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ELT international accreditation in the Saudi HE realm: Does it really improve language educational quality?

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Abstract

English language teaching (ELT) international accreditation in this paper is understood as an "internationalized approach to quality assurance" and academic practices through which language institutions worldwide measure their students' learning and benchmark their policies, curricula, pedagogies and program outcomes with global (predominantly Western) institutions. Informed by the above understanding of ELT international accreditation, this study uses the European Association for Quality Language Services (EAQUALS) accreditation project as a case example to explore the experiences of three transnational (i.e., Indian, Pakistani and Algerian) TESOL teachers working in a Saudi university dubbed *Snow University* (SU; a pseudonym). The data emerged from the following sources: (1) autobiographical narrative; (2) analysis of the EAQUALS accreditation manual; (3) reflective journals; and (4) semi-structured individual interview. The findings reveal that the participants were well informed about why the SU needs international accreditation. They saw it as offering global reach to the university's programs. Yet their reflections on the project showed that mutual benefits and recognition are missing. For them, the process of gaining accreditation offered the opportunity for them to reflect on their everyday realities at different levels including epistemological positions, classroom pedagogical practices, and ethical and professional responsibilities. This study concludes with some critical reflections and a call for further studies on international accreditation in Saudi Arabia.

Keyword: International, transnational, accreditation, English, higher education, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Over the past 15 years, with generous legal, administrative and financial support from the government, transnational education (TNE) has come to life in multiple forms and scales in the Saudi higher education (HE) system. Two indicators of the proliferation of TNE practices that can be seen today are: (1) the heavy

presence of transnational English language teachers (e.g., from India, Pakistan, the US, Canada, etc.) working across Saudi universities; and (2) the race for obtaining international accreditation among local universities (see, in particular, Barnawi, 2018/2021). International accreditation generally refers to "the process by which a qualification, a course or a program comes to be accepted by an external body [mainly Western accreditation organizations] to be a satisfactory quality and standard" in non-English dominant countries (Augusti, 2005, p. 418). In the context of English language teaching (ELT), international accreditation refers to the process of exporting a set of language policies, curricula, materials, pedagogies and assessment practices and "cultural scripts from one political and cultural context to another" (Noor & Anderson, 2013, p. 160). Marshaled by transnational teachers and international accreditation, Saudi HE bodies aim to exhibit their strong desire to belong to the global knowledge economy and become globally competitive, and at the same time prove to other stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, employers, and governments, etc.) that their academic programs have sufficient quality (Barnawi, 2020; Ramírez, 2014).

While this is happening, there are rarely studies that examine how international accreditation (and its associated products and services) is understood, negotiated and contested by transnational English language teachers (e.g., from India, Pakistan, and Algeria) working across Saudi universities. I argue that examining the effects of international accreditation from the lens of this group of teachers could offer rich reflection and critical engagement pertinent to transnational academic activities leading to local capacity building. Such an investigation allows us to explore the ways in which tensions between local/global and Islamic/non-Islamic modes of knowledge production and construction are framed and experienced by this group of teachers in their everyday realities. It also offers space for re-visiting or even challenging our own localities, beliefs, and professional practices.

To that end, I first review theoretical approaches to the governance of HE. Next, I engage with the scholarship of international accreditation, with a particular focus on issues of jurisdiction in ELT international accreditation agencies. I then use the European Association for Quality Language Services (EAQUALS) accreditation project as a case example to explore the lived experiences of three transnational (i.e., Indian, Pakistani and Algerian) TESOL teachers working in a Saudi university dubbed *Snow University* (SU; a pseudonym). ELT international accreditation in this paper is understood as an "internationalized approach to quality assurance" and academic practices (Ramírez, 2014; Shahjahan & Morgan, 2016, p. 93) through which language institutions in Saudi Arabia measure their students' learning and benchmark or compare their policies, curricula, pedagogies and program outcomes with global (predominantly Western) institutions. I examine two questions:

1. How and in what ways has EAQUALS accreditation (and its standards) been understood, negotiated, and contested by transnational teachers at Snow University?
2. What forms of teaching and learning practices has EAQUALS accreditation produced, and is producing, at Snow University?

1. The governance of HE institutions

> [While] internationalization stresses the existence of different national cultures and aims at intercultural learning and awareness by people from different backgrounds, globalization is commonly associated with a blurring of (cultural) boundaries and a trend towards cultural convergence, including a convergence of education structures and curricula.
>
> (Ute Lanzendorf, 2013, p. 1)

The above quote suggests that internationalization brings nations together and creates mutual understanding in their HE systems. In the history of the scholarship of globalization in relation to HE, transnational education practices render the boundaries between nations porous/mobile, thereby shifting the power from nations to transnational institutions (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). That is, "[u]niversities that aspire to forge links with global capital networks—both human and financial—must by necessity submit to transnational governance structures and regimes that are a product of an increasingly globalized world" (Noori & Anderson, 2010, p. 162). At the same time, these universities have to strictly adhere to educational rules and regulations set by their local authorities to preserve local culture, knowledge, and tradition. By way of illustration, one of the rules and regulations set by the Saudi National Qualifications Framework reads as follows:

While individual institutions may want to develop special skills beyond minimum requirements and should be encouraged to do so, it is essential that all programs with particular qualification titles develop the level of learning outcomes expected regardless of the institution where studies were undertaken. … Programs developed within this Framework should not only lead to the knowledge, generic skills and professional expertise normally associated with studies leading to comparable awards throughout the world, but they should also include particular knowledge and skills needed for professional practice in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and reflect educational policies and cultural norms in this country.

(*The National Qualifications Framework, 2009*, pp. 1–3)

The above excerpt from *The National Qualifications Framework* (NQF) shows that any academic programs developed by local HE institutions should, on the one hand, reflect local knowledge, educational policies, and cultural norms. These programs should also be "leading to comparable awards throughout the world" (i.e., international standards), on the other. In this context, while Western knowledge is desirable, misreading local knowledge is a violation of educational policies/practices. "Hence, [transnational] institutions of higher education similarly contend with the challenges of coping with fragmented systems of authority that Friedrichs and others refer to as the New Medievalism" (Noori & Anderson, 2013, p. 162). That is, the autonomy of local universities is pulled and pushed between the need to adhere to set of rules, regulations, and educational policy formulated and dictated by local authorities (i.e., the NQF and the Ministry of Education in the case of Saudi Arabia) in order to preserve local culture and norms on the one hand, and pressures to comply with standards and academic quality and orientation mandated by international accreditation agencies on the other.

Paradoxically, "non-compliance [with international accreditation bodies], however, has its price", as Noor and Anderson (2013) convincingly contend. That is, "[u]niversities that fail to receive accreditation or choose not to conform to the evaluative criteria established by [international accreditation agencies], risk shutting themselves off from global sources of human, symbolic, [intellectual] and financial capital" (Noori & Anderson, 2013, p. 162). Consequently, jurisdictional boundaries of local universities have become not only porous/overlap, but are also charged with ideological, linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural tensions (Barnawi & Ahmed, 2020; Barnawi, 2021; CRapley 2006). In the following sections I elaborate on these issues.

2. ELT international accreditation

As stated earlier, international accreditation agencies have brought about a wide range of Western-oriented models of education (including language education) and governance structures to local universities, on the one hand, and they have created various internal tensions, contradictions and complexities to domestic

education, on the other. This is because these accreditation agencies often shape, promote and protect a Western-oriented brand of HE in a given social context. Below I elaborate on these arguments.

The American-based accreditation agency The Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), specialized in accrediting language programs worldwide, presents its mission as follows:
CEA's mission is to promote excellence in the field of English language teaching and administration, as well as to protect the interests of students, through accreditation of English language programs and institutions worldwide. CEA achieves its mission by advancing widely-held standards to foster continuous program development through a rigorous process of regular self-assessment and peer evaluation.[1]

1. https://cea-accredit.org/

Embedded in this mission statement is the ways in which a foreign accreditation agency often shapes and protects its brand in a local context. When a local university applies for international accreditation (e.g., CEA), it is required to follow "mechanisms and structures in place prior to applying for accreditation" (Noori & Anderson, 2013, p. 164). By way of illustration, the university is more likely to adopt vision and mission statements that encourage Western-oriented or so-called global participatory fashion in the governance of its academic orientation and operations. These include implementing the core principles of the CEA's "widely-held standards" and "rigorous process of regular self-evaluation"; inviting students and faculty members to participate in the operation of the program; implementing inclusive forms of curriculum and instruction as well as international textbooks; and standardizing their syllabuses and assessment practices. In combination, these efforts hold CEA's model of quality assurance system, and at the same time governing the market for USA-based education in a given context (Barnawi, 2018; Noori & Anderson, 2013).
For instance, the CEA would be more likely to invest "in defining [and protecting] the attributes that constitute the American model" (Noori & Anderson, 2013, p. 164), even though it repeatedly claims in its official documents that its jurisdiction over local policies, curricula, and pedagogies were always limited and its primary role is to accredit, not to prescribe a particular model. The CEA, for instance, in its official documents claims that it "respects differences," "supports success," "acts with integrity and care," and "embrace[s] collaborative judgment" (CEA Accreditation Manual, 2016). Ironically, during the course of accreditation processes, its decisions and recommendations matter for local universities that are seeking global relevance and reputation. Issues of power are always alive and kicking in the accreditation processes (i.e., local universities often do not resist what has been recommended by these international accreditation agencies).
Worryingly, due to their lack of knowledge of local intellectual conditions and everyday realities, these accreditation agencies could inflict serious damage to both students and the universities they are accrediting. I am convinced by Noor and Anderson's (2013) contention that:
The practice of accreditation may be guided by the principles of "peer review" and "self-regulation," but what happens when the institution's peers are not located in the region? The agency's lack of rootedness means that it has imperfect information regarding the needs of the community that the institution is purportedly trying to serve. (p. 165)

The above discussion reveals that international accreditation agencies can create multiple internal tensions and complexities in the host country. It also shows that universities often grapple with the demands and regulations set by local authorities such as the Ministry of Education and its organizations to preserve local

knowledge and culture as in the case of Saudi Arabia. In this context, academics such as administrators and language teachers have major responsibilities in navigating those tensions and complexities, and at the same time proactively translating standards and educational practices set by international accreditation agencies into local action. Importantly, English language teachers (the focus of this study) have ethical, moral, and professional responsibilities in helping their universities to critically engage in self-governance and claim ownership of language. It is for these reasons that this paper examines how EAQUALS accreditation (and its associated products and services) is understood, negotiated and contested by transnational English language teachers (e.g., from India, Pakistan, and Algeria) working at a Saudi university dubbed Snow University (a pseudonym).

3. Snow University

Snow University (SU), as a HE institution, offers associate and bachelor's degrees in different disciplines including humanities, business and management, and engineering technology. All programs at SU are accredited by top international (Western) accreditation bodies such as City & Guild Accreditation and the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP). The English Language Institute (ELI) of SU is also accredited by EAQUALS. English is the medium of instruction across the university. Faculty members working at SU represent different nations, including India, Algeria, Pakistan, Jordan, Sudan, Malaysia, the UK, Canada, and the USA, as well as various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In this very multinational environment, transnational education is taking place in different forms and scales, one of which is EAQUALS. In what follows, I familiarize readers with EAQUALS accreditation and its standards.

4. EAQUALS accreditation and its standards as a global space of comparison

EAQUALS is a world leader in accreditation for language teaching organizations and our accreditation is the gold standard for language centers and a highly-respected badge of excellence. EAQUALS has been accrediting quality language education since its foundation in 1991. EAQUALS accreditation is designed to be relevant to all types of language teaching organizations and applies to the teaching of all languages. We accredit both private and state-run centers and we operate in any country. The EAQUALS Inspection Scheme has been successfully applied hundreds of times, and has been refined to ensure that it is thorough, practical and fair. (EAQUALS Accreditation Official Website)[2]

The above statement posted on the official website of EAQUALS informs language institutions in different geopolitical locations that their commitments to global recognition and quality language education can be obtained and validated through EAQUALS. EAQUALS is the global face of quality language education. Its gold standards together with "a highly-respected badge of excellence" awarded to its members represent quality standards in language education. Its standards [templates] are projected as objective, universal and "relevant to all types of language teaching organizations and appl[y] to the teaching of all languages."[3] Hence, EAQUALS offers a comprehensive model of language education. EAQUALS's Scheme entails 12 core standards clustered into five sections as summarized below:

Institutional Management and Governance

1. Management and Administration
2. Quality Assurance
3. Communication with Staff
4. Communication with Students and Clients

Academic Management

5. Course Design and Supporting Systems
6. Teaching and Learning
7. Assessment and Certification
8. Academic Resources

Student Services
9. Student Services

Staff
10. Staff Profile and Development
11. Staff Employment Terms

Learning Environment and Facilities

12. Learning Environment

Source: Eaquals's Inspection Scheme[3]

According to EAQUALS, all of its accredited members will enjoy of different benefits. These include the ability to benchmark their language programs "against EAQUALS criteria" and use EAQUALS's name and logo to enhance their "international recognition and the market advantage that comes with being a verified center of excellence".

2. https://www.eaquals.org/accreditation/the-eaquals-inspection-scheme/

3. https://www.eaquals.org/accreditation/the-eaquals-inspection-scheme/

Furthermore, accredited members can enjoy "independent advice and support from international experts", and use EAQUALS inspection reports as "blueprint for future improvement and development". EAQUALS offers "[o]pportunities to form local and international partnerships. This provides further recourse to market intelligence and can open channels for promotion of courses to potential markets, leading to increased student numbers" (see EAQUALS, 2020a, for more details).

5. Data sourcing, collection, and analysis

The data that this study is based on emerged from multiple sources, including: (1) autobiographical narrative; (2) analysis of the EAQUALS accreditation manual; (3) reflective journals; and (4) semi-structured interview questions on the EAQUALS accreditation and its associated products, services, and practices. The data were collected in 2016. These data are part of an ongoing project aimed at studying the trans-nationalization of English language policy across Saudi HE institutions. This article showcases an example of my ongoing research project. Specifically, it examines two research questions:

RQ 1: How and in what ways has EAQUALS accreditation (and its standards) been understood, negotiated, and contested by transnational teachers at Snow University?

RQ 2: What forms of teaching and learning practices has EAQUALS accreditation produced and is producing at Snow University?

While the reflective journals invite participants to reflect on governance structures of EAQUALS, the 45-minute semi-structured interview with each participant aims at unpacking questions related to policy, curriculum, textbooks, classroom instruction, and assessment practices. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes. The analysis of the data was informed by the major themes discussed in the literature review section: the governance of HE and issues of jurisdictions in ELT international accreditation.

As a participant-observer (i.e., English language teacher, former managing director of the language institute of a public HE institution, and a member of different accreditation committees), I am aware of the different

tensions, complexities, and paradoxes shared by the three participants of this study. These tensions and complexities often result from competing ideologies materialized in conflicting demands and educational regulations between local and international accreditation bodies. Nonetheless, I abstained from discussing my experiences with the interviewees, on the basis that such a position would allow me to become reflexive while asking questions (Bevan, 2014).

6.1 Participants of the study

The participants of this study are three transnational teachers working in the English Language Institute of Snow University. These participants are Basem, Ejaz and Aarav (all pseudonyms). They were all selected based on accessibility. A detail account of each participant is provided in his autobiographical narrative below.

Basem, Ejaz and Aarav (all pseudonyms)

Basem grew up in Algeria speaking Arabic, French, and some Berber. After quitting medical school back in 1980, he completed his BA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in 1983 in Algeria. He then won a government scholarship to pursue a postgraduate diploma and a master's in the UK. As he described it, "I got lucky when I secured admission in the literature department of Essex University" (Basem, autobiographical narrative). After completing his MA, he moved to Aberdeen where he got his second master's in stylistics in 1986 with a thesis on the linguistic study of the language of James Joyce. Since then, he has been teaching courses such as English literature, practical criticism, English composition and other related subjects in Algeria and Canada. In early 2012, Basem secured a lecturer position at SU where he has been teaching course such as academic writing, technical report writing, and other general English courses for beginners. During his tenure as Deputy Director for Academic Affairs at the English Language Institute (ELI) at SU, Basem led different tasks related to EAQUALS accreditation including revising the self-evaluation form, observing classes, and benchmarking teaching and learning practices of ELI with EAQUALS standards, in collaboration with other teachers.

Ejaz, from Pakistan, speaks Pashtu, Urdu, basic Arabic and Russian, and English. After teaching in Pakistan for several years, he moved to the UK, and successfully completed his MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from Middlesex University, and EdD TESOL from the University of Exeter. Since 2005, Ejaz has been teaching a range of general as well as English courses in the ELI at SU. He also assumed different leading positions including Course Coordinator, Foundation Year English Coordinator, and member of the ELI Advisory Council. Ejaz shared his experience with the EAQUALS project as follows:

As Chair of Research and Professional Development Committee, I still remember that I was in charge of Standard 10: Staff Profile and Development, in addition to my other roles in the steering committee of EAQUALS. (Ejaz, autobiographical narrative)

Aarav, from India, speaks Malayalam, Tamil, and English. He completed his CELTA course at International House in the UK. As a transnational teacher of English for about two decades, working in the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Maldives and presently employed as a lecturer at SU in SA, Aarav felt that his experiences were varied, even though all the countries he worked in were located in the Global South. However, at the ELI, as he narrated:

Since 2015–2016, I have been teaching several courses on English for Specific Purposes and participating in different committees including EAQUAL accreditation. I must say that working with teachers from different nationalities, religious and cultural backgrounds and participating in different academic projects like EAQUALS is a mind-blowing experience. In India, we do not put much energy and efforts on a product that entertains the superiority of the native Self and the inferiority of the non-native Other. (Aarav, autobiographical narrative)

What is interesting about Basem, Ejaz and Aarav is that their transnational experiences coupled with their (local and Western) qualifications have not only secured their academic positions, but also led them to some higher-level positions in which they could contribute to their institution's policy, curricula, and quality assurance practices. However, the on-the-ground realities of these transnational teachers are complex due to tensions between their epistemological beliefs and the expectations and conditions of their institution relating to EAQUALS accreditation. Below I elaborate on these issues.

6. EAQUALS accreditation as a neocolonial effort

The findings of RQ 1 reveal that, in the interests of competing in the global HE market, self-branding and other business-friendly rhetoric, international accreditation has been universalized and depoliticized at SU. It was also shown that such universalization, as Mukherjee argues (2019), "is based on an analytical model already developed by the metropolitan societies of the Global North" (p. 4). Therefore, EAQUALS accreditation has become "just a body without bones," and a product that "sustains self–other dichotomy" (Ejaz). Furthermore, it creates an intellectual dependency together with internal contradictions in the education system where "standardization and diversity" do not intersect, as Aarav and Basem reported respectively. These accounts are evident in the three participants' reflective journals presented below:

Ejaz: EAQUALS accreditation is just a body without bones.

Generally speaking, [the EAQUALS project] was a rewarding experience for me. It gave me a chance to reflect on my own profession as a language educator in Saudi Arabia. I honestly perceive accreditation as a way of gaining credibility from an external source because the internal system does not hold to its own reliability and acceptability. Thus, credentials from external sources are used to create this reliability and acceptability. It's also a sort of power relationship as the body seeking accreditation is in an inferior political, economic and knowledge position to the body granting accreditation. Therefore, all acts of accreditation not only carry with them an implication of legitimization but also of inferiority and superiority. The legitimization cannot be achieved without an act of acknowledgement by the superior. This is related to positionality. Regarding any advantage and benefit to practice, there is few. Practice is executed at the grass-root level by individuals and any change in practice depends a great deal on the agency of the practitioners. … Another analogy which may help explain the entire process of accreditation is that of gaining battle trophies. The institutions seeking accreditation may get accredited, may be able to display a badge or credentials on their website or in other places, may feel proud about it but like battle trophies all this come at cost. All battle trophies are gained after an element of chaos, destruction and damage. In the act of accreditation, this damage may not be physical but it is certainly psychological, emotional and intellectual to those who are in an inferior position, have to accept it, have to participate in the process and have to work to make it possible. To be honest it is just a body without bones! (Ejaz, reflective journal)

Aarav: How does standardization and diversity intersect?

An accreditation is nothing much, from a postcolonial perspective. It is a new means of colonialization enabled through different logics of global competition and rankings in global HE market. HE realms in developing countries are rapidly getting transformed into private sectors … so if these institutions are getting evolved as a commodity, then they should be subject to Western trade rules. How does standardization and diversity intersect? Does standardization imply "McDonaldisation"? And if it is so, how far could education be unique and diverse? What is the purpose of accreditation? (Aarav, reflective journal)

Basem: International accreditation as a form of intellectual dependency

Academic accreditation, as a process of validation which universities and higher education institutions adopt to validate their academic programs, practices, and facilities, is a mechanism that ensures the constant improvement of these centers of learning and subject them to public accountability. While international standards for accreditation are undoubtedly useful, we should think, as teachers and managers, of gaining some independency and latitude vis-à-vis international accreditation institutions in order to develop our own criteria of success. That way, assessment of our teaching philosophies and practices will be more comprehensive, realistic, and worthy of such endeavor. Unless otherwise, it would be an empty validation of efforts. (Basem, reflective journal)

The above extracts show that the participants were well-informed about the potential pedagogical challenges of EAQUALS accreditation, albeit it helps the ELI at SU to celebrate its belonging to the global HE community. Ejaz felt that EAQUALS sustains the dichotomy of the "Self" and the "Other" and continues to widen the local versus global division. This is because "the legitimization cannot be achieved without an act of acknowledgement by the superior". Hence, this accreditation becomes "a body without bones". Aarav, on the other hand, acknowledged that Western accreditation could help HE institutions in non-English-speaking countries to compete in the global HE market. Yet, this very form of competition could also nurture and sustain coloniality, he suggested. Such observations were also recently shared by scholars such as Ramírez (2014) and Shahjahan and Morgan (2016). Using the "International Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO)" as an example case, Shahjahan and Morgan (2016) examine how competition for belonging to the global HE market entertains coloniality. They contend that "AHELO represents the mediation and internalization of a HE competition focused on teaching and learning, which reproduces coloniality by valuing characteristics of the enterprising, globally competitive institution" (p. 92).

Similarly, Ramírez (2014) argues that accountability practices are on the rise in contemporary HE policy. Uncritical adoption of quality assurance products, goods and services (EAQUALs in the case of this paper) originating from the Global North makes the process of knowledge production "frequently unidirectional, moving from North to South" (p. 122). In this sense, discourses of coloniality become alive. This is because "when the claim of universal knowledge or universal values is made from a position of privilege, it is likely to serve hegemony not liberation," as Connell (2007, p. x) describes. Basem felt that understanding international accreditation from intellectual "dependency perspectives" (Kapoor, 2002) could create mutual benefits, and at the same time minimize risks of uncritically mobilizing curricula and teaching philosophies and practices from Global North to the Global South.

As a Western-trained local English language teacher, the experiences shared by Ejaz, Aarav and Basem above prompted me to explore the nexus between their beliefs and actions on key issues. Simply put, as a way of delving into their beliefs and actions, I explored the following questions with them: How do they

see the tensions between local and global knowledge played out in the curriculum of the ELI? What ethical, moral and professional actions had they taken and are taking in their everyday practices?

Interestingly, as evident in their responses below, these questions led them to reflect on their own subjectivities, interrogate their professional roles, share personal stories and support their experiences with evidence (e.g., EAQUALS documents), on the one hand. They also acknowledged the sociocultural and economic of the institution in which they operate in relation to their work ethics on the other. Together, I argue that these different ethical and professional perspectives, reflections on past/present experiences, texts and personal stories shared by the participants depict some examples of their complex everyday realities at the ELI in particular and SU in general.

7. Local knowledge, EAQUALS accreditation, and ELT curriculum in retrospective: Insights from individual interviews

Basem:

As a non-Western teacher, EAQUALS gave me a chance to reflect on how Western standards are transplanted in a non-Western context. Yes, we succeed in meeting the standards set by EAQUALS. We also met the needs of [SU]. But this at the expense of local knowledge I could say. This accreditation was hegemonic. I want to share my personal observation quoting EAQUALS' official website here:

"EAQUALS Accreditation confirms that your centre is successful in meeting its own objectives and internationally recognized standards". (EAQUALS Website, Eaquals.org)

The commonsensical question that could come to mind revolves around the (im)possibility of reconciling one's own objectives with internationally recognized objectives. The notion of universality at the core of EAQUALS's claim seems not to account for the uniqueness of the cultural geography of institutions seeking accreditation nor does it perceive stakeholders in relative terms. What kind of stakeholders does EAQUALS have in mind? What stakeholders' perceptions is EAQUALS mindful of?

He further added that these challenges were also reflected on "the definition of curriculum in EAQUALS's document". Standard 5 of its manual—Course Design and Supporting Systems—claims that:

Courses are designed to be coherent, relevant to student needs and aims and have specified learning objectives and content. All course programs are specified by levels which refer to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the Global Scale of English (GSE) or another internationally recognized language learning scale: learning objectives for each level are related to the global descriptors of one of these scales. (EAQUALS, 2019, p. 13)

Basem further questioned the claimed flexibility in EAQUALS standards. He reported that:

Ironically, EAQUALS viewed curriculum in its standard 5 as something flexible and responsive to the needs of your leaners. But if we put all the 12 standards together, as required by EAQUALS, in our everyday practices, our language curriculum becomes prescriptive. It is pity that we did not make diligent assessment about this project in the past. Maybe my evaluation was subjective as it was my first involvement with international accreditation. But it is a learning curve. When I look at the flexibility claim made by EAQUALS in retrospective, I can say it was a false claim. We cannot move outside the boxes. I mean the 12 standards. Eventually, they validated the merit of our curriculum through the CEFR. That is why we used commercial textbooks based on CEFR. In these textbooks the themes were predominantly Western and local knowledge and culture were taken lightly, even though these books had labels such as "Kingdom

of Saudi Arabia Version" and "The Arabian Gulf Version" Look at how our students are dressed and their haircuts even now. Even local conferences are always sponsored by British Council, University of Cambridge and other market-driven organizations. I understand the upper management and other authorities had their own reasons and justifications for supporting such project. But we could have all looked at the ground realities. (Individual interview)

Ejaz:

Retrospectively speaking, as Chair of Professional Development Committee, I saw a fast erosion of local knowledge and culture with the adoption of such Western-based quality assurance system. To meet some predefined criteria of so-called "quality language teaching and learning practices," we had to change our documents, institutional practices, textbooks, and even our jargon. Because the ELI had put a lot of money, time and energy on this international project, the opinions of Bachelor's Degree Western teachers were more authoritative than non-native English teachers like me. (Individual interview)

Ejaz further added:

I was deeply disturbed to see how local teaching and learning strategies were disqualified even by local colleagues from Jordan, Pakistan and Sudan during one of the professional development sessions through which I emphasized the merit of "Reading Aloud" in classrooms. As you know, this teaching method has been used in the Islamic madrasa system. It is very rich and deep. When we ask students to read aloud from the book, it gives them oral practices through which they can adjust their tongue and sounds. In an Islamic school in Pakistan, for example, children are usually set in a circle. When we teach them how to pray, we ask one child to read aloud from the book and the others repeat it. In this way, it is mnemonic in a sense that they remember. It is also motivating for other students. But our textbooks and the professional development framework and practices demanded by EAQUALS did not encourage local practices of teaching and learning. I know we might also say this project was part of a globalization of higher education, and SU is part of this world and cannot isolate itself from the geopolitics of knowledge. But if we reflect on this project again, we could see how power was distributed unequally. Who has benefited much under this framework of globalization? (Individual interview)

Aarav:

I worked in Oman before coming to Saudi Arabia, and found Islamic ways of teaching were incredibly rich. But why did we gradually abandon them? I am here just trying to understand the context from a realistic perspective. I am not a Muslim or Arabic speaker. I also knew the institute needs the accreditation in order to boost itself locally and globally. But education was free here anyway. This international accreditation could have led to mutual benefits. We were supposed to have the right to exchange and put local recipe in the curriculum. … This project was meant to enable us to enrich local curriculum, not to frame the way you teach a language. Gurukula education in India is still commonly used, and I learned English language through the Gurukula system. (Individual interview)

He further added:

If I had to share my sincere opinion now, I would say that McDonaldization should be an aspect that we could consider when referring to accreditation. Too much of standardization was taking the spirit of learning and would not give a real account for the lived experience of the teachers and learners. Let me give my personal opinion, in India for instance, a multilingual country where learners were generally proficient in

using two or three languages, the colonial period had marginalized the local knowledge along with the local languages in which they were expressed. Deliberately, a shift was made possible at least in documents to portray English as the second language. The next step was to nullify the existence of the other languages. Thus, learning English through English was made compulsory. The L2 learner had only one thing to bother while learning—to learn and use English empathizing with the native speaker. The individual voice and cultural identity of the learner is thus suppressed and marginalized. Pluralism is undermined and methods are manufactured and marketed to fulfill the neocolonial goals. (Individual interview)

It is important to note that Basem, Ejaz and Aarav were not Saudis! But their observations, as transnational language teachers from non-English speaking countries, stemming from on-the-ground realities coupled with some commonalities they shared about Saudi context, were thought-provoking. Strikingly, studies that examine the experiences of transnational language teachers from non-English-speaking dominant countries working in other non-English-speaking contexts are rare. Retrospective observations made by this (often under-examined) group of teachers are organic, and have the potential to offer insights into local efforts that examine the merits of international quality assurance policies and practices in HE. The retrospective nature of the interviews allowed them to share a great deal of information in their responses, as shown above. Below I categorize these responses into two themes: (1) EAQUALS accreditation and its "self-perpetuating cycle of legitimation"; and (2) the ELI curriculum is still white; we have to pay attention to these phenomena.

8. EAQUALS accreditation and its "self-perpetuating cycle of legitimation"

The participants were concerned that although flexibility, diversity, and mutual benefits were listed as core values of EAQUALS, in reality these terms were twisted. The available flexibility in this international quality assurance system was to move inside its 12 standards rather than going outside (as in the case of Basem). In professional teaching and development, teachers were instructed to refer to the framework developed in the West and endorsed by EAQUALS in its official website (as in the case of Ejaz). I argue that the flexibility, diversity, and mutual benefits claimed by EAQUALS were not only to serve its economic interests, but the interests of its business networks as well. On its official website, EAQUALS listed organizations such as the British Council, the Council of Europe which published the CEFR, and the European Profiling Grid (EPG) as its strategic partners. EAQUALS referred to ideas and teaching and learning practices developed by these organizations as highly desirable examples of meeting its standards. These affiliated organizations were presented and represented as consultants and experts that language institutions in the Global South could seek the assistance of in order to meet EAQUALS's expectations. In this sense, EAQUALS has been sustaining the economic interests of its partners, and undermining the dependency of institutions from the Global South. In return, organizations like the British Council and British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP) represent themselves through rhetoric such as "strategic partner" and "long-term affiliate" to further assist "each other in a self-perpetuating cycle of legitimation" (Ramírez, 2014, p. 129).

Within this market framework, the process of globalization becomes a continuation of neocolonial practice (Ramírez, 2014), and "'borrowing' of policies and procedures" from the Global North is maintained (Morley, 2003, p. 19). In this context, I argue that unpacking and "mapping interdiscursive relations" (Ramírez, 2014, p. 123) among international quality assurance bodies and the ways in which their policy documents influence teaching and learning practice in the Global South need further scholarly attention.

9. The ELI curriculum is still white! We have to pay attention to this phenomenon

The participants felt that although the English curriculum was originally designed at the ELI, and commercialized textbooks in use had labels such as "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Version" and "The Arabian Gulf Version", the themes, images and topics presented in the books were predominantly white (i.e., from the Global North). I argue that labeling commercialized English textbooks with expressions such as "The Arabian Gulf Version" does not remove whiteness or Global North ideologies from local curriculum. By whiteness or Global North, I am here referring to the lack of diversity in course contents, appreciation of non-Western ideologies, cultures, and teaching and learning practices, as well as the projection of Western knowledge/academia as superior (Jenks, 2019).

The on-the-ground realities of ELT show that "inner circle" English (e.g., British, American, etc.) is still seen as legitimate English in many non-English-speaking contexts including Saudi Arabia (see, for example, Barnawi, 2018; Phan & Barnawi, 2015). ELT industries are branding their materials through inner circle English as well as teaching and learning practices such as communicative approach and task-based learning, to name just a few examples (e.g., Jenks, 2019; Kubota, 2011). ELT commercialized textbooks in use across Saudi universities were all designed and developed according to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Publishers of these textbooks are all located in the Global North. These publishers often sell these materials to local schools and institutions, with generous training packages on how to use their textbooks and associated materials like test banks, DVDs, CDs, Teachers' Manuals, and PowerPoint presentations. Local employers often validate students' language proficiency through internationally recognized tests such as IELTS or TOEFL and Aptis. At local conferences, organizations like the British Council, Cambridge University Press, Pearson and Cengage often participate by sponsoring speakers from the Global North, and showcasing their various projects and hawking different clients at the conference venues. The aforementioned practices represent the materials by which the white curriculum is entertained and sustained across Saudi HE institutions. In this regards, interdiscursive relationships between these practices and the notion of curriculum in Saudi HE need to be examined, identified and theorized further.

10. Classroom pedagogical practices: what is happening is beyond our control!

The findings of RQ 2 demonstrated that although the three teachers were aware of the tensions and complexities brought about by this international accreditation, they felt that it was beyond their control to address some critical challenges related to classroom pedagogical practices, as shown below.

Basem:

I am an Arabic speaker. I can tell you in a straightforward way. When you teach beginner/low level students, you will realize the importance of local knowledge. These students used to come to the classes full of energy and enthusiasm. But their energy and enthusiasm were directed to consume shallow ideas and topics in commercialized textbooks such as ecology, global warming, shopping for clothes, lifestyle, and eating in Pizza Hut. We need topics such as local legacy, values and culture to be taught because they are important and our current generation keep losing these things. (Individual interview)

He further added:

I used to put my students in groups and encourage them to talk about local topics and issues and compare them with topics in the textbook. But I found it challenging, I often see that they cannot deeply engage with me in discussing local legacy even in Arabic let alone in English. Also, because of the unified assessment practices in which students in all sections at the foundation year program had to take the same quiz, midterm exam and final exam, my teaching strategies were more inclined toward preparing them for those different

types of assessment. I had little space for actual teaching. Accreditation mandates such as course files and student progress report made our actual teaching challenging. (Individual interview)

Ejaz:

Well, I could see some serious intellectual issues here whenever I think about my teaching and learning practices. We had many teachers from Sudan, Pakistan and Jordan who got their qualifications and pedagogical training in their own countries. These teachers had to abandon their local pedagogies and experiences to meet criteria such as active learning, communicative approach, and task-based approach set by EAQUALS. When you go to classroom observations, you got frustrated! You see a lot of meaningless practices. You see tensions, stress, and emotional and psychological chaos during the classroom observations I conducted, as chair of professional development. Whom should I blame? Myself or the EAQUALS standards? (Individual interview)

Aarav:

Classroom practices were major issues under the current conditions. To help students engage with me in classroom, I used different strategies with them. I used to bring documents such as student bylaws and classroom rules into the classroom and ask my students to read, discuss and suggest items that can be removed from these documents. Finding ways to engage them in the classroom was the most challenging part for me because this accreditation created a very stressful environment for us. For example, course report, student survey, number of professional development had to be attended by teachers, course portfolio, and committee meetings kept us on our toes. (Individual interview)

The sincere and transparent observations shared by Basem, Ejaz and Aarav show that accountability practices such as end of semester reports, rigidly defined course learning outcomes, and predefined classroom teaching and learning practices seem to put teachers and academic leaders at multiple crossroads, including internal self-negotiation, tensions, and other ambivalent positions. These observations raised the question of what ethical, moral, and professional responsibility had these teachers taken and are taking? Under the current complex conditions caused by the adoption of international quality assurance systems at the ELI (i.e., EAQUALS), the participants felt that their ethical and professional responsibilities as transnational TESOL teachers were framed and reframed in multiple ways. Ejaz thought that he had ethically helped the ELI to meet its needs:

The ELI needs the accreditation to boost its reputation, and I had professionally and sincerely completed my assigned task to help the institute achieve its own goal. During the exit meeting as well and the final report of EAQUALS, the professional development standard was described as one of the strongest parts by the accreditors. (Individual interview)

On the other hand, he felt guilty because the professional development framework he had been promoting during his tenure as Chair of Professional Development was "promoting western ways of teaching. It did not recognize the mix and rich environment of the ELI. In retrospective, I am ethically responsible and I feel guilty about that" (Individual interview). Similarly, Basem shared that he had "maintained the interests of the institutions" and "professionally followed his job descriptions", but did not succeed in fulfilling other ethical issues in classroom and beyond. As he described:

my students were struggling in classrooms but because the structure of the program has rigidly been defined by this accreditation body, I had to go with the flow sometimes and sometimes I had to strike a balance. In

a regular staff meeting, I prefer not to make harsh comments in order to show collegiality and because of fears of embarrassing others. (Individual interview)

Aarav, on the contrary, believed that he could not draw the upper management's attention to some unethical practices he had observed throughout the course of this accreditation process. This is because "there was no space for teachers to voice their opinions as transnational teachers. Experiences and practices of transnational teachers from Asia are underestimated compared to those who are from the West. We have to change our teaching practices to meet somebody's expectations" (individual interview).

11. Final thoughts and reflections

In this study, Basem, Ejaz and Aarav were well informed about why the ELI needs international accreditation. They saw it as something that could offer global reach to the ELI. Yet their reflections on the project showed that mutual benefits and recognition are missing. For them, this accreditation allowed them to reflect on their everyday realities at different levels including epistemological positions, classroom pedagogical practices, and ethical and professional responsibilities. Although using international quality assurance systems is on the rise in the HE realm worldwide, studies that examine how the international accreditation system is experienced in everyday academic workplace are rare, especially from the perspectives of transnational language teachers working in Saudi Arabia. One possible reason for the paucity of such studies is due to the sensitivity of critically engaging with, as a transnational teacher, the Western model of knowledge construction that had been approved from the top down. I argue that explicit explorations of international quality assurance policies and practices have the merit of bringing different perspectives together and illuminating local/global tensions in the Saudi HE context. Further comparative ethnographic studies that examine the impact of international quality assurance policies and practices on different Saudi HE institutions could help policy makers unearth sources of tensions; bridge epistemological and ethical gaps; and realize mutual benefits and recognitions in the business of the transnationalization of HE.

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