

**Achieving International Competitiveness Through Academic Accreditation:
The Case of Qatar University**

Pr. Mohamed Benbouziane
Université Abou Bakr Belkaid
Tlemcen, Algeria

Mr. Fethi Saidi, M.Acc, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Accounting
College of Business & Economics
Qatar University

Introduction

Accreditation is a process of quality assurance that determines whether an institution or program meets established standards for function, structure, and performance. The accreditation process also fosters institutional and program improvement. Accreditation is a voluntary process of evaluation and review, which is performed by a nongovernmental agency of peers.

In a report by the World Bank (2008) officials warned that education reform needs to take top priority in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, including the GCC states, in order that education meets current economic development challenges and helps to tackle high unemployment. In this report, globalization, the knowledge economy, demographic changes and financing are diagnosed to be the main challenges facing education in the MENA countries.

Almost all GCC states have exerted visible emphasis on education in general and higher education in particular. In the past few years, higher education has grown rapidly and thus required reforms and new measures to regulate its market. Furthermore, the very limited visibility of the GCC higher education institutions in the world-class university rankings and the exigencies of international competition of graduates have motivated decision makers on higher education to impose stronger quality requirements and seek additional funding and research support to higher education (see Table 1). The notion of PPP in providing higher education, as well, is seen by various stakeholders to be imperative in the GCC states.

Reforms on higher education in the GCC encompass new policies, regulatory measures, the creation of academic accreditation and quality assurance bodies, funding schemes and research enhancement initiatives. Academic accreditation or quality assurance bodies are being introduced in several GCC states in parallel.

This paper is about the SACS accreditation project (ITIMAD) in Qatar University. The aim is to show the importance of international recognition in the field of higher education.

Qatar University accreditation project

Qatar University began its initial preparation to become an applicant institution for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) in Fall 2009. Because SACS emphasizes on the documentation of institutional effectiveness, faculty in all seven colleges and programs identified target student learning outcomes in each course for the purpose of program assessment. At the end of each semester, the program coordinators and their faculty review the candidates' performance on pre-selected course objectives for the semester for the purpose of reflection and improvements for teaching and course content in the future. The data gathered for these pre-selected objectives are summarized and then sent to the Director of Academic Programs and Learning Outcomes Assessment for the university. This task not only contributed to university goals for program assessment, but also strengthened the unit's assessment efforts at the course level and provided another tool to review and reflect to make program improvements.

QU Embarks on Itimad – Institutional Accreditation Project

Judith Bennett Henry¹

As part of its ongoing reform initiative, Qatar University (QU) is embarking on another phase in its pursuit of institutional excellence. QU is currently undergoing an intensive self-evaluation and review of its institutional, academic, and administrative structures in preparation for application as a candidate for membership in the US-based Commission of Colleges (COC) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

The Commission on Colleges accredits institutions in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Latin America that award associate, baccalaureate, master's and/or doctoral degrees. It also accepts a limited number of applications from international institutions of higher education. SACS is a regional educational accreditation agency for over 13,000 public and private educational institutions in the southern United States, ranging from preschool to college level. It is one of six regional accreditation organizations recognized by the United States Department of Education.

In a move to keep the QU community abreast of its reform activities, the Office of the Vice President (VP) for Institutional Planning and Development held an accreditation awareness presentation in January this year. COC Vice-President Donna Wilkinson gave an overview on accreditation procedures and detailed steps for preparing the application for COC membership.

¹Judith is Senior Editor at the External Relations Department and member of the Professional Service Committee of the Itimad Project

Hence, the Institutional Accreditation Project entitled “Itimad” was born. “Itimad” means accreditation in Arabic. It is expected to be in process for the next 3 years and will involve participation by the university’s leadership, staff, students and faculty alike.

The project is headed by VP for Institutional Planning and Development, DrSaif Al-Soweidi. Eight accreditation committees under the titles Governance, Faculty, Educational Programs, Institutional Effectiveness, Financial and Physical Resources, Learning Resources, Student Services, and Professional Services, will help in guiding the review process to ensure compliance with SACS rigorous standards. Additionally, an Institutional Accreditation Steering Committee is in place to guide the project. It is comprised of QU President Prof Sheikha Abdulla Al-Misnad as Chair, VP and Chief Financial Officer DrHumaid Al-Midfaa, VP and Chief Academic Officer DrSheikhabintJabor Al-Thani, VP for Student Affairs Dr Omar Al-Ansari and VP for Research Dr Hassan Al-Derham.

What is Accreditation?

The accreditation exercise will place the University’s financial and administrative structure, programs, facilities, faculty, and student services under a microscope to determine whether applicable standards and requirements (as laid out by the COC) are met.

In its Handbook “*Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*”, the COC states its philosophy of accreditation as such:

“Both a process and a product, accreditation relies on integrity, thoughtful and principled judgment, rigorous application of requirements, and a context of trust. The process provides an assessment of an institution’s effectiveness in the fulfillment of its mission, its compliance with the requirements of its accrediting association, and its continuing efforts to enhance the quality of student learning and its programs and services. Based upon reasoned judgment, the process stimulates evaluation and improvement, while providing a means of continuing accountability to constituents and the public”.

Qatar University, the country’s only national institution for higher education, in its decision to bid for accreditation with the COC is seeking to strengthen the quality of its education so that its graduates are assured that the education they receive is valuable and worthwhile and can hold its own against international standards. Additionally, by gaining accreditation status, the university will hold itself accountable to the accrediting agency, its students, the Qatar community and the wider international arena, to continue to improve the quality and results of the education it provides.

The added benefit to QU’s graduates is that most potential employers tend to look more favorably on a résumé from a job applicant who has received his/her education from an accredited college, university, or program. Important to note however, is that accreditation status of QU will not automatically guarantee a student’s success.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)

In most countries in the world, the process of evaluation usually is conducted by the national-level Ministry of Education. However, in the US, the process is independent of government and performed by private membership associations, such as SACS. SACS has a long history as an established accreditation agency with rigorous standards, which are outlined in its handbook. The agency was founded in 1895 and currently comprises the Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (CASI) and the Commission on Colleges (COC).

The COC was founded in 1912 to develop standards and a process for accrediting colleges and universities in the southern United States. It is the umbrella agency of shared values and practices among the diverse institutions in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Latin America and other international sites approved by the COC that award associate, baccalaureate, master's, or doctoral degrees. The Commission also reviews applications from other international institutions of higher education. In the Gulf region, the American University of Dubai is accredited by SACS-COC.

Accreditation Process

Attaining accreditation from the COC would signify that QU has a mission appropriate to higher education and has resources, programs, and services sufficient to accomplish and sustain that mission. It also signifies that the university maintains educational objectives that are clearly specified and consistent with its mission and appropriate to the degrees it offers, and which indicate its success in achieving those stated objectives.

As laid out in the *Principles* handbook, initial accreditation status is granted to an academic institution based on its successful compliance with core requirements, comprehensive standards, and federal requirements. The *Principles* are applied uniformly to all institutions seeking accreditation.

Core Requirements

Core requirements are basic, broad-based, foundational requirements that QU, as other institutions, must meet to be accredited with the COC. The requirements cover the expectations that QU has degree-granting authority from the appropriate national government agency, that it has a governing board, a chief executive officer, and an institutional mission.

During the accreditation process, QU will be reviewed for institutional effectiveness, continuous operation, program length, and program content. It also would need to meet the expectation that it requires the successful completion of a general education component at the collegiate level; and provides instruction for all course work for degrees.

Additionally, the university must meet the comprehensive standard of faculty qualifications; provision of learning resources and student support services; has a strong base of financial resources and possesses adequate physical resources.

Comprehensive Standards

Comprehensive standards, as outlined in the *Principles*, are more specific to the operations of the institution. They represent good practice in higher education and establish a level of accomplishment expected of all accredited member institutions.

Review of QU's institutional effectiveness would cover educational programs including student learning outcomes, administrative support services, educational support services, research within its educational mission, and community or public service within its education mission.

The standards also cover the expectation that QU, as other universities, can identify college-level competencies and the extent to which graduates have attained them. Similarly, QU would need to demonstrate a competent faculty body qualified to accomplish its mission and goals.

Federal Requirements

In its application to the Commission on Colleges for accreditation status, QU is expected to fulfill the Commission's Federal Requirements. The US federal statute includes mandates that the COC review an institution in accordance with criteria outlined in the regulations of the *1998 Higher Education Amendments* developed by the US Department of Education. QU would therefore be required to document compliance with those criteria and the Commission is obligated to consider such compliance when the institution is reviewed for initial membership or continued accreditation. The criteria comprise:

The university's evaluation of success with respect to **student achievement**;

A **program curriculum** that is directly related and appropriate to the university's purpose and goals and the diplomas/certificates/ degrees awarded;

Publication of university policies, such as current academic calendars, grading and refund policies, for the benefit of students and the public;

Appropriate **program length** for each of QU's educational programs;

Adequate procedures for addressing written **student complaints** and demonstrating such procedures when resolving complaints;

Accurate representation of the university's practices and policies on **recruitment materials** and presentations;

In compliance with **Title IV program responsibilities** of the 1998 Higher Education Amendments.

As it embarks on this monumental task, one of the top priorities for Qatar University is to establish a culture of evidence and documentation, which is key to addressing compliance with the core requirements and comprehensive standards detailed in the *Principles*.

To this end, the university is looking for full participation in this exercise by the entire QU community— its leadership, staff, faculty and students. It is an exercise that will proceed at steady pace over the next three years. Implicit in its objective to achieve accreditation with the Commission on Colleges is the university's commitment to enhance the quality of its programs and services within the context of its resources and capacities and to create an environment of teaching, research, learning, and public service in keeping with international standards for higher education.

Conclusion

In this presentation it is proposed that higher education institutions consider positioning as a strategy to ride the tide of globalization. While the application seems suited only to private education institutions, it does not necessarily preclude public institutions.

Positioning is being deliberate in how one wants to be defined by the target market in relation to competition. It is taking the move to be in the best place possible for one's own advantage. It is establishing a perceptual location, staking a place in the global market, and willing others to accept it. Such a perceptual location may be based on a single attribute like institutional skills, or a combination of attributes as program mix and skills.

The perception of one's place and role in the global higher education landscape is determined by the reputation one wants to establish in the future. It is practically rooted from what is current, but goes beyond with a hope for what may be feasible. American universities, though now severely challenged, are still perceived as being in the top rung of the higher education ladder. Australian universities currently have the perception of being strong contenders with their blend of relevant programs and high quality research. European universities are evidently regrouping to capture a better place in the global market. The aspiration of higher education institutions in developing countries, in this regard, is not evident.

Furthermore, this presentation is an attempt to answer the following questions: How can universities position themselves to gain an edge in the face of globalization? How can higher education institutions handle the competition spawned by globalization?

Table 1: International Ranking

Table 4: Ranks of the first 20 GCC universities in the Webometrics University Ranking			
GCC RANK	UNIVERSITY	GCC States	WORLD RANK
1	King Saud University	KSA	199
2	King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals	KSA	404
3	King Abdulaziz University	KSA	496
4	Imam Muhammad bin Saud University	KSA	835
5	Umm Al-Qura University	KSA	1,050
6	King Faisal University	KSA	1,527
7	Kuwait University	Kuwait	1,691
8	United Arab Emirates University	UAE	1,736
9	Qatar University	Qatar	1,886
10	King Khalid University	KSA	2,227
11	Higher Colleges of Technology	UAE	2,269
12	Najran University	KSA	2,297
13	Sultan Qaboos University	Oman	2,407
14	Islamic University of Al Madinah	KSA	3,161
15	Prince Sultan University	KSA	3,707
16	King Abdullah University of Science & Technology	KSA	3,728
17	College of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences	KSA	3,903
18	Zayed University	UAE	4,131
19	American University of Sharjah	UAE	4,190
20	Taibah University	KSA	4,330

Source: World Universities' ranking on the Web
http://www.webometrics.info/top100_continent.asp?cont=AW sited at April 8, 2010