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# Management and Academic Freedom in Higher Educational Institutions: Implications for Quality Education in Uganda

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**ABSTRACT** *In accordance with the recommendation concerning the status of higher-education teaching personnel approved by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1997, higher education institutions and their academic personnel have long been expected to exercise their intellectual capacity and their moral prestige to defend and actively disseminate universally-accepted values; and enjoy full academic autonomy and freedom, conceived as a set of rights and duties, while being fully responsible and accountable to society. Academic freedom is a key parameter of sound governance of higher education systems in any country. To what extent can academic freedom be a function of effective management systems and does it have any implications for quality education in developing countries? The paper answers in the affirmative. Data from a sample of academic staff, university managers, students and policy-makers were analysed using correlation and regression techniques and it was found that management significantly contributes to academic freedom in higher educational institutions. In this way, a better-managed institution enhances academic freedom and this consequently offers answers to the quality of education. The results are compared with international findings and policy and management implications are presented. A conceptual framework is suggested that links management systems with academic freedom and the quality of education, using the systems theory approach.*

**Keywords:** academic freedom; autonomy; quality education and management

## Introduction

Concern about the quality of higher education in Africa is on the rise and it comes at a time of growing recognition of the potentially powerful role of tertiary education for growth and a natural response to public perception that educational quality is being compromised (Materu, 2007). Little is available in the literature on what African countries are doing to regulate and improve higher education quality, what it takes to implement this initiative, what has been the impact and what the priorities for capacity building are. This paper looks

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at academic freedom as one of the 'panacea' to the quality problems in higher educational institutions, taking the context of Uganda. As argued by Sall and Mangu (2005), academic freedom is as critical today as ever before and without it universities and higher education institutions are unable to fulfil some of their primary functions of helping societies to respond not only to the challenges of development and globalisation but also making sense of and addressing, increasingly complex societal needs.

In conformity with existing literature, the paper recognises that the institutional and legal frameworks of the academy differ from place to place (Hiesler, 2007) but at the same time, academics have always worked in the dual roles of educator and researcher (MacGregor *et al.*, 2006); although their environment of work has fundamentally changed to the extent that the long-cherished principle of academic freedom has been, in a number of instances, threatened. This threat is not just in Africa, of course, as the recent high-profile case of the United Kingdom Higher Education Academy illustrated (Attwood & Gill, 2008). While academic and intellectual freedoms are vital (and not only for scholars and intellectuals), they are not clearly the most basic or 'core' human rights (Risse & Sikkink, 1999). Academic freedom involves the freedom to engage in the entire range of academic activities involved in the production of knowledge, including choosing a research focus, determining what to teach in the classroom, presenting research findings to colleagues and publishing research findings. However, that kind of academic freedom has limits. This paper uses the systems approach and the transformational models of input-processes-output relationship to argue that management of higher education (*input*) affects academic freedom (*process*), which would have likely implications for quality education in Uganda (*output*).

### The purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to examine the extent to which the planning, organising, leadership, staffing and controlling management functions contribute to the promotion of academic freedom. This study was intended to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent does planning in higher educational institutions contribute to academic freedom in Uganda?
- Is there a significant relationship between organising and academic freedom in higher educational institutions in Uganda?
- To what extent does the leadership of higher educational institutions contribute to academic freedom in Uganda?
- Is there any relationship between staffing and academic freedom in higher educational institutions in Uganda?
- Is there a significant relationship between controlling and academic freedom in higher educational institutions in Uganda?
- What would be the likely implications of each of the above relationships on enhancement of quality in higher educational institutions in Uganda?

### Methodology

The study had a total sample size of 384 respondents (from a population of 4126), which included academic staff, university managers, student representatives and policy-makers. The data presented in this paper were derived from a total of 296 respondents (a response rate of 77%). Owing to the nature of the population, stratified sampling was used to divide

the population into subpopulations and this enabled the use of simple random sampling to select the samples from each of the subgroups. The population were members of academic staff associations because each higher education institution is mandated to have this association by law, it also included the university managers, student representatives from the students guild council and policy-makers who included members of the governing council and senior staff at the ministry of education.

Data were collected using a closed questionnaire. Different categories of respondents had different questionnaires but measuring the same variables. So during analysis, the different questionnaires were coded into one integrated code sheet and it is from this that the analysis was made. Management was conceptualised into the management functions of planning (five items), organising (eight items), leading (eight items), and controlling (eight items). This gave a total of 29 items that measured the variable of management. During data analysis, the 29 items were subjected to exploratory factor analysis and it emerged that four items were retained as reliable measures of the planning function, three items were for staffing, five items were for leading and two items were for controlling; suggesting that 13 items were extracted from the initial 29 items as reliable measures of the management functions. Academic freedom was measured using 11 variables obtained from the review of international literature. Using a five-point Likert scale, respondents were asked to indicate their opinions on: (1) whether academic freedom was a key principle in governance of higher education; (2) whether institutions were encouraging autonomy in decision-making; (3) the degree of interference by top management in teaching decisions; (4) the involvement of government in employment of academic staff in higher institutions; (5) academics having a long tenure of employment; (6) their employment being on a renewable contractual basis; (7) their remuneration systems; (8) the academics having control over curriculum content; (9) academics having control over admission requirements for their programmes; (10) having freedom to pursue any line of inquiry; and (11) having the freedom to set their research agenda.

The returned questionnaires were edited, coded and analysed using SPSS. It was found that all variables were reliable: planning ( $\alpha=0.737$ ), staffing ( $\alpha=0.779$ ), leading ( $\alpha=0.672$ ), controlling ( $\alpha=0.997$ ) and academic freedom ( $\alpha=0.803$ ). Subsequently, each of the four management functions was correlated and regressed against the computed mean for all the items of academic freedom to determine the degree and direction of relationships among study variables and then determine the extent to which the predictor variables accounted for the variations in the scores of academic freedom, which was the dependent variable. In addition, some descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies, means and standard deviations were computed.

### **Literature review**

Education is viewed as a process and the role of the education manager is to plan, design and implement an efficient and effective learning system, responsive to the needs of the learner and society. Successful management requires an accountability of the system (Kaufman, 1972). A system is an entity, whether conceptual or physical, which consists of, interrelated, interacting or interdependent parts (Modern, 2004). System thinkers distinguish between closed systems and open systems. Closed systems are regarded as being self-supporting or self-managing and not interacting with their environments (of which higher education is inherently not). Open systems do interact with their environments from which they receive essential inputs (the case being with higher education institutions) (Harrison & Shiroun, 1999; Mullins, 2002; Modern, 2004). However, closed and open systems cannot be

completely differentiated in practice (Kreitner, 1995). Managing higher education institutions can immensely benefit from systems thinking. Ivancevich *et al.* (1994) argue that from the systems perspective, management involves managing and solving problems in each part of the organisation but doing so with the understanding that actions taken in one part of the organisation affect other parts of the organisation.

### Quality education

Quality is a fascinating concept, which has a very positive image but it has been difficult to define in practice even though it is so widely used (Harvey & Green, 1993; Cheng, 2003; Hamalainen, 2003; Van Damme, 2003). The notion of quality is difficult to define especially in the context of tertiary education where institutions have broad autonomy to decide on their own visions and mission (Materu, 2007). In the age of increasing competitive pressure, finite individual and institutional resources and increased demand for universal access, assessing the quality of higher education has become a major public concern and institutions of higher education will continue to be scrutinised by external stakeholders until they provide evidence of improved institutional quality (Koslowski, 2006). Traditionally, education quality has referred to the achievement of planned education goals, particularly students' outcomes, and have been taken not to be different from education effectiveness (Cheng, 2003). It has come to be equivalent to what may be termed as internal quality assurance referring to efforts for improving the internal environment and processes such that the effectiveness of learning and teaching can be ensured to achieve the planned goals (Cheng, 2003). The process model of quality assurance assumes that, to attain education quality, there are processes: the management process, teaching process and learning process. Thus, there is a need to develop management quality indicators (leadership, decision-making), teaching quality indicators (teaching efficacy, teaching methods) and learning quality indicators (learning attitude, attendance rate). Quality assurance by this model is to ensure smooth, healthy internal processes and fruitful learning experiences (Cheng, 2003). This paper looks at the links among the three processes. However, Cheng also identifies other models of quality assurance as described below:

- *The absence of problems model.* This model assumes there is an absence of problems, troubles, defects, weaknesses, difficulties and dysfunctions in an educational institution. Education quality is defined from this model as the absence of problems and troubles inside the educational institution. Quality assurance, therefore, relies heavily on institutional monitoring and reporting to ensure no problems or deficiencies are arising from its operation or structure. The management team of an institution will establish a strong quality assurance system for a deficiency-free environment.
- *The goal and specification model.* This assumes that there are clear, enduring, normative and well-accepted goals and specifications as indicators and standards for educational institutions or educational systems to pursue or with which to conform. Education quality defined by this model is the achievement of stated goals or conformance with the specifications listed in the institutional plan or programme plans. The typical examples of quality indicators to be used may include students' academic achievements, attendance rates, drop-out, personal developments, number of graduate enrolments in universities and staff's professional qualifications.
- *The resource input model.* This model assumes that scarce and quality resources are necessary for educational institutions to achieve diverse objectives and provide quality services

in a short space of time. Education quality is perceived as the natural result of achievement of scarce resources and inputs for the institution. Quality assurance in this model refers to the efforts to ensure that different types of quality resource inputs and appropriate environment are available to education services and practices. The education quality indicators may include high-quality student intake, recruitment of better-qualified staff, better facilities and equipment, better staff–student ratio and more financial support procured from the central education authority, alumni, parents, sponsoring body or any outside agents.

- *The satisfaction model.* The satisfaction of strategic constituents of an education institution is critical to its survival in the community. In this model, education quality mainly refers to the extent to which the performance of an education institution can satisfy the needs and expectations of its powerful stakeholders. Quality assurance by this model heavily relies on the efforts to ensure that education practices and services satisfy stakeholders' needs or even go beyond their expectations.
- *The legitimacy model.* This model assumes that the education environment is very challenging, demanding and competitive. Therefore, educational institutions have to face external challenges and demands for accountability and value for money in order to gain legitimacy for survival and, to acquire critical resource, education institutions have to win support from the community, build up a good public image and show evidence of accountability.
- *The organisational learning model.* The changing education environment is producing great impacts on nearly every aspect of function in educational institutions. This model assumes that, responding to changing environment, education quality is a dynamic concept, involving continuous improvement and development of members, process and outcomes of an education institution. Quality assurance of this model emphasises the importance of organisational learning behaviour to ensuring quality in education.
- *The total quality management model.* This approach defines education quality as the character of the set of elements in the input, processes and output of the educational institution that provide services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations.

From the above models, it is evident that all the approaches recognise, first, that an education system has different stakeholders (internal and external) each with a need. Second, that quality education is the overall target of each and every education system. In this paper, it is argued that the teachers are essential in each of the models for the attainment of education quality. Therefore their fundamental rights and freedoms have to be protected. It has emerged from almost all models that there is an input–process–output logic in higher education where quality has to be maintained through meeting of indicators at each of the elements. All the models are certainly useful in understanding the complex interplay between education inputs and outputs through a transformation process. All models offer a helping hand in understanding the interactions within a higher education system and its various stakeholders.

### **Autonomy and academic freedom**

There are different and diverse ideas by different people in different countries as to what constitutes autonomy and academic freedom in institutions of higher learning. Berdahl (1990) attempted a distinction between academic freedom and what he preferred to call

substantive and procedural autonomy. He asserted that academic freedom is the freedom of the individual scholar in his or her teaching and research to pursue truth wherever it may lead, without fear of punishment or termination of employment. He considered substantive autonomy as the power of the university or college to determine its own goals and programmes. Procedural autonomy is the power of the university or college to determine the means by which its goals and programmes will be pursued (Goedegbuure *et al.*, 1993). Autonomy applied to higher education concerns the relative ability of an institution to govern itself without outside control and this autonomy can be granted by law or through the financing system. Academic freedom and autonomy vis-à-vis the state will continue to be the overriding issue and the relationship is delicate and in discussing it, a distinction must be made between 'dependency' and 'intervention' (Husén, 1996). Kasozi (2003, pp. 112–113), quoting Ajayi *et al.* (1996), observes that institutional autonomy is the corporate freedom of the university from external interference by outside authorities including the state, the owners of the university, civil society and other organised groups. Institutional autonomy includes freedom to admit and dismiss students, hire and fire students, design curricula, the setting and marking of examinations, the awarding of certificates, proposing and implementing budgets without interference; but it must be balanced by accountability which includes relevance of the programmes taught to the needs of society, annual auditing and publications of university accounts, annual reports of activities of the university and good governance within the university. On the other hand, academic freedom refers to the freedom that staff and students of the university must have to do their work effectively. It is the freedom of the individual university worker or student to act freely in the pursuance of knowledge. It includes freedom to:

- teach, speak and write what a person thinks is correct or is the truth;
- set and implement one's research agenda;
- hold opinions that staff consider to be true without interference from the government, external parties or the university.

Ajayi's ideas, unlike other views on academic freedom in universities include the freedom of students, which is a fundamental contribution to the good governance of institutions as students are key stakeholders. In accordance with the recommendation concerning the status of higher education teaching personnel approved by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 1997 (UNESCO, 1997), higher education institutions and their personnel and students were to: (a) preserve and develop their crucial functions, through the exercise of ethics and scientific and intellectual rigor in their various activities; (b) be able to speak out on ethical, cultural and social problems completely independently and in full awareness of their responsibilities, exercising a kind of intellectual authority that society needs to help it to reflect, understand and act; (c) enhance their critical and forward-looking functions, through continuing analysis of emerging social, economic, cultural and political trends, providing a focus for forecasting, warning and prevention; (d) exercise their intellectual capacity and their moral prestige to defend and actively disseminate universally accepted values, including peace, justice, freedom, equality and solidarity, as enshrined in UNESCO's constitution; (e) enjoy full academic autonomy and freedom, conceived as a set of rights and duties, while being fully responsible and accountable to society; (f) play a role in helping to identify and address issues that affect the well-being of communities, nations and global society.

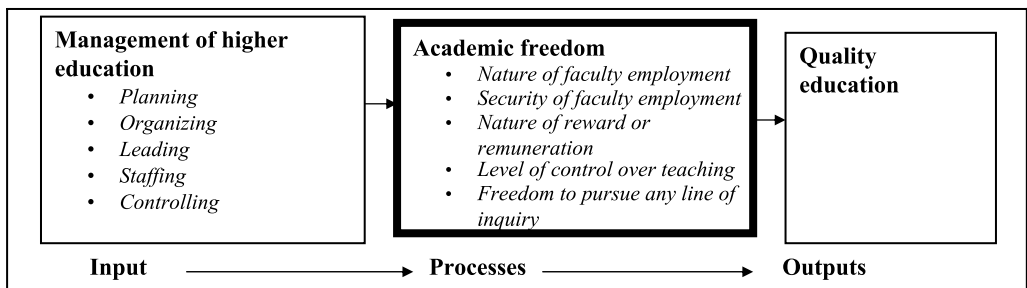
## Management of higher education

As medicine, management has some strong aspects of analysis, diagnosis, preventing and therapy, that is, the ability to find solutions for problematic situations and to take decisions. Management has a deep relationship with several areas of human behaviour as the competence to analyse, to plan activities, to define objectives, to formulate strategies, to decide, to motivate people in order to coordinate and control the possibility of achieving the goals (Carneiro, 2004). The management and leadership of tertiary educational institutions has always become the subject of increasing uncertainty as institutions have to grapple with the profound external changes that influence the way they function (Meek & Wood, 1997). Expansion of the system, diversification of provision of services and resource base and the changes in economic rationality of investing in higher education have been factors influencing change in the higher education scene (Varghese, 2004a, b, c). As is the case with all organisations, the quality of leadership may be more crucial in effecting successful change than other important factors such as adequate resources (Harrison & Brodeth, 1999).

Dearlove (2000, p. 269) has argued that:

... like it or not, process matters among academics in a way that highlights the need to connect 'what to do' with the 'how to do it'. Do this, and then the broad direction of strategic change is more likely to be regarded as legitimate in a way that will generate commitment and actual change down on the ground.

Building on this observation, the above conceptual framework (Figure 1) argues that if management has to achieve quality education, which they are now called upon to do, then there is no way they can achieve it without the full consent and full involvement of the academics. The available way is to first enhance their cherished principles of academic freedom and quality can be achieved. Short of this realisation, this paper argues, quality will be sacrificed in the long run. The conceptual framework looks at management as the inputs to the protection and the promotion of the fundamental principles of academic freedom, which revolves around five fundamental principles. By protecting these principles, which are assumed in the model to offer transformational mechanisms, the final output is quality education. All this is possible within the broader political, economic, social and technological environment.



Environment (Political, economic, social, and technological)

FIGURE 1. Conceptual framework

## Findings and discussion

Respondents to the study included academic staff, university managers, students and policy-makers. The majority of the sample were males (64.9%). One eighth (12.5%) had a PhD, 37.2% had Master's qualifications, 41.2% had a Bachelor's degree, 12.5% were undergraduate students and 2.7% had other qualifications. There were probably some students who indicated having Bachelor's degrees when they were actually still pursuing their undergraduate study.

With the exception of respondent's institution, gender and religious affiliation, all the rest of the demographic variables are significant (Table 1). Similarly, among the primary independent variables (management functions) all are statistically significant with the exception of the controlling function; a finding that is not surprising given that those managers who strictly control the academic staff are likely to infringe on their academic freedom. On the other hand, the enhancement of the freedom of the faculty in pursuit of their research agenda, curricula, and employment results from a management régime that allows some degree of flexibility rather than 'mechanistic' control machinery that seriously angers the academic staff as a serious infringement of the traditional rights. The coefficient, which is significant, with a positive sign, indicates that such variables are correlated with academic freedom. In developing countries for example, policy-makers, university managers and administrators, students and the academic staff themselves are fundamental constituents that can promote academic freedom. This explains why the results revealed that the category of respondents was positively significantly correlated with academic freedom.

There are some variables however that correlate negatively with academic freedom, for example, age of the respondents, experience and the place where respondents had obtained their qualification (local, abroad or both). This means that increase in the age and experience leads to a reduction in the promotion of academic freedom. As the age of the university managers and their experience increases, those managers would seriously infringe on the rights of the academics. Among the managerial functions, correlation results imply that

TABLE 1. Correlation results among demographic variables, independent variables and academic freedom (dependent)

Variables	Coefficients	Sig
Category of respondents	0.603**	0.000
Respondents' institution	-0.026	0.658
Position in the institution	0.251**	0.000
Gender	-0.041	0.481
Education level	0.276**	0.000
Religious affiliation	0.044	0.455
Where qualification obtained	-0.280**	0.000
Age of respondents	-0.469**	0.000
Respondents' experience	-0.362**	0.000
Planning in higher education	0.152**	0.009
Leading in higher education	0.249**	0.000
Organising in higher education	0.366**	0.000
Staffing in higher education	0.119*	0.040
Controlling in higher education	0.083	0.153

Note: \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

organising is the most important factor that promotes academic freedom in higher education, followed by leading as supported by findings from Harrison and Brodeth (1999), where they emphasise that as is the case with all organisations, the quality of leadership may be more crucial in effecting successful change than other important factors such as adequate resources. However, according to Hogan and Hogan (2001), it is estimated that between 50% and 75% of leaders are not performing well. These observations agree with Trow (1984, p. 7) who argued that 'it is broadly true that institutional leadership is not very effective in higher education around the world'. If leadership is the missing link, then getting academics into the leading positions throughout a university is proving to be an increasing problem, even though academic involvement in management and governance is fundamental given that institutions geared for teaching and research can hardly bypass the people who do these things (Dearlove, 2000).

Table 2 links five primary independent variables and a combined list of demographic variables with the principle of academic freedom. It presents the regression results of these variables against academic freedom as the dependent variables. Although a correlation coefficient indicates the relationship between all the predictor variables with academic freedom, it does not imply any causal relationship between the variables and regression analysis is used to find out whether the independent variables predicts the dependent variable (Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999). The multiple regression tables include five primary independent variables and other predictor variables. The independent variables include planning, leading, organising, staffing and controlling. The table indicates the R, R-squared, standard error, significance levels and below it is the Anova table. Multiple regression analysis was used, which is concerned with the use of many predictor variables to predict a criterion variable (Amin, 2005) and its main use is to provide an estimate of the relative importance of the different independent variables in producing changes in the dependent variable (Robson, 1993).

In Table 2, the first column lists the variables that were entered into the regression. The next column represents the 'multiple R' (0.685, 0.689, 0.686, 0.700, 0.683 and 0.674) for planning, leading, controlling, organising and the demographic variables respectively. The values indicate the correlation between the observed dependent variable and the predicted dependent variable (that is, predicted by the regression equation). 'R-square' is the square of R and is also known as the 'co-efficient of determination' (planning=0.469, leading=0.475,

TABLE 2. Regression analysis results

Variables	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Stand. Error	Sig.
Planning	0.685	0.469	0.451	.39362	0.004
Leading	0.689	0.475	0.456	.39171	0.001
Controlling	0.686	0.471	0.452	.39315	0.003
Organising	0.700	0.490	0.472	.38586	0.000
Staffing	0.683	0.467	0.449	.39449	0.009
Demographic variables	0.674	0.454	0.436	.39864	0.000
ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	14	40.129	2.866	18.369	0.000
Residual	278	43.380	0.156		
Total	292	83.508			

controlling=0.471, organising=0.490, staffing=0.467 and demographic variables= 0.454) and it tells us what percentage or portion of the sample variation in the dependent variable can be attributed to the individual independent variables and combined independent variables. This means that when treated as a stand-alone management function and regressed against academic freedom, while controlling for other variables the planning function is likely to contribute to only 46.9% of the variations in academic freedom.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

This paper has examined empirically the contribution of the management functions of planning, leading, organising, staffing and controlling to the promotion of academic freedom in Uganda's higher education systems. The paper has argued that if management systems contribute to academic freedom, then the quality of education could be improved. Of course there are other factors that would come into play in such a complex interplay. The empirical findings have shown that effective management significantly promotes the principle of academic freedom in higher educational institutions; a finding that supports the already-existing literature. The findings have also revealed that several demographic variables, such as the position of respondents, their age, their experience, also significantly promotes academic freedom. Both these factors have wider implications for quality education. These are significant findings on the subject of academic freedom and have implications for quality education from the Ugandan context. The results are significant for the academics, the higher education managers, the policy-makers, the students and the research community and appeal to local and international audiences.

To academics, the paper has provided empirical indicators of important drivers for their long-cherished principles of academic freedom. The study has analysed and examined those factors that are essential for the promotion of academic freedom, which in turn academics can use to promote quality education in their respective disciplines. To policy-makers, the findings provide empirical groundwork for the formulation of appropriate policies for the promotion of quality education in higher education. To managers, the findings provide critical aspects of their management effort that can effectively promote the principles of academic freedom upon which they can argue for the enhancement of quality education from the academics. To students and the research community, the findings offer an important foundation for subsequent research in similar or related areas. This paper makes wider implications to policy-makers and practice. The emerging results imply that management generally has to work in a joint effort to first enhance the principles of academic freedom before realising fundamental benefits of quality education. Of course, there are other essential actors in a higher education system that would enhance quality. However, the paper favours the academics because of their central role in a higher education system. It is the academics that play the largest part of the transformation processes to produce quality graduates.

### **Conclusion**

This study used the input-process-output model together with the systems approach to develop a conceptual framework on how to promote quality education in higher educational institutions through improvements in academic freedom as a result of the management systems. It was argued in the paper that (1) by focusing on the inputs required by one of the greatest promoters of academic freedom, the academics themselves, institutions

of higher learning could set a permanent foundation for quality; and (2) the processes, which take place in the institutions, should aim at 'waste elimination' and emphasise 'value added'. The academics in close cooperation with the administrators and students in certain instances could use their cherished positions to improve the quality of education offered in higher educational institutions. The quality of graduates should be continuously improved through a systematic process of monitoring and assessment. This study has provided evidence that while the management systems may be effective in the promotion of academic freedom and subsequent enhancement of quality education, there are other underlying internal and external factors (including age, experience and position) that could come into play. The results compare well with existing local and international literature.

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