

# Total Quality Management in Education Directorates in Saudi Arabia: Contrasting Provincial Case Studies

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## Abstract

This article is part of the PhD research which conducted in Saudi over the period of three years beginning in 2009. The article addresses the issue of total quality management (TQM) implementation in Saudi provincial directorates in two contrasting case studies, a female directorate in the north of the country –Aljouf province– and a male directorate in the Eastern province, through the views of senior managers. In order to explore the local conditions and challenges of implementing TQM, 40 interviews were conducted alongside unstructured observations in both directorates and institutional and policy document analysis. The journey of the two provincial Directorates towards TQM had few common features and many differences. Having embarked earlier on TQM initiatives - even before the ministerial compulsion - the Eastern Directorate had already gone through some of the issues and challenges encountered by the Aljouf Directorate at the time of this research. The study also revealed profound differences in the two institutional cultures under focus and in the ways managers felt that TQM was impacting on their professional practice and environment. The study reports their perceptions of the implementation process and compares the two contexts on such challenges as training opportunities, reward systems, workplace relations, and mismanagement practices. The article concludes on a discussion of core issues identified, particularly the level of embeddedness of organisations in local cultures and socioeconomic contexts, the centrality of actors in reform processes and the question of the universality of management approaches such as TQM.

**Keywords:** Qualitative case study, Saudi Arabia, Total quality management, managers, ministry of education

## 1. Introduction

Community-based organizations, including educational institutions, are now moving faster toward transformations such as re-engineering management, installing total quality management (TQM), crisis management etc. Consistent with the foregoing, the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Saudi Arabia has put much effort and adopted a number of strategies into education policies, those for educational management in particular. However, although the Saudi Arabian government has made immense efforts to promote the education system by the generosity of its budget, the outcomes are not meeting officials' hopes and aspirations. This has been noted by a number of professionals in the country (e.g. Alssaloom, 2005; Al-Eisa, 2009).

Given the above, it is very important to be aware of current administrative patterns in Saudi Arabia, so as to clarify the conditions in which the education system operates and where stakeholders and decision-makers seek to implement TQM properly. In order to fulfill this aim, the article will address the following question:

- What are the factors which might hinder or facilitate the implementation of TQM?
- How does the use and implementation of TQM generate different perceptions and expectation in contrasting contexts?

### 1.1 Why TQM in Saudi Arabia?

When the US suddenly became intensely interested in quality at all levels and sectors, the driving force was that it was losing the productivity race to world-class competitors (Rhodes, 1994). What is the connection between this and the attractiveness of TQM to educational policy makers and planners in Saudi Arabia? It is difficult to find a straightforward answer within the ministerial archives and files. It may have been driven by the demands of international agencies, national political pressure and fierce universal competition. For example, according to Donn and Almanthri (2010), the 2008 meeting of G8<sup>1</sup> and BMENA<sup>2</sup> reported that a strong quality assurance framework and culture should be encouraged to ensure sustained high performance in education institutions, schools in particular. In parallel but nationally, the eighth Saudi Development Plan advocated official accountability in education and a move to develop it at less cost and higher quality in the shortest possible time in order to deal efficiently with the challenges posed by global scientific development and successive technical advances (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2009).

As a result of the educational bureaucracy's failure to deal with present demands for change and innovation (e.g.

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<sup>1</sup> A group of eight countries (the G8): France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Russia.

<sup>2</sup> The wider Middle East and North Africa (BMENA).

Beinhocker, 2006; Heckscher, 1994; Osbourne and Graebler, 1992; Quinn, 1992 cited in Johnson & Duberley, 2010), the business ethos of customer service

... has repositioned the public sector as product provider, and has shifted management's focus to serving its citizen-customers by providing quality services. The production and measurement of quality have become a central focus for governance systems, and public sector workers are held accountable for standards of performance for producing results at less cost to the consumer. New public management discourse addresses "a public" depicted as customers who relate to their governance on the basis of an economic, rather than a social, contract-through the logic of consumption ... New public management's recent embrace of free-market principles does not reflect a return to laissez-faire liberalism ... but rather [that this 'enables' the ] market to work more effectively (Hall, 2005: 154-55).

At the same time, attending the '1st International Conference on TQM in K-12 Education 2011', Riyadh, gave me a better understanding of the recent movement towards TQM, and the rationale. When the Ministry in 2009 issued Circular No. 42/5/8/10/17 on 30/01/1430 [27/01/2009] asking 83 Directorates in Saudi Arabia to introduce TQM, no compelling reasons were given in the Ministry's letters, policies, etc. or explanations of what had motivated this shift. But the conference organized by the Ministry made matters somewhat clearer. According to the Ministry's website, the conference targeted 1,382 participants, including 83 Directors of Directorates and their deputies, senior decision-makers of the Ministry, senior managers of educational quality, planning and development and head teachers of schools. The workshop programmes were presented over four days. Apart from the first day, there were also parallel activities taking place every morning, which were open to all participants and presented by keynote speakers, belonging to diverse organizations such as the World Bank, the Organization for Economic and Development (OECD), the Arabia American Oil Company (commonly known as Aramco), Middle East/North Africa (MENA), Ministry of Education (Canada), Permata Negara Policy Working Committee in Malaysia, Kaizen Institute, American Society for Quality Standards and Awards (ASQ), David Hutchins International Quality College, AIMS Institute for Science and the CBT Education Trust.

From the above, I would conclude that the economy and the dynamics of technology and globalization were the key motivators for introducing TQM as a Ministry policy and in its procedures, management and leadership. Commentators such as O'Mahony & Garavan (2012) have suggested that a group of factors at the international level, including 'political, economic and socio-cultural factors', are presently steering change in educational institutions (p. 186).

A knowledge-based economy and a knowledge society were mentioned repeatedly in statements by the Minister of Education, Prince Faisal Bin Abdullah Al-Saud, on the inaugural day of the conference. One Saudi management author (Alssaloom, 2005) listed several factors in addition to the need to introduce TQM introduction to Saudi educational institutions, as follows:

- Most Saudi educational institutions have functioned traditionally among the existing organizations of the twenty-first century. Their teaching, management and leadership processes fail entirely to match the current advanced approaches worldwide;
- High quality means less cost and adequate effectiveness in an institution or system. This is what the Saudi education system currently needs and will continue to need, not least because the sums expended on the education system have not yielded the expected outcomes;
- It is assumed that there are continuing dilemmas and shortcomings within educational organizations and institutions, resulting from insufficient and ineffective management. The Saudi management style is rigid and outdated, responding too slowly to the changes in the world. Indeed, Saudi management culture relies heavily on guesswork, gut feeling or at least management by command;

A proper, comprehensive and well-thought-out implementation of TQM would improve organisational performance (e.g., Deming, 1986; Fisher, 1998) which would beyond doubt contribute to the reform and development of the Saudi education system (ibid).

## **2. Implementing TQM in Education institutions**

Oakland (2007: 339) constantly stresses that the 'implementation of TQM can be daunting'. However, a number of research studies argue that TQM is more likely to succeed if it reflects adequate application (Eriksson and Hansson, 2003; Jannadi & Al-Saggaf, 2000; Lewis, Pun & Lalla, 2005; Yusuf, Gunasekaran & Dan, 2007). Planning for TQM implementation is the first and most important steps in securing the essential dimensions of service activities at different organizations. It is argued that continuous improvement for quality represents a comprehensive competitive strategy for human organizations over both interim and long-term strategies (Spanbauer, 1992).

A corresponding proliferation of frameworks and models for TQM implementation has been proposed to

educational institutions. These include bureaucratic and facilitative rationality, managerial and collegial rationality, uncertainty, subjectivity, and cultural and formal frameworks (Bush, 2003); power and political frameworks (Brennan, de Varies & Williams, 1997); the pedagogical framework (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003); and the engagement framework (Corwin, 1997 in Mehralizadeh & Safaeemoghaddam, 2010). Nevertheless, the best-known models in educational institutions are ISO 9000:2000, Malcolm Baldrige, the excellence models (EFQM) (Pino, 2008), and more recently in the Arab context, the Dubai Quality Award. Srikanthan & Dalrymple (2003) criticise the absence of agreement on a model for quality in educational institutions, citing the industrial origin of quality models as a main cause. However, it is possible, as Zairi & Alsughayir (2011) suggest, that each individual organization may adopt a successful, current TQM framework or model and adapt it to its own socio-cultural and political contexts. It is probably better to build the framework at the outset of the TQM implementation process.

### 3. Beyond TQM

Despite the intangibility of organizational culture, it is easy to have a sense or flavor of one organization's culture by just looking at the workers' dress codes, its offices' layout etc. Organizational culture, as argued, has the autonomous component of social action and has its unique features for each nation, country, organization, department and even individual. Cultural differences need to be acknowledged when borrowing a new management philosophy from a different culture; and differences are 'not a bad thing in a managerial world; they just require a bit more work at times' (Steers, Sanchez-Runde & Nardon, 2010: 77).

This is what this article is aiming to do by exploring the policy implementation in two contrasting regional administrations. This article takes TQM as an entry point into the management administrative culture of Saudi. It therefore aims to locate the experience of TQM implementation within a broader set of considerations. These include: the level of embeddedness of local educational directorate in their local socio-economic fabric; the actor system dynamic; and the issue of transferability and universality of management procedures.

On the first point, I am borrowing concepts from the economic sociology literature of social embeddedness. The concepts of relational and structural embeddedness are used to link the actions to the local and national Saudi context. Relational embeddedness is defined by Granovetter as the type of interpersonal liaisons people have constructed with each other through a history of interactions (Granovetter, 1992). Trustworthiness, loyalty, overlapping identities, solidarity and feeling of closeness are the main dimensions of relational embeddedness (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). However, Nahapiet and Ghoshal provide a refined conceptualization of Granovetter's structural embeddedness. It is, therefore, 'the impersonal configuration of linkages between people or units' (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998: 244). These, as Moran (2005: 1132) points out, involve absence or presence of network bonds between actors, centrality, connectivity and hierarchy. My central hypothesis is that demonstrating micro and macro opportunities and challenges can help to understand actions and embeddedness.

The second point refers to the role of human agency in processes of reform. Scholars including Gila, Jime & Lorentec (2001) and Chung & Luo (2008) indicate that organizational and environmental contexts have been reinforced whereas human agency neglected. Human agency and its dynamic possibilities play a significant role within humanities and social sciences. With more recognition paid to the role of human agency in institutional change, according to Chung & Luo (2008), 'research has found that both peripheral and [influential] actors can be change agents' (p. 124). Actors, therefore, are incorporated in this article in order to understand and explain the newly adopted management. In a sense, I am addressing the interaction between actors, context and system in which they operate and live by exploring the conditions that would make change happen.

Finally, the issues of transferability and universality will be drawing largely on institutional, cultural and political dimensions. Scholars of TQM (Deming, 1986; Juran, 1992; Crosby, 1996; Ishikawa, 1985) subscribe to the view that total quality management is universal in its applicability (Rungtusanatham et al., 2005). Therefore, this article will shed more light on this claim in two contrasting regional administrations contexts far away from its original birthplace.

### 4. Research Methodology

Investigation in the field of social science requires a research methodology which will provide deep understanding and knowledge (Taimah, 2004). Kumar (2005) illustrates this view by giving the example of someone going out for a drive. He/she should know where to go before starting and which route to follow and, if there is more than one route, they should decide which one to take based on logical reasons. The question which I continually asked myself was whether qualitative case study was a suitable method to use if I wanted to explain a case at the same time as I was exploring it. In his book *Case Study Research*, Yin (2009) justifies doing so by explaining that it is a misconception that case studies are appropriate for the exploratory phase only; they can in fact be used for two other purposes, descriptive and explanatory. The rationale behind my choice of a multi-case study was that I am keen to explore and explain the perspectives on new styles of management in two contexts.

A qualitative case study will give me the chance to explore, describe, analyse, and study the process of applying TQM from the point of view of senior managers. To clarify, I looked at the statements of top management in order to identify the ‘interactive process at work to show how [cases and individual features] affect the implementation of [new] systems and influence the way an organization functions’ (Bell, 2005: 10). Fieldwork was carried out over a period of two years involving: trial exploratory visit, core data fieldwork and supplementary observation. Data were collected mainly through interviews. I concentrated on case study 1 (the Aljouf Directorate) for a month and a half. Then, I moved to case study 2 (the Eastern Directorate) for a further month and a half. After completing this crucial stage I was able to do a supplementary stage that lasted for three weeks during December 2010. This was a period of unstructured observation. I divided these weeks evenly so I visited Aljouf Directorate, Eastern Directorate and the Ministry of Education’s first conference regarding TQM. For data analysis, since my focus was two case studies, conflation or comparison of each issue or theme runs throughout my analysis (Cordingley & Kogan, 1993: 22). The themes and subthemes indicated are ‘presented in the order of strength of expression and frequency of mention’ by study participants (Kutsyurba, Walker & Noonan, 2011: 88). I formed some significant perceptions of the state of the two Directorates’ premises, their welcoming of visitors, how staff come to the Directorates and from where, and so on. My field visits to the Directorates involved a sort of reflection, making sense of the situation, reading the body language of male interviewees and attempting to interpret the tone of a female interviewee’s voice and ‘challenge [my own] assumptions’ (ibid). At the end of the day, I was overwhelmed by the task of organizing data and writing notes on this single visit. With the passage of time, both familiar and unexpected issues have emerged and some myths have also been dispelled.

I created two projects on MaxQDA; each Directorate has a separate database. By creating two projects I intended to facilitate my understanding of each Directorate individually. Equally important, similarities, differences, strengths and weaknesses would be of interest to policy makers and planners if they wanted to successfully complete their project of applying TQM throughout the country. However, both Directorates had a similar framework, in the sense that I used identical code systems for both.

I adopted the techniques outlined by Kvale & Brinkmann (2009: 234). I read through the text of each interview in order to gain an overall impression and then picked out the interesting points or counted the expressions which seemed to form a pattern. To the best of my knowledge, information can be visualised via key understandings in themes, flow charts, words, figures, and so on (ibid). I reduced the data by establishing themes into code system of MaxQDA which fit with my pre-existing framework (e.g. current management practices; challenges facing management; perspectives on either the new TQM adopted or the way in which it is to be practiced, together with its constraints; communications, whether flat structure, top-down or bottom-up; existing difficulties, problems and relationships; planning, training and provision for continuous improvement).

## 5. Research Findings

There were a number of constraining forces—whether personal, professional or organisational—that challenged the implementation of TQM at both directorates. And yet, the implementation process proceeded to a certain extent in each directorate, with different degrees of practice and sometimes in different forms. These forces are discussed below.

*Bureaucratic restrictions:* The data showed that centralized management is the norm in these two directorates, as shown in the traditional top-down authority structure reflecting the influence of the centralized authority responsible for the Saudi education system, which is the MoE. The study showed that in the Aljouf Directorate, the highly centralized system was being controlled by local top management through micromanagement. Additionally, with the existence of centralized functions and the autocratic handling of power at the macro level, both local and national centralization are obstructing efficiency and quality of service by generating excessive workloads, tedious administrative chores and apathy. Local top management was likely to pay lip service to the notion of autonomy for propaganda purposes. Further, the impact of centralization extended to include bureaucratic decision-making at every layer of management, resulting in slow processes and prolonged procedures for easy decisions, thus leading to work delays. The existence of heavy workloads was also clearly perceived as an issue attributed to the centralized system or to the selection and appointment of the wrong senior managers. Unless actors, as Tuchman (2009: 159) proposed, are ‘deeply involved in the formation, decisions, approval, and implementation, there is little hope that...the educational institution will be transformed’.

In the Eastern Directorate, centralization was related much more to the macro level (the MoE). The data showed that the ministry had a much more profound influence on their progress, development and improvement, and that its centralized management affected their daily working practices. Policies and regulations that were related to financial management were too hard to avoid or change. The data also showed that the centralized system took the form of documentation hysteria (red tape) that ensued day after day, as earlier depicted in the case of the Aljouf Directorate. Managers were intensely engaged in trivial managerial details. Sometimes external politics,

as Tuchman (2009) put it ‘derail the enactment of internal policies’ (p. 89). Consequently, the idea of decentralization was discussed with considerable passion by the managers interviewed. Many wished to manage their activities and build their teams freely in order to be more innovative and effective. With acknowledgment that decentralization was not a panacea, they thought that centralized decision-making had hampered their roles. Among Eastern Directorate participants, there was an awareness of the arguments for and against decentralization. The data also showed that the discernible effect of TQM in the ministry would be restricted by the prevailing management style, which would then have repercussions in the provincial directorates. In other words, the Ministry imposed the same policies, regulations and procedures on all directorates.

*Lack of education and inadequate training:* Findings on this issue underscored the lack of managerial and administrative training at both directorates. The study showed that in the Aljouf Directorate explicitly, the quantity of training on offer was limited. Some senior managers, along with their subordinates, had had no training courses for years. In the case of others, their training programmes were often irrelevant to their current positions. The shortage of training courses was related to the location of the courses for which participants could apply. The Institute of Public Administration (IPA) is the main institution providing individual civil service employees with short-term in-service training that leads to qualifications which translate into promotion. Unfortunately, the headquarters is located in Riyadh, with two branches, one in Jeddah and one in Dammam, all of which are very far from the directorate’s location. Further, it is rare to find even one vacant training place in any of these three cities, as the institution provides in-service training for all Saudi public service employees. It must also be borne in mind that low-ranking staff members have the added barrier of finance. Regarding the quality and content of in-house training, the study revealed concerns about the inadequate experience of in-house trainers. The methods of delivering information were considered appropriate only for theoretical development and did not comply with the current techniques of training, such as workshops, seminars and conferences, which would focus on practice and generate enthusiasm among trainees.

In regard to availability of training, the situation at the Eastern Directorate is unlike that of the Aljouf Directorate, owing to the availability of the IPA subsidiary branch in Dammam and to the collection of private providers who offer professional and managerial development programmes. These facilities have, to some extent, enhanced the directorate’s performance. However, the advantage afforded by availability of training opportunities is constantly outweighed by a long list of obstacles arising from the managerial hierarchy and the bureaucratic structure. There were two main concerns: the unmet training needs of the managers and junior administrators and those of the administrative and financial managers. In regard to the first concern, too often courses were designed in advance by the central authority; important personal data on applicants, such as background information, qualifications and in-service experience, were all overlooked, so the courses delivered did not address the actual needs of trainees. The physically remote location of the MoE did not prevent its intervention, but the ministry did not design proper education and training activities that were relevant to preparing for change. In regard to the latter concern, which related specifically to the training of administrative and financial managers, those who occupied non-educational or schooling positions were in favor of IPA training courses. The underlying reason was that in-house training courses were not counted for promotion, although the Eastern Directorate created an award to encourage all departments and administrative sections to participate. Here again, admission to an IPA training course was subject to prolonged bureaucratic procedures similar to those described earlier, in relation to Aljouf.

*Reward system:* Fixed monthly pay was taken for granted based on permanent contracts valid for the life of the individual. Therefore, with acknowledgment of some scattered efforts at addressing the issue, the absence of an adequate reward system was cited as a potential challenge to the performance of these two directorates, and indeed, to their TQM initiatives. There was a spectrum of different perspectives on this theme. However, as far as material incentives were concerned, the study in both directorates under review showed that senior managers preferred financial incentives to other kinds of rewards. In both cases, the financial incentives formed a cornerstone of rewards for themselves and their subordinates alike. Senior managers were also concerned about provisional and rank-and-file employees. They appeared to be sympathetic towards the need for favorable working conditions and standards of living for provisional and rank-and-file employees. Beside their very low salary, which was below what would provide a very basic standard of living, the reward system itself discouraged and subverted the efforts of those workers.

The data presented evidence of dissatisfaction amongst most senior managers about the meaningless titles provided to them, when they were appointed senior managers, with no immediate tangible promotion effect. Although titles seemed to motivate some managers who believed that high positions conferred high status, which was, for instance, granted by employees and even outside the workplace by the holder’s relatives, friends and the local community, their current titles were viewed purely as only a different job title. Those who had gained experience of the service over many years were more frustrated by not receiving allowances. Concerning non-material incentives, the study showed that participants were dissatisfied from two main perspectives. The first

was the lack of such incentives; and the second was the lack of clarity; that is, the criterion which top management or the ministry used for awarding non-material incentives was blurred.

The negative impact of the incentives factor on the participants' motivation and job satisfaction was one of the dimensions that challenged the success of TQM initiatives. It seems that absence of incentives was in tune with low morale among some senior managers. It was not very obvious which aspect of the incentives issue generated the decline in their morale, nor why they were more inclined to link poor morale with incentives, in particular. Further investigation would perhaps attribute this low morale to job dissatisfaction or to something else.

*Workplace relations:* Based upon a variety of responses elicited in each directorate, these presented one more challenge to the success of the TQM initiatives. In the case of the Aljouf Directorate, School Affairs and Educational Affairs were in conflict with one another, whether deliberately or inadvertently. This may have been due to the recent changes to the structure of the directorates whereby a new counterpart group (Schools Affairs) of the administration had been either established or moved from the "mother group" (Educational Affairs). It may also have been one of the consequences of turning to Educational Affairs in order to poach staff or attract them away, thus causing clashes and tension between the top management of these two main groups. Another concern that participants expressed related to issues involving male versus female managers; this involved an unhealthy working climate, a tangible conflict and, sometimes, disturbing competition. This finding was attributed to bureaucratic attitudes and behavior as well as to organizational challenges such as outmoded regulations which encourage staff to be slack, ill-defined job descriptions and overlaps in tasks and responsibilities.

The Eastern Directorate is unlike Aljouf regarding this matter; instead, their concerns focus on the issue of overlapping tasks and grey areas, isolation and gaps in management, lack of integrity and eventual duplication. The prominent issue in this regard was the overlaps and grey areas. In certain workplaces, differences between some duties were vague in nature; for instance differences between the Department of Teachers' Affairs and the Personnel Department, the Department of Educational Planning and Development and the Department of Educational Training, along with Department of Sites. Isolation and gaps in management emerged as another significant area which impacted on the collaboration between managers, and this was seen as possibly "a reflective mirror" of what prevailed inside the headquarters (the ministry) itself. Admittedly, there was lack of communication within the administration, between divisions and departments, and a lack of integration among administrative units that implicitly competed against one another. This led, as well, to adverse effects that impinged on the harmonizing process among administrations or even departments and divisions, extending to individual administrators. The last major issue in respect to workplace relations was duplication of tasks. Certain departments, divisions or administrations offered examples of this. It seemed that this issue related, to some extent, to the first one, that of 'overlap and grey areas' owing to similarity in administrative roles, as described in the discussion of the first key issue mentioned in this section. Senior managers at each provincial directorate, as Teh et al. (2009) conclude, may 'need to identify which dimension of TQM practices could alleviate the role conflict issue...so [they] would be able to tailor assistance strategies to be more successful in reducing undesirable role conflict' (p. 1131).

*Corruption and malpractice:* The study showed that at both directorates, participants complained vociferously about corrupt practices; yet such allegations are hard to prove in such vertical structures, and no individual person cited any instances of bribery, embezzlement or fraud in educational settings. Notwithstanding this, the evidence gathered was divided into three related areas. First, there was the interlinked relationship between corruption and loyalty; second, the exchange of favors; and third, the misuse of time and public property. Regarding the first area, in both directorates, the data suggested that there were conflicting loyalties in terms of the loyalty and commitment among most senior managers and staff to their family members, close friends and close relatives, as against their commitment to the organization. Otherwise, members of the executive would be isolated or in confrontation with their local communities, including people of their own status. As far as exchange of favors was concerned, the 'theory of the Saudi hidden points' was acknowledged but was only implicitly exercised. Pure exchange of favors would be practiced with someone working outside the directorate in a different public organization such as the public health sector, for example. The third common topic of concern in regard to corruption was the use of time and public property, which was one of the critical issues faced by these two directorates. This included misuse of prayer and ablution time, chatting with colleagues inside the directorate building or with friends visiting from outside the directorate; smoking for too long outside the building, playing with smart phones; pursuing private business and conducting private business by phone while at work; or leaving the office sometimes to supervise business in person; surfing the Internet; roaming from one office to another; or asking for permission to follow up the business of members of the family at some other public organization. In this regard, there was a strong relationship to the Saudi Bedouin culture.

*Physical and technological resources:* There was a good deal of satisfaction among interviewees with their resources and this factor could facilitate the introduction of TQM. As a reflection of the second Saudi economic

boom, the MoE had recently removed schools that were not purpose-built, in the process bringing scattered buildings belonging to each directorate onto the same campus. According to data results, in the existing buildings occupied by the two directorates, the workplace environment was considered on the whole well equipped, which worked well in the eyes of the main participants and reflected the value placed on these kinds of resources by Saudi culture. There was the tendency to relate luxuriously furnished offices to TQM initiatives, though in the global literature, that practice is definitely seen as a waste of money. With regard to the transportation issue, both directorates provided some senior managers with cars. Others, who needed the directorates' cars for transportation, could book them by following certain procedures which differed in flexibility from one directorate to another. But all female managers, without exception, were provided with new chauffeured cars, as they are not allowed to drive themselves in Saudi Arabia.

## 6. Conceptual conclusions

This article's rich empirical grounding finally allows me to revisit and hopefully further contribute to some key theoretical perspectives on institutions and public management:

*Importance of actors in a model* the institutions, departments, units etc. are not inanimate objects, but living organisms. They are 'human constructs' (Crozier & Friedberg, 1980). Their actors, who interact and respond to the system, have conflicting interests, cooperate with different personalities and agents, have ambitions, fears, pleasures, families and financial problems. In themselves the actors of the administrative system are affected by contextual variables upon which a complete standardization, even through micro-management, is risky and perhaps prone to failure. Because individuals had not been considered in their complexities (and abilities to anticipate, adapt and resist), the bureaucratic system was effectively impractical and unprepared for the introduction of a new policy of management drawing on a 'beneficiary-centered' model. Against this background, the distant leadership should have been embedded within the new system through what Ball (2006: 10) calls a 'loose-tight structure'. Within this, the actors can 'become leaders rather than controllers, providing the vision and inspiration to produce quality and strive for 'excellence' themselves (ibid). I am suggesting here, that the conditions, policies and practices which normally suit TQM were adopted in Saudi Arabia out of their relational context. My case studies have revealed how much actors react to change in reference to multiple professional and non-professional values and constraints and how much the effectiveness of change in the system relies on the cooperation and therefore a good understanding of actors.

*Embeddedness* Both Directorates are embedded within the socio-cultural and economic fabric of their locality. Studies of economic sociology by Polanyi (1994), Granovetter (1985) and others have revealed how the economic success of firms depends on their structural embeddedness in local - often non-economic - networks. Similarly, findings from this research indicate how directorates combine two levels of embeddedness (local/cultural and national/bureaucratic) that can be mutually reinforcing or alienating in the process of introduction of management innovation. This clearly emerged in staffing matters of both directorates (and related issues of professional development, incentives and staff turnover), but also in the patterns of communication and cooperation observed among actors.

On the first point (staffing matters), Directorates rely excessively on a workforce imposed by centrally defined criteria of nationality and qualification. But this entanglement in a centralized bureaucratic system also generates a dependency on local labor markets (as they have to recruit their staff from within their assigned pool of schools). Aljouf was for instance found to be missing the more qualified staff available to the Eastern directorate, where staff development opportunities but also greater mobility between private and public labor markets, provide opportunities and constraints (higher turnover) of a different nature.

The second point (communication and cooperation) echoes to the Durkheimian concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity. Communications in the two directorates rely on different models of interdependence among actors. The greater embeddedness of Aljouf directorate in local cultural patterns of relationships and hierarchies is perceptible in the reluctance of agents in the various units to embrace TQM models of communication transcending these existing patterns. In the Eastern Directorate by contrast, the interdependence between actors is more organic, resulting more from their objective positioning in the structure than in the local systems of hierarchies and societal values.

*Universality of TQM* Although the Saudi government is not in a dependency position vis a vis international donors, it is, like other states, being increasingly held accountable for the quality of services provided to the public and is therefore relying on new public management systems to improve its people' life (Hall, 2005). The translation and implementation of such new and imported policies, TQM in the present case, requires careful local and national consideration of different, often contrasting, environments. Moreover, the political context in which the precepts of TQM were first introduced and implemented was a political and economic liberal one, as opposed to the central monarchical system of Saudi Arabia. This either means that TQM must be reshaped to fit the Saudi context or that both national and local institutional environments must be transformed to meet TQM

requirements. The necessary compromise to be reached towards a successful reform implementation would need careful consideration of which adaptation is easier and how to reconcile TQM with a complex power structure, without downplaying the challenging conditions of the country, its provinces and institutions. According to Dale et al (2001: 440), TQM has at times been found incomplete because of an over-reliance on a formal analysis of information, and where universal applicability is assumed.

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