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Original Article

Institutional Academic Accreditation Journey and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Background: Institutional academic accreditation is essential for the universities and a pre-requisite for requesting program accreditation. Academic accreditation is a structured review process to ensure the availability of minimum quality and the ability for continuous quality improvement. The accreditation process helped educational institutes to determine the areas for improvement and priorities improvements.

Aim: Investigate the impact of the institutional academic accreditation process on continuous quality improvement and address the challenges of the accreditation journey.

Method: A cross-sectional survey was used to record the impact of accreditation by collecting data through focus group discussions with the standards committees' members. The interview was carried out in a structured format following the self-evaluation scale format. Data collected were managed and analyzed descriptively.

Results: The accreditation process impacted the quality of education positively. Different aspects of education including program specifications and reports, assessment, evaluation, academic counseling, and student support were improved significantly, and automation was introduced to foster quality. The major challenges during the accreditation journey were identifying unified governance to institutional resources, and community partnership.

Conclusion: Accreditation improved education quality in the university without commanding any major change in the curricula and fostered the university ranking.

Keywords: Accreditation, Institutional, Reviewers, Education, Quality

INTRODUCTION

Accreditation is defined as 'a process whereby officially appointed external regulatory bodies, accountable at government level, evaluate educational institutions using established criteria, standards and procedures'. It involves collecting evidence for all practices 'criteria' and determining the compliance level with the standards.^[1] Accreditation award helps the university to prove to their stakeholders their commitment to quality education. Accreditation occurs periodically to demonstrate whether the institution achieved the minimum standard required to assure a positive judgment at the time of the

accreditation site visit. Quality assurance is also an ongoing process through which the university maintains its achieved quality in education and continues quality improvement. The quality is assessed by collecting evidence, data, and indicators covering inputs, processes, and outcomes.^[2]

Universities in Saudi Arabia require accreditation by a national agency created in 2005, namely the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA). The NCAAA has developed a complete quality assurance review based on the standards for institutional accreditation. These standards are under periodic updates, based on a benchmark with other international academic accreditation agencies and best practices in higher education quality. The NCAAA is supervised by the Education and Training Evaluation Commission, which was founded as an authorized body with administrative and financial autonomy. The Commission is responsible for academic accreditation and quality assurance in public and private higher education institutions.^[3,4] In addition, the student health clinics of the university require accreditation with a different accrediting body dedicated to healthcare facility accreditation, the Central Board for Accreditation of Healthcare Institutions (CBAHI). The accreditation process for academic institutes and student health clinics requires time, financial support, and hard work.^[5]

The journey of accreditation starts with the submission of the eligibility requirements for institutional accreditation in a package. The governance and system for quality assurance were formed and published on the university website. The steering Quality Assurance and Academic Accreditation (QAAA) committee established the governance, and this committee is chaired by the vice president for Development and Quality Management Affairs (DQMA). The Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS) was developed by the Deanship of Quality Management (DOQ), which explains the role of all the university deanships/departments in quality assurance.

The steering QAAA committee formed committees for each standard, and each committee has the duty of collecting the required evidence to rate each criterion in each sub-standard according to the Self-Evaluation Scale (SES) for the Institution rating rubric. Once the Self-Evaluation Scale is completed for all the standards, the sub-committees write the Self Study Report for the Institution (SSRI). External reviewers are invited as academic accreditation process experts for their independent opinion.

Areas for improvement are identified, and quality improvement action plans are developed and executed before coordinating a mock survey visit. A group of academic accreditation process experts is invited to do readiness checks and suggest recommendations to improve the quality. The mock survey is similar to the actual accreditation visit and is given the same respect. This exercise in institutional accreditation is a planned and systematic accomplishment. It enables the university to identify its strengths, areas for improvement, and limitations. If required, new systems are developed to support automation and data management. One of these systems is the Automated Data for Analytics and Assessment (ADAA[®]) for the performance monitoring of the university. The other system is AYSAR[®] for reporting all programs, course specifications, and reports.^[6]

The accreditation journey identifies areas of improvement and creates an amazing spirit of loyalty and solidarity among its community, including faculty members, staff, and students.^[7,8] Accreditation is used for academic quality improvement, as other universities use an Academic Quality Improvement Program as a tool for accreditation.^[9] The use of information technology for accreditation is important to prepare the electronic resources room and automate performance measures.^[10] The impact of this accreditation process on continuous quality improvement was investigated, and the challenges were addressed in this study.

METHODS

This study was conducted at King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences (KSAU-HS) after the institutional accreditation process was completed by the NCAAA. The impact of the accreditation was measured through a cross-sectional survey. Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGD) with the members of each standard committee. Eight committees were formulated to cover the eight institutional academic accreditation standards.

Guidelines were developed for the FGD based on the NCAAA Self-Evaluation Scale by injecting probes to extract detailed information regarding the quality and key performance indicators that are enclosed in the questionnaire. The FGD was carried out in English and controlled by the first author, and a data collection sheet was used. All the respondents had the option to refuse participation in the study, and the responses of participants were kept confidential.

The rating for each standard, sub-standard, and criterion was recorded, then categorized according to the eight standards. The authors interpret the FGD notes independently and were later integrated. The quantitative data were entered into Excel spreadsheets and analyzed descriptively via the Microsoft Excel software but the qualitative data were analyzed manually. A report of all the results was written and validated by two colleagues in the deanship of quality management before completing our conversation and making assumptions for this study.

RESULTS

The participants of this study were asked about the university graduate attributes and strategic plan, as well as the activities the academic programs perform to achieve that. They were aware of the university graduate attributes, strategic plan, and academic program activities. They believe the university has the potential to be in the top ranking, and are proud of the excellent achievement of our graduates in the Licensed Professional Practice Tests (LPPT), hosted by the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties, considered as an indicator for this conclusion.

The improvement in the education quality after accreditation was reported by the participants. This improvement included rewriting student learning outcomes, program/course specifications, and program/course reports. The program/course reports were written on time with an appropriate action plan for continuous quality improvement and uploaded to AYSAR[®]. The sources for key performance indicators were unified via ADAA[®]. These improvements were done before the evaluation and the verification visit for accreditation by the NCAAA team.

The academic programs became more open to curricula development to adapt to the national and international standards for health professions education. Participants indicated that the curriculum design, study plan, content, and schedules were well-planned and controlled. They reported increased focus on soft skills more than before. Course specifications and course reports are essential for all courses basic sciences and clinical courses and are archived in the AYSAR[®] system. The accreditation process is reported as a motive for curricula periodic review and improvement. The courses are evaluated yearly according to students' feedback and the learning outcomes achievement as a result of the accreditation. Each academic program and course identified its key performance indicators and used them to monitor quality and performance. Students' performance and completion rates are one of these key performance indicators used in the program and course reports. Awareness about the academic program evaluation has increased noticeably.

Assessment tools have become more aligned with the teaching strategies, and the learning outcomes. The assessment plan is explained to students at the beginning of the course in the introduction lecture and written in the course/block book. The benchmarks internal and external were utilized for comparison of

student achievement. Comparison of the graduates of the University with other comparable national universities is done using the LPPT results each year. Students are offered feedback on their performance via the Blackboard® for each course and have the right to request appeals according to the clear procedure if they think there is a mistake in their assessment results. The university through the student wellness center fosters the mental health and psychological well-being of all students.

The academic counseling policy and procedure helped the faculty members to offer periodic academic counseling to all students. Student academic counseling was initiated, and reports were requested to monitor the student's progress. Any decrease in a student's academic achievement is communicated by the academic supervisor to ensure the required support is provided. The university implemented extended working hours of the libraries and recreation center for student's use.

The support for students' extra-curricular activities improved through the accreditation journey, where the deanship of student affairs started several initiatives in this regard as the students' clubs. The participants reported significant improvement in the student supports services but not all of the faculty members are aware of the variety of support services offered at the university.

A wider range of teaching strategies was used by all academic programs, and didactic teaching became more restricted to settings where this method is necessary. The participants reported that the other strategies encouraged were problem-based learning, self-directed learning, team-based learning, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Interprofessional education was not reported by the participants, and they are not aware of any other than the courses in the preprofessional phase in the health sciences academic programs.

Educational resources, including the Blackboard®, and the digital library, fostered the quality improvement of teaching. A faculty enhancement unit was formed to offer courses and programs for faculty members to enhance their teaching and research skills. Assessment units were developed to oversee the quality of student assessment within each academic program. Most of the university curricula were adopted from international schools and developed in-house to meet the local accreditation standards and local higher education requirements.

Table 1: Standards average evaluation and rating

Standards	Total sum of evaluation creteria	Number of applicable creteria	Average evaluation of standard	Overall quality rating
1. Mission, Vision and Strategic Planning	40	11	3.64	Perfect Compliance
2. Governance, Leadership and Management	126	36	3.50	Perfect Compliance
3. Teaching and Learning	143	39	3.67	Perfect Compliance
4. Students	89	25	3.56	Perfect Compliance
5. Faculty & Staff	45	12	3.75	Perfect Compliance
6. Institutional Resources	101	30	3.36	Compliance
7. Research and Innovation	65	17	3.82	Perfect Compliance
8. Community Partnership	34	10	3.4	Compliance

The average evaluation and rating for each standard summarized are in table 1. A major challenge during the accreditation journey was identifying unified governance for institutional resources and community partnership. This resulted in the standards related to institutional resources and community partnership receiving a lower overall quality rating. The other challenge was related to inconsistent data, with different departments reporting inconsistent data. This challenge was managed through the development of ADAA[®], that supported the unification of the key performance indicators for all academic programs.

DISCUSSION

The impact of accreditation on all aspects of the quality at the university is apparent and includes data collection, analysis, documentation, and the participation of stakeholders. The NCAAA standards for institutional accreditation covered all aspects of the educational process, starting with governance, strategic planning, and quality management. These standards included institutional resources, research, innovation, and community partnership. The core standards focused on teaching, learning, faculty, staff, and students. The data indicated the accreditation journey impact on continuous quality improvement of the health professions education. Fostering a quality culture in the university amplified the analytical judgment concerning education quality. The findings of this study also offer the base for the evaluation of different aspects of health professions education other than teaching and learning. Accreditation is useful for continuous quality improvement of the curricula other than evaluation of the academic programs and monitoring them.^[11]

The changes that happened because of the accreditation process led to quality improvement. All schools in Oceania-Australia and New Zealand made major modifications to their courses due to accreditation requirements. These major changes involved the teaching and assessment of communication skills, curricula integration, student-centered learning, information technology utilization, assessment strategies diversification, and consistency of course evaluation.^[12] The same results were reported in another study in Nigeria.^[13]

Universities globally went through the accreditation process to ensure quality academic programs. Accreditation agencies use different strategies, techniques, and standards. However, they are in essence similar with one goal to ensure the availability of minimum standards, and continuous quality improvement. The core of accreditation and continuous quality improvement is to meet the needs of the communities and support the learners to meet the demands of the healthcare system, and revolving technology, and to produce life-long learners.^[14-17]

The accreditation process, standards, and criteria should be revised regularly based on feedback from research, experts, and stakeholders. Periodic review against national and international standards is essential for universities striving to continuously improve and achieve a good rank in international and national universities.

CONCLUSION

The accreditation journey with the NCAAA has been fruitful in refining the education quality in the university without a major change in the curricula. It fostered a continuous quality improvement culture, the use of educational technology for automation, and a paperless system. It encouraged the university to pursue a better ranking among regional and international universities and become more reputable.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest relevant to this article.

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