Academic Excellence Framework: Towards Sustainable Growth

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Abstract

In response to the ongoing calls for excellence across all sectors in Saudi Arabia, higher education institutions are pressured to rethink their practices. However, with all the governmental strategic, focused planning in Saudi higher education to achieve excellence and compete globally, there is a gap between what is expected and what is happening regarding academic excellence's pedagogical and practical aspects. Hence, this study is an attempt to bridge that gap. The main purpose of this study is to propose an educational excellence framework by exploring the perceptions of academics. Data was collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The proposed framework will provide a roadmap to produce better and more relevant outcomes and raise the standards to complement the broader reform in higher education. The key strength of the study is that it orients the reader to understand how to acquire academic excellence to enhance institutional distinctiveness and student success.

Practitioner Notes

1. Academic excellence is a multidimensional concept includes the aspects of learning, teaching, curriculum, governance and assessment, extracurricular activities and services, and digitalisation and ICT. All these aspects should be approached holistically.
2. To promote sustainable academic excellence in higher education institutions, the concept of excellence must be translated into policies and procedures.
3. The academic excellence framework provides a basis for a strategic approach to producing contextualised measurable objectives, practical actions, and performance indicators.
4. Academics play a major role in achieving academic excellence, therefore, they should be encouraged by distinction and empowerment.
5. The adoption of academic excellence framework on a national level can facilitate a comparative analysis of higher education institutions performance.

Introduction

Higher education reform is becoming more vital to social and economic development as economists renewed interest in human capital drives economic growth (Abdelnabi, 2022; Jessop, 2016; Maneejuk & Yamaka, 2021; Volchik et al., 2018). On a global level, UNESCO (2020), in the roadmap for ESD2030, ascertained that "to shift to a sustainable future, we need to rethink what, where and how we learn to develop the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that enable us all to make informed decisions and take individual and collective action on local, national and global urgencies" (p.8). This was recognised by many countries and reflected in their education policy and reforming process (UNESCO, 2020).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched the Future of Education and Skills 2030 project in 2015 to help countries prepare their education systems for the future (OECD, 2019). This is in response to the different social, economic, and technological challenges and students' need to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that result in better ethical and responsible actions. Knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are inter-related concepts; and they are developed interdependently. Knowledge as a key component of OECD Learning Compass, comprises desciplinary, interdesciplinary, epistemic and procedural knowledge. On the other hand, skills, which includes cognitive and metacognitive, social and emotional, and practical and physical skills, are the capacity to use one's knowledge and understanding to achieve a goal. In terms of attitudes and values, education systems integrated a diverse range of principles and beliefs that influence one's choices, judgments and behaviours (OECD, 2019). The project has been through two phases: the first phase (2015-2019) was to decide the type of competencies students need to thrive in and shape the future; the second phase (2019 and beyond) was to design suitable learning environments and curricula to stimulate these competencies through a series of reports on curriculum address curriculum redesign (OECD, 2020), curriculum overload (OECD, 2020), and embedding values in the curriculum (OECD, 2021).

Hence, like many other countries, Saudi Arabia has realised the urgent need to equip citizens with the required knowledge, skills, and values to compete globally. Therefore, as part of the Saudi Vision 2030 Realisation programmes, the Human Capability Development Programme was established to build the Kingdom's prosperous and bright future through a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation (HCDP, 2021). Higher education institutions play a crucial role in the achievement of the fundamental objectives of the programme and the transformation into a knowledge-based economy.

To compete efficiently locally, regionally, and globally, higher education institutions must be distinguished by their outcomes to ensure the satisfaction of internal and external customers. Universities desperately seek to grow in the higher education market, and work on developing and implementing general strategies to ensure they achieve their goals (Mazi & Altbach, 2013). However, they face new and increasing challenges, including financial, local and international

competition, and the pressures of the diverse and changing labour market requirements (OECD, 2019). These challenges are becoming increasingly complex, emphasising the need for excellence in the core business, which is teaching and learning (Al Jaber & Elayyan, 2018). Hence, the current practices of achieving compliance with national and international quality standards are insufficient. Making meaningful and relevant changes in higher education is essential to reach that distinction level in teaching and learning.

Literature

Excellence is well-stated in the missions of higher education institutions. However, it is not well defined in academic publications (Brusoni et al., 2014). Defining excellence in higher education is not easy (Brusoni et al. 2014; Skelton, 2007; Wood & Su, 2017). Brusoni et al. (2014) argued that reaching a universal meaning of excellence in higher education is complicated as it relates to social, cultural, political, and economic environments. Furthermore, Wood and Su (2017) ascertained the need for a global understanding of teaching excellence and student learning in higher education. Alternatively, the global ranking of higher education institutions defines excellence in terms of academic research rather than teaching and learning (Brusoni et al., 2014). However, whether or not there is a meaningful definition of excellence depends on the designed framework that conceptualises and contextualises excellence.

Defining a world-class university, which is highly associated with excellence and rankings, is exclusively measured by research while ignoring other key functions such as teaching and learning (Mazi & Altbach, 2013). Recently, there has been a global shift toward considering teaching and learning to correct this imbalance; one example is the introduction of the UK Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (Vassie et al., 2021); a national rating scheme that aims to incentivise academic excellence above a set of minimum requirements for quality and standards which they must satisfy. This framework aims to inform students' choices about what and where to study, raise esteem for teaching, recognise and reward excellent teaching, and better meet the needs of employers, businesses, industries, and professions (Pearce, 2019).

However, in the case of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, there is an urgent need to rethink teaching and learning to compete globally. The highest authority in Saudi higher education, the Council of University Affairs, has developed policies and encouraged reform (Ministry of Education, 2022). It was indicated in the Human Capability Development Programme that higher education institutions face several challenges that affect their quality and recognition (HCDP, 2021). Furthermore, there is a demand for accountability, requiring open statements and data from higher education institutions about their learning outcome achievements. Accordingly, most higher education institutions have procedures and initiatives for academic excellence. These procedures and initiatives are sometimes managed at the institutional or programme level, not to mention the personal efforts where academics have their experience and beliefs of academic excellence. All these initiatives and efforts managed at different levels and in different committees which might result in not well integrated functions. Consequently, this study is an attempt to overcome the ambiguity of academic excellence by investigating the related domains which reflect the multifaceted nature of the concept. Higher education institutions can define and frame their efforts in a unified framework to guide their academic development and excellence journey. Therefore, there is a high demand to rethink teaching and learning and the concurrent contextual factors. This study explores academic excellence, its domains, and how it can be achieved from the perspective of academics and related literature.

Method

The study employed a qualitative design utilising interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) with semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth insight into participants' understanding of academic excellence and how they believed it could be achieved. According to Smith et al. (2022), "IPA approach studies usually have a small number of participants, and the aim is to reveal something of the experience of each of those individuals" (p. 3). It entails the examination of personal lived experience.

The study's sample size was 29 academics representing 29 public universities in Saudi Arabia. It was a purposive sampling where the participants were academic staff from different public higher education institutions to reflect on more broad experiences, procedures, and practices of academic excellence. The main criteria for selecting the sample was their significant role at the institutional level related to curriculum development, academic accreditation, and academic affairs in general, so it is possible to examine convergence and divergence in detail (Smith et al., 2022). However, only 12 academics agreed to be interviewed. Even though the response rate was relatively low but good enough as no new thematic areas were revealed after the ninth interview. All participants are associate or full professors in different disciplines including science, engineering, medical sciences, art and humanities, and education. Data was collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews and analysed following IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2022).

The researcher used mobile phone calls as a medium for conducting the interviews due to the fact that the participants are geographically dispersed around the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The average time of the interviews was 48 minutes. The interviewees were asked the following questions:

> *What do you think of academic excellence, what does it mean?*
> *What are the domains of academic excellence?*
> *How can we achieve academic excellence in higher education? What do we need to do (strategies and practices)?*

Verbal consent was obtained from the participants at the beginning of the interview. Also, the postgraduate studies and research board conducted ethical review and approval of the study at the institutional level by the postgraduate studies and research board. Consented audio recordings were permenantly deleted after transcriptions.

Findings

The data analysis revealed six domains of academic excellence (Figure 1); five are considered main domains, while the sixth, excellence in digitalization and the use of ICT, is embedded in them all. Related subthemes were also identified. The literature shows that academic excellence is related to higher education institutions' ranking and rating. However, that was not reflected in the interviews conducted with the academics. The participants related academic excellence to the performance of academic staff and learning outcome achievements. However, more themes were introduced when they elaborated on the strategies and procedures that should be established to achieve academic excellence.

Figure 1: Academic Excellence Framework

Excellence in learning

Participants expressed a student-centred approach and interactive learning strategies to develop skills and achieve learning outcomes. However, they suggested that those learning outcomes must align with the institution's mission, as shown in the following excerpts of participants 1 and 4:

> *To achieve excellence, we should consider students and their needs; we should plan the whole process to be student-centred. Also, shifting from a traditional learning environment into more active learning is important.* (P1)

> *Excellence is stated in the mission of our institution. We should align teaching, learning outcomes, and everything we do with our well-stated mission.* (P4)

Moreover, nine participants expressed the importance of students' voices and how they should be engaged in shaping decisions made by faculty members and leadership to improve their learning experience, leading to success. Additionally, they all agreed that achieving excellence in learning needs financial support and infrastructure. This was clearly expressed by participants 9, 11, and 12, as shown in the following excerpts:

> *Students' voice is much heard nowadays, but they should be directed and elevated as valuable input to the decision-making process related to a learning environment.* (P9)

> *Achieving excellence requires having sufficient financial support and infrastructure to help implement the latest educational strategies.* (P11)

> *If we think about the future of our graduates, we should provide learning experiences that are well-designed and focused; I mean the overall experience of being a student in a higher education institution.* (P12)

However, the following objectives of excellence in learning were extracted from the overall inputs of the participants:

- Strategic alignment of the intended learning outcomes and graduate attributes with learning experiences.
- Implementing an active, flexible, high-quality learning model that achieves student satisfaction.
- Engaging students' voices as a guide for shaping decisions related to learning experiences.
- Providing appropriate infrastructure for student-centred learning.
- Improving student learning experience to maintain retention and success.
- Supporting students to achieve a successful career.

Excellence in teaching

Participants emphasised the role of academic staff in achieving academic excellence in higher education by implementing up-to-date practices; six elaborated on the crucial impact of training on academics, as shown in the following excerpts of participants 2 and 3:

> *The problem is that most academics resist change; they think getting a PhD is the end of the development story. It is just the beginning; as we get the discipline knowledge, we now need to develop our teaching practices. I do not think we can achieve academic excellence in our institution without prominent training.* (P2)

> *I do good teaching all the time. Nevertheless, when the leadership is looking for excellence in teaching, they should provide excellent training. Even if we trained well, we cannot practice high-quality teaching in large classrooms. We need support!* (P3)

Two participants referred to enabling academics with proper feedback from the academic department and well-rounded evidence to enrich their teaching:

> *We cannot achieve excellence without continuous improvement; to do so, academic affairs should always make sure to review courses, and students need to provide feedback to academics.* (P4).

> *We heard much about data and data-driven decision-making in our institution. That sounds great, but we all need access to the data that help us make decisions at the teaching and learning levels. All department and inistitutional level assessment procedures must be reported accurately with open access to all academics. On the other hand, since the pandemic (COVID19), we have been doing much online, e.g., on blackboard, so the digital footprints of our students would tell us a lot that could help to improve our teaching strategies, prioritise learning objectives, and monitor students' performance.* (P12).

However, the following objectives of excellence in teaching were extracted from the overall inputs of the participants:

- Promoting innovative pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning.
- Enabling evidence-based practices among academics to enrich teaching and learning.

Excellence in curriculum

From the interviews, we learned that higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia invest in an overall strategic and focused reforming process of academic programmes. Participants were from 12 different public universities, and they all mentioned a reforming process of academic programmes. However, three participants shed light on the urge to refine such reform to cope with the changing nature of the industry, technology, and labour market. The following excerpts are of participants 6 and 10:

> *Much work has been done so far to transform our academic programmes. We are reviewing our existing programmes to see if they cope with the latest advancements and inter-related labour market. It is time to empower our graduates with job-related skills by introducing more training and field experiences alongside the theoretical knowledge in our courses.* (P6)

> *The academic programmes transformation project is one of the most important projects of our university as it is linked to the national transformation programme and its underpinning projects. We are introducing more vocational and technical programmes and re-evaluating the existing programmes according to specific determinants, including the labour market requirements. We are working on filling the gap between what we teach in our university and what the labour market is seeking in our graduates.* (P10)

The following objectives of excellence in the curriculum were extracted from the inputs of the participants:

- Designing and implementing a strategic methodology for curriculum review and redesigning it to meet the continuous change in the industry, technology, and the required job-related skills.
- Designing and developing high-quality vocational programmes.

Excellence in governance and assessment

All participants reported a need for governing guidelines to achieve excellence in teaching and learning. However, only four participants have particularised specific actions for governance and assessment. The following excerpts are of participants 5, 6, 8, and 10:

> *We have a good internal quality assurance guideline, but we should make sure it is applied. Everything looks good on an administrative level, but much governing and assessment are needed practically, and all academics should be involved in that process*. (P5)

> *To reach that excellence level we are talking about, we need not only to assess our practices but to go beyond that and provide constructive feedback that would contribute to the change we are looking for*. (P6)

> *Assessment is the key to excellent performance in teaching and learning. Both students and academics should be guided to the intended level of excellence with a standardised assessment methodology for teaching, learning, and research. Our research should be connected and provide inputs to our practices in teaching and learning.* (P8)

> *With all the implemented technologies in our institution, achieving excellence should be much more prevailing. These technologies provided us with big data that can guide and support decision-making to achieve excellence.* (P10)

The following objectives of excellence in governance and assessment were extracted from the inputs of the participants:

- Applying the principles of governance in academic performance.
- Build a strategic plan and procedures for assessment and feedback that leads to the required change in academic performance.
- Building and developing outstanding performance in students' academic achievement and research practices of academics.
- Using big data, advanced analytics, and deep learning solutions to guide strategic and operational decisions.

Excellence in student extracurricular activities and services

Five participants highlighted some ideas about students' overall experience at the university and how academic excellence can be reinforced with extracurricular activities and all the facilities and services provided on and off campus. The following excerpts are of participants 2, 7, and 12:

> *Besides all the knowledge, skills, and values in the curriculum, students need further skills to be ready to join the labour market. These skills can be addressed in extracurricular activities. We cannot teach everything to our students, some of the most important skills and values can be smoothly learned in a much more vibrant environment like the one in students' clubs, but I know it needs a lot of effort and budget to achieve the intended level of inputs and outputs.* (P2)

> *We all know now that career-related skills should be introduced and practised throughout the curriculum and enhanced in the extracurricular activities; therefore, these activities should be designed by experts in the field, which is going to be costly.* (P7)

> *Excellence is about reputation, and a good students' satisfaction can enhance a good reputation; therefore, all kinds of student services should be prioritised.* (P12)

The following objectives of excellence in student extracurricular activities and services were extracted from the inputs of the participants:

- Developing students as individuals in terms of emotional, intellectual, physical, social, and personal aspects.
- Planning extracurricular activities to support the achievement of learning outcomes.
- Providing opportunities to enhance professional competencies and career-related skills.
- Enhancing the sustainability of the campus and raising the student retention rate.

Excellence in digitalisation and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

All participants directly or indirectly highlighted the importance of digitalisation and the use of ICT to achieve academic excellence. They had reported several projects and initiatives affecting

teaching, learning, services and the flow of work in their institutions in general. The following excerpts are of participants 1, 4, 7, and 8:

> *A few years ago, our institution started a series of projects to automate most of the paperwork and services provided to staff, academics, and students. This automation saves time, efforts, and money; therefore, I can relate that to excellence.* (P1)

> *The digital library portal is of great support for us and for our students. We can access so many information resources and services like plagiarism and language checker software applications and several reference managers there. All of that is free of charge.* (P4)

> *All the available digital technology tools can be used to support teaching, learning, and decision-making. We have an automated system for administration, financial management, registration, library, cloud computing, and a learning management system that includes an examination. However, further use of technologies would shift us to the level of excellence we are looking for as internet of things, artificial intelligence, and data analytics solutions.* (P7)

> *To achieve academic excellence, we must cope with the rapid technology change. Teaching and learning can occur anywhere and anytime, but the lack of efficient computers and internet accessibility are barriers to implementing technology. For example, we can access many applications that do not work on our outdated computers.* (P8)

The following objectives of excellence in digitalisation and the use of ICT were extracted from the participants' input:

- Providing flexible formal and informal digital educational experiences and learning environments.
- Employing data from different automated systems activates a learning dashboard that helps academics make decisions.
- Enhancing the role of curriculum design and extracurricular activities in promoting digital-savvy graduates.
- Developing policies and initiatives to cope with the rapidly changing nature of technology.

Discussion

This study aims to explore academic excellence, its domains, and how it could be achieved from the perspective of academics. Previous research indicated that the definition of excellence is varied and ambiguous; therefore, the current study attempts to contextualise academic excellence and reach a practical framework. Based on the findings, learning, teaching, curriculum, governance and assessment, extracurricular activities and services, digitalisation, and ICT use constitute academic excellence. The following is a discussion of the specific objectives drawn for each domain (Table 1).

Consistent with the OECD Learning Compass 2030, which advocates the concept of student agency and the active role of students in the learning process (OECD, 2019), according to the data analysis, academic excellence views learners as active agents involved in the construction of the learning process. Therefore, universities should offer training, instruction, and infrastructure to reach that level of performance (French & O'Leary, 2017). Calling for the engagement of

students' voices should be preceded by appropriate guidance and incentives, which was considered one of the strategic imperatives in the Human Capability Development Programme to overcome the challenges higher education institutions face (HCDP, 2021). Besides all the required actions to be taken regarding the strategic development of a learning model that can achieve the intended learning outcomes, graduate attributes, and student satisfaction, higher education institutions need a continuous onboarding programme that guides students throughout their journey.

Alternatively, successful learning is always underpinned by high-quality teaching; nonetheless, Pearce (2019) ascertained that "learning is an active process not simply related to the quality of teaching" (p. 26). Therefore, excellence in teaching is a multitude of innovative and evidence-based pedagogical approaches to teaching, as well as learning experiences and opportunities that higher education institutions should provide in addition to excellent teaching practices.

To achieve excellence in learning and teaching in this ever-changing world, we need to build a curriculum in a meaningful and agile way to embed knowledge, skills, and values in the direction of the continuous and evolving change in the industry, technology, and job-related skills; as education is part of a larger ecosystem (OECD, 2019). Furthermore, in response to the labour market in Saudi Arabia, there is an urgent call from the Ministry of Education (HCDP, 2021) to design high-quality vocational programmes at higher education institutions, focusing more on practical experiences and considering an interdisciplinary approach (Al Jaber & Elayyan, 2018). Therefore, integrating project-based learning (UNESCO, 2020) to develop a curriculum can facilitate combining knowledge and skills from multiple disciplines to maximise the depth of knowing what and how that leads to deep learning.

Table 2: Academic Excellence Framework (Domains and Objectives)

Domain	Objectives
Learning	• Strategic alignment of the intended learning outcomes and graduate attributes with learning experiences. • Implementing an active, flexible, high-quality learning model that achieves student satisfaction. • Engaging students' voices as a guide for shaping decisions related to learning experiences. • Providing appropriate infrastructure for student-centred learning. • Improving student learning experience to maintain retention and success. • Supporting students to achieve a successful career.
Teaching	• Promoting innovative pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. • Enabling evidence-based practices among academics to enrich teaching and learning.
Curriculum	• Designing and implementing a strategic methodology for curriculum review and redesigning it to meet the continuous change in the industry, technology, and the required job-related skills. • Designing and developing high-quality vocational programmes.
Governance and Assessment	• Applying the principles of governance in academic performance. • Build a strategic plan and procedures for assessment and feedback that leads to the required change in academic performance. • Building and developing outstanding performance in students' academic achievement and research practices of academics.

Extracurricular Activities and Services	• Using big data, advanced analytics, and deep learning solutions to guide strategic and operational decisions.
	• Developing students as individuals in terms of emotional, intellectual, physical, social, and personal aspects.
	• Planning extracurricular activities to support the achievement of learning outcomes.
	• Providing opportunities to enhance professional competencies and career-related skills.
	• Enhancing the sustainability of the campus and raising the student retention rate.
Digitalisation and the Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)	• Providing flexible formal and informal digital educational experiences and learning environments.
	• Employing data from different automated systems activates a learning dashboard that helps academics make decisions.
	• Enhancing the role of curriculum design and extracurricular activities in promoting digital-savvy graduates.
	• Developing policies and initiatives to cope with the rapidly changing nature of technology.

In academia, learning, teaching, curriculum, research, and academic performance, in general, are subject to governance and assessment. Among the challenges higher education institutions face is the quality of academic performance (HCDP, 2021). Therefore, a shift from the traditional valuing of accountability and compliance into governance and valuing continuous improvement through feedback, big data, advanced analytics, and deep learning solutions is crucial (OECD, 2019).

Among the factors contributing to academic excellence are experiences and skills not shown on academic transcripts (Kato et al., 2020). However, they occur on and off campus with academic guidance and are of great importance to the overall development of students in terms of emotional, intellectual, physical, social, and personal aspects. Such extracurricular or volunteering activities need to be designed and planned to support the achievement of learning outcomes and enhance professional competencies and career-related skills, social responsibility, and students' overall well-being. Díaz-Iso et al. (2019), OECD (2019), and UNESCO (2020) emphasised the concept and principles of sustainability and innovation in education, which requires a shift in teaching, learning, assessment, extracurricular activities, services, and includes key issues on sustainability throughout disciplines, and overall management of the institution. It has also been highlighted in the Saudi National Model for Institutional Excellence (King Abdulaziz Quality Award, 2022). However, since the change in academic programmes across disciplines is much more bureaucratic and time-consuming, quick wins can be gained through extracurricular activities and services in higher education, which have been proven to greatly influence academic achievement in higher education (Díaz-Iso et al., 2019).

All these elaborated domains of academic excellence need to be flourished and be boosted by technology. Despite the Saudi government's strategic and focused investment in ICT in education, no clear evidence reflects a pedagogical and practical return on education (AlMarwani, 2021). Therefore, to achieve academic excellence, higher education institutions need to adapt to the new and ever-changing technologies and ICT to create a richer learning experience, support teaching with deep learning analytics, develop and evolve digital literacy among students, academics, and staff, and capitalise on best principles, practices, and fit for purpose technologies to create a better environment to achieve academic excellence.

Overall, "describing excellence in higher education is not a tranquil assignment. There are many possible definitions, and excellence can be with a complicated selection of universal meanings because it is simultaneously linked to that culture's social and cultural environment values and principles. It is also linked to that country's dogmatic and profitable contexts" (Al Jaber & Elayyan, 2018, p. 353). In contrast, Skelton (2007) indicated that excellence is part of higher education's everyday language and practice. However, achieving academic excellence remains critical and challenging. Having conceptualized and framed academic excellence can guide and support policy reform at different levels, including individual, institution, and discipline in Saudi Arabia. Subsequently, when statements of academic excellence are enlisted in policy and practice, expectations and priorities of higher education institutions will be shifted in that direction.

Academics play a major role in achieving academic excellence to satisfy internal and external stakeholders. Therefore, their perceptions, attitudes, knowledge, and skills significantly impact achieving academic excellence. Hence, the top management should support the multi-dimensional role of academics in higher education with distinction and empowerment.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions must translate the concept into measurable objectives, practical actions, and performance indicators to achieve academic excellence. However, the findings of this study can guide and inform the process of setting policies and procedures for academic excellence in higher education institutions as they revealed the ambiguity of the concept in a specific context. These policies hope to improve student learning outcomes and enhance the academic excellence and the quality of higher education. Also, the proposed excellence framework can be a baseline for further investigation; it can provide a foundation for an in-depth case study of a higher education institution to examine how academic excellence is achieved or why it was not achieved if it is embedded and enlisted in internal policies and procedures. Furthermore, the framework as well as the subsequent objectives and suggested actions of each domain articulate high level expectations for academic performance in higher education institutions. Further research can identifies operations, measures, and indicators of academic excellence.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interest

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