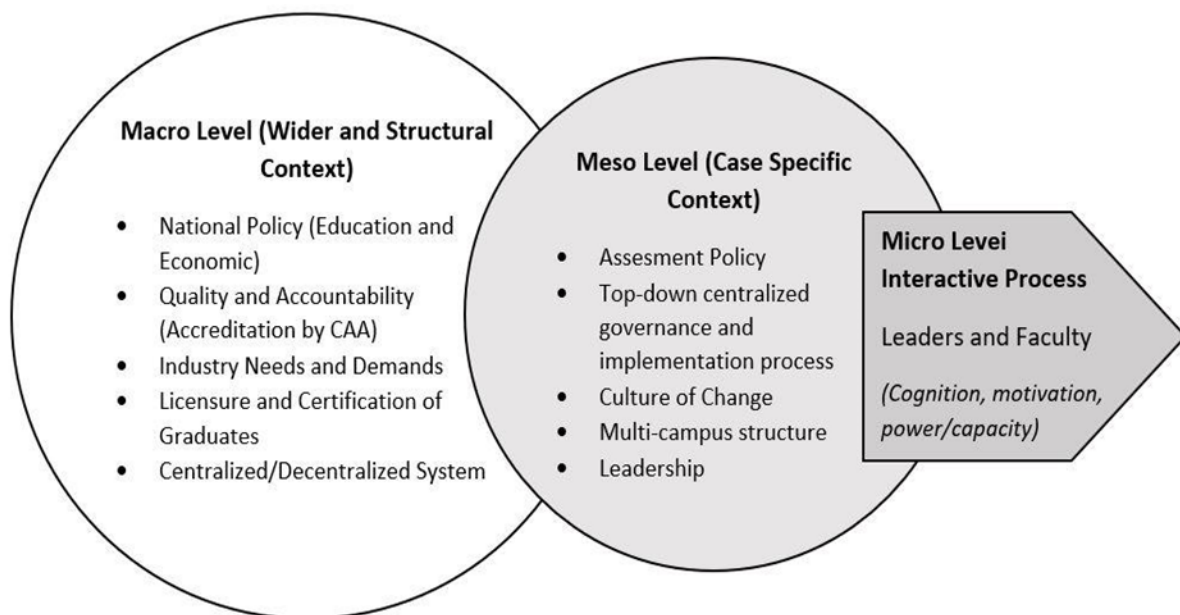
Contextual Interaction Theory

CIT is a logical and empirically tested conceptual framework, which combines top-down and bottom-up theory, and was utilized as a conceptual framework for this study along with multi-level analysis. CIT identifies and explains the interaction between different contextual factors influencing policy implementation (Figure 2). The basic premise of the CIT is that varying levels of context can influence policy implementation as much as they influence actors' interaction on the ground level by influencing their cognition, motivation, and power/capacity characteristics. According to Bressers (2004), there are three different contexts in which assessment policy is situated: the wider context, the structural context, and the specific "case" context.

Figure 2 highlights how the varying levels of context can influence policy implementation as it affects actors' interaction on the ground level by influencing their cognition, motivation, and

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power/capacity characteristics. According to Bressers (2004), there are three different contexts in which assessment policy is situated: the broader context, the structural context, and the specific context.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework Adapted from Bressers' Contextual Interaction Theory (Bressers et al., 2009)

Macro Level (Wider and Structural Context)

- National Policy (Education and Economic)
- Quality and Accountability (Accreditation by CAA)
- Industry Needs and Demands
- Licensure and Certification of Graduates
- Centralized/Decentralized System

Meso Level (Case Specific Context)

- Assesment Policy
- Top-down centralized governance and implementation process
- Culture of Change
- Multi-campus structure
- Leadership

Micro Levei Interactive Process

Leaders and Faculty

(Cognition, motivation, power/capacity)

In line with bottom-up theory, Bressers (2004) believes that implementation is an interactive and dynamic process involving actors who play a crucial role in the success or failure of the implementation process. The basic assumption is that the outcomes of the policy process are contingent on inputs (in this case, the characteristics of the policy instruments and context) and, more critically, the interaction of characteristics of the actors involved, particularly their cognition, motivation, and power/capacity (Table 1). Moreover, the case-specific context influences these characteristics (Bressers, 2004).

Table 1

Actors' Characteristics

Characteristics	Description
Cognition	How actors understand the policy or information held to be true or how the situation is interpreted is linked to communication.
Motivation	The level of importance the actors place on a policy and the degree to which policy contributes to their goals and objectives affects implementation.
Power/Capacity	Power relates to who holds the formal power to act, such as decisions about human resources, mobilizing needed resources, and adapting policy in the implementation process. Capacity is linked to having adequate resources to carry out policy goals and procedures. Resources such as information, training, and tools provide actors with the capacity to act.

Bressers' (2004) framework assists with the exploration of how both context and actors influence assessment policy implementation and provides a lens to study the specific case context (institution) influence on leaders during the implementation process. Using Bressers' CIT framework, this paper examined the influence of contextual factors at the macro, meso, and micro levels on the implementation of assessment policy in an institution in the UAE.

Methodology

The study utilized a case study methodology to study the implementation of assessment policy in a department at a public higher education institution in the UAE. This single case study was bound to a government institution in the UAE and one department (Health Science) that implemented the assessment policy over a semester. This study sought to explore how actors and

surrounding contextual factors influence the implementation of assessment policy at Latifa University (Latifa is a pseudonym) in the UAE. In the case study, the research data were collected in stages using different tools such as a literature review, institutional and policy documentation, and semi-structured interviews.

In the first stage, institutional and public documentation from MOE, the CAA, and different government websites were analyzed. The documents were collected during the first few weeks of the study, and the analysis provided insight into the macro and meso-level contextual influences. These documents shed some light on how the policy was framed and how macro and meso-level factors influenced its implementation. When using the documentation, the different usage issues, such as access to documents, were kept private, and no harmful or sensitive data was shared in the study. The documents were also evaluated for their authenticity (Merriam, 1998). Secondly, the purposeful sampling of nine key informants (N=9) who had specialized knowledge of the policy and were key informants in the department ensured the credibility and dependability of the research findings. It included the upper management, mid-managers, and teaching faculty at the Associate Professor and Lecturer rank (see Table 2).

Table 2

Participant profiles (Department of Health Science)

Participant	Role	Years in Education	Educational Background	Number of Years at Institution
Participant 1 (P1)	Faculty (Associate Professor)	17 years	PhD	1 year
Participant 2 (P2)	Faculty (Associate Professor)	14 years	PhD	14 years
Participant 3 (P3)	Faculty (Associate Professor)	8 years	PhD	1 year 6 months
Participant 4 (P4)	Faculty (Lecturer)	10 years	Masters	5 years
Participant 5 (P5)	Program Coordinator/Associate Professor	8 years	PhD	2 years
Participant 6 (P6)	Divisional Chair/Associate Professor	12 years	PhD	7 years
Participant 7 (P7)	Program Coordinator/Associate Professor	10 years	PhD	4 years
Participant 8 (P8)	Senior Department Leader	5 years	Masters	2 months
Participant 9 (P9)	Senior Department Leader	13 years	PhD	8 months

Although this was a small sample, this sample comprised almost half of the department to ensure the trustworthiness of the research; and by selecting key informants who had specialized knowledge in different roles in the department, the small sample was further balanced. This study also included detailed information about: (1) contextual factors at the meso-level, (2) leadership, and (3) actors' characteristics at the micro-level.

Key Findings and Analysis

The results and analysis are organized into two sections. The first section explores the meso-level (institution level), identifying five factors influencing leaders' policy implementation. The factors were the framing of assessment policy goals, the position of the policy, the system of governance influence on power and capacity, the institutional culture of change, and the multi-campus structure. The second section discusses the impact of leadership on the policy implementation process at the micro level, specifically its impact on actors' beliefs, cognition, and motivation.

Framing of Policy Goals and Position of the Policy

Firstly, the study found that the assessment goals needed clarification. As a result, it became difficult for leaders to explain the goals and justify the policy change. For example, one of the primary assessment documents (Course Assessment Guidelines) stressed the importance of aligning assessment tasks to course outcomes and meeting the desired standards of QF Emirates. However, in the preamble of the same document, the directive stated that the assessment policy LP 2220 will be suspended "until a more comprehensive one is issued" (Latifa University, 2016, p. 1). Furthermore, no new overarching policy document was issued, so leaders could not systematically introduce the department to the assessment policy goals leading to confusion.

Secondly, the study also found that the purpose and methods of assessment did not align with the leaders' conceptions of assessment. For instance, although it only accounted for 30% of the final grade, the participants discussed how the policy focused primarily on the summative aspect of assessment through the implementation of final examinations. One leader noted:

My role at the moment is specifically to do with exams which are not formative. There's not much involvement within the coursework aspect of the assessment at the moment, which I feel would be beneficial to do moving forward, because we're not auditing or reviewing quality of course work assessments at the moment. (P8)

Here, we have evidence of how the policy is misaligned and conflicts with leaderships' own beliefs about their role in assessment. For example, they disagreed with how leaders had far less control and responsibility to focus on coursework assessment (formative assessment) which accounted for 70% of the students' final grade.

The above two findings coincided with research that highlighted the need to establish clear policy goals within the policy design (Honig, 2006; OECD, 2013; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979; Tezera, 2019). The lack of clarity on the overall policy goals caused issues for leaders who could not fully articulate the objectives of the new assessment policy to faculty who wanted to know "why" the change. In addition, due to the lack of clarity, leaders had difficulties unpacking and explaining some procedures in the process, such as the use of final exams to assess courses and the Course Assessment Plan and Assessment Specification Document (CAP/ASD) document.

Researchers have also emphasized that policy framing, such as the policy goals, tools, and objectives, influences policy implementation (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979; Tezera, 2019; Viennet & Pont, 2017). Tezera (2019) was clear that policy design "determines whether and how a policy can be enacted" (p. 93). The findings highlighted that the policy was framed in principles of summative assessment to ensure consistency, influencing the leaders' role during the process. Instead of leading, leaders took on more managerial roles through auditing and monitoring processes. The findings suggest that department leaders have an important role in framing assessment policy during the formulation and implementation stage. During the implementation

stage, leaders provide clarity about the goals and processes. Moreover, their interpretation of the policy plays an important role in faculty's understanding of the policy. Lastly, the findings about policy framing underscores the challenge of aligning policy with faculty's beliefs, especially if they are not a part of the formulation process.

Top-down Governance Influence on Power and Capacity

The documentation and interviews with participants revealed that the university's governance structure and policy implementation was a highly centralized, top-down process. This was evident in the language of the strategic plan and the management framework, which described how standardization of assessment will be "cascaded" down from the central authority. Subsequently, the plan stated there would be "internal organizational alignment around the chosen strategy" which will "enable the aspired change" (Latifa University, 2017, p. 11). Different actors also confirmed the top-down process. For example, program chairs confirmed that when the policy was introduced, the information "trickled" down to the faculty. As one mid-manager supported, "the information trickles down from the higher management to the lower management and then to the faculty members" (P7). Faculty echoed leaders' description, noting that the new policy was briefly introduced at a meeting at the start of the year where there was little time to discuss and understand the policy. Due to this top-down linear approach, decisions about assessment and policy were held by the CAU; therefore, leaders in mid-management positions (divisional and program leaders) in the department held little power or capacity to make decisions during the process.

There were other examples of top-down policy implementation. It was apparent that program coordinators and the division chair in the Health Sciences department rarely questioned assessment policies or procedures, as there were no formal opportunities or processes to do so.

Furthermore, the study also found that no other platforms enabled faculty to communicate or provide feedback to the higher authorities. Simply, the institution had no mechanisms to comment on some factors influencing the assessment policy at different stages of the process.

The findings align with research about governance within government agencies in the UAE. For example, it confirmed Masumoto's (2019) findings that a top-down implementation process is adopted in most government agencies in the UAE and is based on an authoritative model with a strict hierarchy of power. Matsumoto (2019) concluded that this governance model was traditionally used because it aligned with Emirati's cultural beliefs of social and political hierarchy. Despite this confirmation, the findings illustrate some of the shortcomings of a top-down implementation approach and its impact on leadership. It demonstrated the limited power and capacity leaders had during the implementation process, which conflicted with some western educated and trained leaders who typically prefer a more democratic approach to implementation and leadership. Power issues could be avoided if institutional leadership considered some elements of a bottom-up strategy, which gives actors a voice during the process and permits them to feed information about policy and procedures up the hierarchy to the managers.

Institutional Culture of Change

A prominent theme that emerged from the documentation and interviews was the existence of an institutional culture focused on change. According to faculty and leadership in the Health Sciences department, the culture affected the assessment policy and implementation process. Leaders described how the impetus for change was due to the new strategic direction of the institution, which first began in 2017, ushering in a new assessment policy to improve the quality of learning. However, just four years later, there was another change in this institution's strategic direction, which further impacted academic policies. As one program leader noted:

We have to change to meet the vision 4.0, etc., etc., I know that, but it's not that easy. It's a whole program, curriculum, teaching, assessment. We are learning every day. It's new here because of the amount of time it's hard. So that's it, it's happening whether we agree with it or not. (P5)

This participant also described how one objective of the new strategic direction related to developing soft skills in graduates. The leader noted that this would further affect the assessment policy because a change would be needed to include the assessment of these soft skills. They explained:

We are moving into soft skills assessment, so this is a new thing that we are moving through the vision of HCT which is employability, and you know, so basically, we need to prepare graduates to have soft skills and to be technical leaders and to graduate companies within two years. In order to have these graduate outputs, we need to change our program. So, if we want to change the program, we have to change the learning outcomes. Once the learning outcomes are changed, the assessments have to be changed now, we are at a point where our program is settled if you like, which is 2.0, but now we move to 4.0. (P5)

This was corroborated by another leader who detailed that there needed to be further alterations to the assessment because of the new goals of developing technical leaders, innovation, and soft skills.

Many participants noted that in 2017, the assessment policy transformation occurred simultaneously with other policy and procedural changes at the institution. This included modifications in leadership structures, program and curriculum changes, increased curriculum responsibilities and professional development requirements for faculty, and a change in the

advising model, creating extra administrative duties for faculty. In general, many participants expressed concern with the continuous updates and modifications to the assessment policy and other policies since 2017. As one faculty confirmed:

> Each semester we have new regulations and new policies. … and um, we have too many policies, guidelines, and as I told you, every semester that keeps changing. So, I'm not sure why they keep changing the regulations that much, always there is updates in each semester. (P3)

This culture of change impacted the leaders' and faculty's workload and created stress for department leaders. As Participant 9 detailed, "we're always on the move and that is frustrating because it really creates unnecessary workload on the faculty … It's really affecting the culture, the health, and the work environment." Basically, since they had little time to understand and learn new processes, it impacted actors' cognition, influencing leaders' and faculty's motivation during implementation.

The findings about the impact of this institutional culture align with the research on policy implementation and its complexity. In the UAE, macro-level policy in higher education focused on quality and employability in a knowledge-based economy, leading to multi-faceted and multi-level organization changes. The changes' impact was far-reaching and underscored the unpredictability of implementation because contextual factors influence implementation (Braithwaite et al., 2018). This also suggests that the possible solutions vary in time and space according to the local context. However, leadership could enhance policy implementation, such as those professionals and managers assigned key roles coming to a common ground about implementation. Moreover, as Hudson et. al (2019) supported, leaders could recruit

implementation brokers who can support the implementation and provide ongoing assistance through problem-solving and capacity building.

Multi-campus Organization

Another relevant factor emerging at the meso level was the intricacies of implementing assessment at an institution with multiple campuses. The institution comprises 14 different campuses across five different Emirates, and this unique organizational feature influenced the assessment policy's development and implementation. For the Health Sciences department, this meant managing the implementation of assessments in eight different programs across several campuses. As one program leader noted:

> You know, the instruments I have been mentioning, you know the CAP/ASD document is to ensure that you have consistency across the campuses. So, you know, it is different if you have only one campus. Of course, it's going to be one standard exam, and was designed by the faculty who designed the course. But to ensure consistency across the different campuses you know, we have to comply with it, it is a more stringent, more rigorous, process. (P7)

The multi-campus system influenced the policy because consistency among different campuses became a focal point which the policy developer's felt could be accomplished through standardized exams across campuses. The assessment and policy documents revealed underlying goals of consistency and standardization that impacted the interaction process by requiring greater collaboration among faculty and leadership. However, the primary focus was the faculty's quality checks, which lasted the entire semester. This was particularly problematic for courses taught at different campuses due to the difficulty of coordinating staff meetings. As the study participants pointed out, at times, it was challenging to communicate complex processes across different

campuses due to each actor's responsibilities and workload, especially if multiple emails had to be exchanged. It illustrates the challenge and responsibility held by department leadership to maintain the quality of assessment in the department.

The findings parallel much of the educational research suggesting the institution or meso-level factors influence actors' interactions during the policy implementation (Bressers, 2004; Honig, 2006; Viennet & Pont, 2017). As each context is unique, it is important to understand different policy contexts to add to a body of knowledge that focuses primarily on westernized contexts. In this case, it was discovered that this context influenced the underlying policy goals and the process, which impacted leaders' role. This echoes Ewell (2009) and Fulmer et al. (2015) research which identified accountability within the education system as a major factor that affects the implementation of assessment because it impacts much of the work done by educators. It added more responsibilities to leaders and changed the relationship between leaders and faculty. Leaders were now responsible for monitoring and evaluating faculty to ensure they were adhering to the implementation procedures and timelines during the assessment process.

Leadership as an Institutional Factor Influencing Assessment Policy Implementation

Although the literature is unequivocal in its assertion that leadership influences the policy implementation, little is understood about how this influences policy implementation, especially in the UAE. Assuming that implementation is an interactive process involving different actors (Bresser, 2004), the following discussion and analysis highlight the influence leadership had on actors' cognition, motivation, and power/capacity at the micro level.

Cognition of Policy Goals, Implementation Processes and Tools

This study revealed issues of clarity with the policy. Leaders needed more precise information and more understanding (cognition) of the policy because it impacted implementation. During the interviews with different department leaders, they consistently voiced a need for more understanding of the assessment policy goals and some parts of the process. Specifically, leaders were under the false assumption that the sole goal of assessment was to measure student learning in courses, failing to understand other goals and principles of assessment such as consistency, transparency, accountability, and assessments' important contribution to the quality of student learning. No mid-managers or faculty discussed these broader goals of assessment linked to learning. Participant 2 noted that she was not clear on the goals and stated in response to the purpose of assessment: "what is the purpose of the assessment in the guidelines? I don't know?" She claimed that "no the goals are not clear. I really don't know what they want me to do?"

Besides a lack of cognition of goals, there needed to be more clarity about the steps in the policy implementation process. It was found that leader's and faculty lacked clarity because of the complexity of the process, lack of information, and lack of external support in the department. For example, one participant discussed how she was unsure what her role was compared to the Divisional Chair, stating that there was some confusion between the responsibilities of the Divisional Chair and Program Coordinators: "To be honest with you ... I didn't know what I was doing, no one knows, there was no handbook or guidelines regarding my role and responsibilities." As cognition was influenced by the lack of information, during the implementation process there was little forthcoming information supporting the detailed procedural documents and the use of different tools. Indeed, many of the faculty had questions about why different policy procedures

existed. However, department leaders could not explain or justify (unpack) different procedures when queries were posed.

There were several reasons for the leaders' lack of cognition of the policy goals. First, there was a genuine lack of awareness of the policy document, suggesting there may have been some initial communication issues when introducing the policy document. For example, when one of the senior department leaders was questioned about the policy document, he asked, "which document?" (P9). The second factor compounded this; it was revealed that there were many supplemental assessment documents that department leaders and faculty mistakenly identified as the policy. Lastly, how the central policy was written influenced the lack of cognition. Instead of a traditional policy document that outlined the purpose and goals, the policy was written as a list of procedures that failed to outline a clear purpose and specific goals.

The findings support Bressers' (2004) research of the importance of understanding a policy and the process. If leaders do not understand, it will impact faculty's cognition as they are a source of information and have the power to allocate resources and offer support. Moreover, it is important to note that leaders can positively influence actors' cognition by communicating goals, tools, deadlines, and key procedures in the process. To do this, leaders need to allocate time during their management roles to thoroughly understand the policy goals and implementation process as they provide information for faculty. If this is done, leaders can increase faculty's cognition and capacity to implement assessment by understanding and framing key policy information.

Communication Influences Cognition and Motivation

Another major leadership issue was the communication of the policy in the department. Teaching faculty indicated problems existed with the means of communication and how the processes and procedures were discussed. To the detriment of the implementation process, the

primary form of communication was email, compounding the understanding of the policy. As one faculty member indicated that, "By just sending the email you have to keep asking people around you or you keep asking your PC, what does this mean? What do they want?" (P3). One teaching faculty confirmed the pervasive use of email and its impact. She asserted that when the policy was updated "it was just communicated by email" (P2) so there was no time to clarify any ideas in the policy. The number of changes to the policy further exacerbated this.

When queried about using email, program leaders cited the institution's heavy workload and multi-campus structure. They stated that the multi-campus structure made coordinating meetings among staff across campuses difficult. As a result, most leaders relied on email to communicate important policy decisions. However, it was found that faculty opposed this form of communication. They argued that it was essential to have a meeting or a workshop, "especially when we have, uh, updated policies or instructions. It is useful rather than just being communicated with us by email. We always prefer to have good communication and training" (P3).

The findings suggest the importance of face-to-face communication and collaborative discussion. According to Bressers (2004), if a policy is poorly communicated, it will affect the actor's understanding (cognition), and it will impact the motivation of the actors who are responsible for implementation. That said, the findings suggest deeper meanings about communication. The dependence on email to disseminate information did not allow those in the department to develop a shared understanding of the policy. Fullan and Quinn's (2016) research on leadership supports this point, asserting that leaders should organize "purposeful interaction," allowing actors to develop a shared understanding of a policy. The findings support this assertion, suggesting that leaders need time and space to unpack the policy with the faculty. In this case,

there was limited time for purposeful interaction, resulting in significant gaps in the faculty's understanding of parts of the implementation process.

Beliefs of Leaders and Faculty

Another critical theme discovered about leadership is the impact of actors' beliefs on policy implementation. For example, it was discovered that most participants opposed using final examinations as the primary approach to assessing students. Conversely, many leaned more towards a competency-based approach to demonstrate knowledge and skills in authentic situations like practical lab assessments, which allowed for skills assessment. As participant 6, a department chair supported:

> I believe that, uh, like knowledge should be assessed. But like, as a technical institution of technology, I think we should be focused on assessing the skills of the students more than assessing the knowledge.

This belief was at odds with the current policy which focused more on assessment through final exams in courses. Moreover, most departmental actors held dubious beliefs about assessment. For example, many participants were resolute that the primary purpose of assessment was to measure student learning, unaware that assessment can contribute to student learning.

These findings reveal another critical consideration for leadership in policy implementation. Leaders should understand that faculty embrace certain attitudes and beliefs about assessment and policy, which impacts their motivation. Viennet and Pont (2017) argued that "actors' interests may complete with individuals, between interest groups, and sometimes between individuals and the organization they belong to" (p. 32). In this case, the department's beliefs about assessment and how it should be done were at odds with the policy developed by the university and the CAU, creating tension and frustration, albeit very passive levels of resistance. Research

indicates that resistance to change arises when those affected by the change cannot see its benefits or goals in contrast with their values, beliefs, and/or practices. Thus, the closer the perceived alignment between a program's proposed practices and current practices, the greater the probability that changes will be viewed favorably (Graczewski et al., 2007; Spillane, 1999).

While it is not uncharacteristic for faculty to hold beliefs about assessment, leaders must understand faculty's beliefs in the department. In this case, beliefs were based on traditional conceptions of assessment and were incongruent with current assessment principles, which asserts that assessment is a crucial part of learning. Therefore, strong leaders are needed to challenge false assumptions and outdated beliefs during implementation. Indeed, the HEA (2012), in their report on change in higher education assessment policy and practice, clearly identified that leaders must be prepared to challenge faculty's beliefs in favor of more widely accepted understandings that align with crucial assessment principles. Interestingly, this finding in the assessment literature also aligns with Bass's (1990) research on leadership, which often involves leaders structuring or restructuring the perceptions and expectations of members. Consequently, the findings suggest that to influence policy implementation successfully, leaders may need to restructure faculty's perceptions or ideas about assessment through "purposeful interactions" or training. Moreover, this evidence supports the argument that the engagement of stakeholders (higher education faculty) during the formulation and implementation process is crucial because a policy must gather support among actors if it is to be implemented (Datnow, 2002).

Power During the Formulation and Implementation Process

Finally, this study found that department leadership had little power over decision-making, such as assessment resources, staffing, and policy changes. The policy formulation was left to a few actors in the CAU. In addition, their opportunity to evaluate the policy and process was limited

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during implementation. It was revealed that leadership and faculty needed more formal opportunities to feed in information about the policy, procedures, and assessment process. This was compounded by a need for more resources (human resources) to support program leaders, who were neither assessment experts nor had the power or capacity to make decisions about the policy and implementation. For example, leaders in Health Sciences described how, unlike other departments, there was no assessment specialist to support the faculty during the policy implementation during its initial introduction, which impacted all actors' understanding for one year. As one leader highlighted:

> Uh no, to be honest with you. It's not clear, I mean, now we have a new role, as I
> told an assessment specialist, so she is trying to help us with that. I mean before we
> didn't have an assessment specialist it was just a delegation task. (P5)

While many of the faculty felt leaders were trying to provide support, their ability was limited due to the lack of knowledge and power over the decision-making process and their inability to make decisions about final course assessments, resources, and tools. In addition, a system of decentralization does not exist at the institution, which begs the question if this is typical of most higher education institutions in the UAE. Overall, these leaders expressed frustration with their lack of power during the process, feeling the CAU held most of the power over the policy formulation and implementation process.

The findings about leaders' power reveal much about the influence this can have on faculty and assessment policy implementation. For example, Michel et al. (2020) concluded that "effective leaders have decision-making power and financial delegations to unlock resources and solve existing problems and challenges impeding implementation" (p. 14). However, leaders at the institution held little power due to the top-down governance model where there was minimal

decentralization of power to leaders, especially in assessment decisions. Consequently, department leaders had no autonomy to contextualize the assessment policy to their program and curriculum or allocate different resources for support.

The research is unequivocal in that actors require some power to tailor policy (Allcock et al., 2015; Honig, 2006; Viennet & Pont, 2017). In the UAE, where educational policies are borrowed, department leaders must have the autonomy to contextualize policy. Indeed, a one-size fits all approach does not work. Department leaders in higher education could benefit from increased power or capacity because, as Allcock et al. (2015) suggested, those who work on the front line, whether managerially or professionally, know more about delivery challenges than national policymakers. Moreover, in this case, they know more about approaches to assessment.

The findings also reveal the contextual impact of a centralized and top-down governance structure on a leader's power during policy implementation in higher education in the UAE. Hudson et al. (2019) contended that implementation is complex and contextual; it should be as much a bottom-up as a top-down process. Interestingly, those who advocate for a top-down model often assert that this approach is more efficient and effective, especially if policy's goals, expectations, and procedures are clearly formulated and cascaded. However, those who are opposed suggest that concentrated or centralized governance often does not always grasp what happens on the front lines (Lipsky, 1980; Hudson et al., 2019).

In higher education, undoubtedly, department leaders are on the front lines and know about teaching, learning, and assessment in their fields, arguably more than central administrators who perhaps are not in the Health Sciences. Therefore, alternative or supplementary approaches to policy implementation and support should be considered (Hudson et al, 2019). This argument

seems particularly salient in the UAE, where there is a need for an alternative approach that allows for some leadership autonomy to tailor policy at the department level.

One alternative to a top-down institutional approach in the UAE is a more centralized-decentralized approach. This approach has been introduced in other countries with some success. For example, Singapore's education system utilizes a centralized-decentralized approach. Here, both levels of leadership attempt to work in tandem to ensure alignment, even though there are often tensions and unintended outcomes (Tan & Ng, 2007). This same governance model could be introduced in HE, where implementation occurs because many stakeholders, such as the central administration, department leaders, and faculty, interact at different levels. In addition, it is well established in the research that if the centralized leadership allowed some autonomy and authority over the curriculum and assessment of departments and programs, there might be less tension and resistance. Indeed, a more bottom-up and decentralization of power could give department leaders' more power during the implementation process, especially over important curriculum policy area matters such as assessment.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The policy influenced leaders' ability to successfully implement and negotiate the implementation process. The system of governance, the culture of change, and the multi-campus structure at the institution also hindered leaders. This paper suggests that different institutional contexts, such as the UAE's pseudo-centralized-decentralized system at the macro and meso levels, have specific contextual nuances related to the factors. That said, department leaders are a significant factor influencing institutional policy implementation at the micro level.

Kouzes and Posner (1995) noted that leadership is a learnable set of practices, suggesting that there are ways for leaders to support policy implementation. For example, in higher education

in the UAE, policy implementation could be improved by increasing department leaders' power and capacity over the process and more effective communication regarding how leaders communicate and what they communicate about the policy. Moreover, leaders must manage faculty members' knowledge gaps by providing the necessary prerequisite information and training. In addition, leading policy implementation requires understanding that faculty often have their own beliefs, which might necessitate restructuring or challenging. Finally, leaders void of power in the policy process are limited in their capabilities to implement policy effectively (see Figure 4).
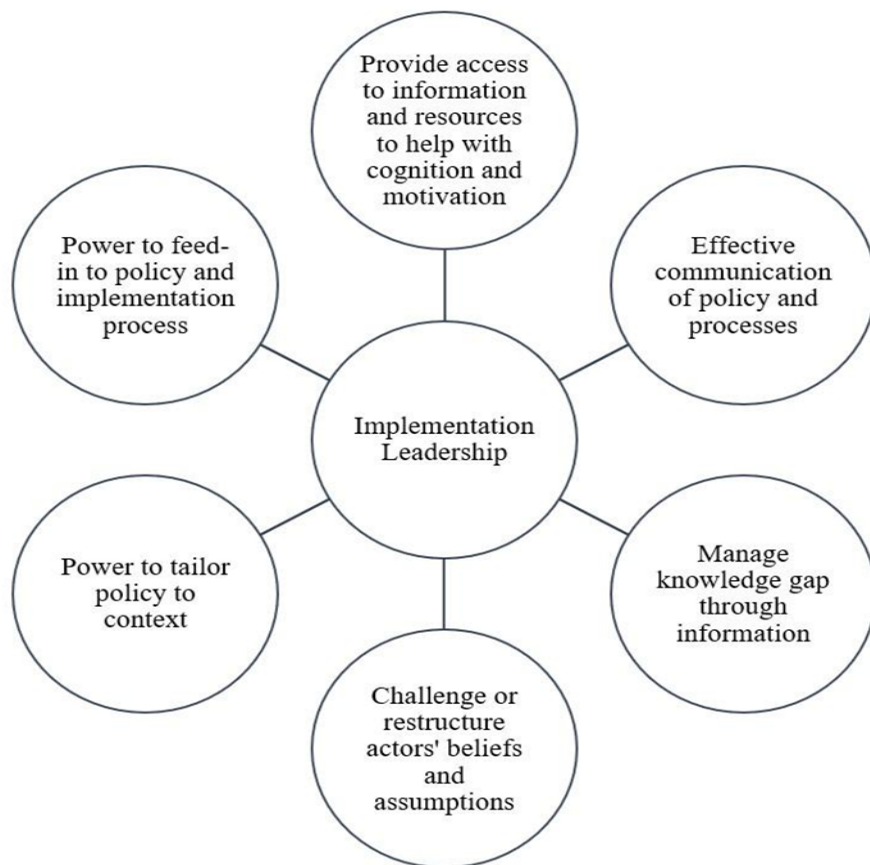
Figure 4

Supporting Policy Implementation

Figure 4 provides a framework to support policy leaders and institutional leaders outside the department in understanding the intricacies of the policy process and obstacles to successful implementation at the department level. Likewise, policy experts can assist department leaders in negotiating the complexity of the policy implementation process, especially the support of actors. Understanding the content of centralization-decentralization and its impact and improving the leadership of policy implementation is essential to enacting meaningful education reforms in higher education in the UAE.

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