

Quality Assurance in Kuwait Higher Education Reforms and Improvements:
Policies, Standards, and Procedures

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Abstract

Recent research findings highlight the importance of quality assurance globally and in Kuwait higher education specifically. Several significant national and cultural issues that are affecting both government and non-government education sectors in Kuwait are discussed. Conclusions address several weaknesses that may prevent Kuwait higher education institutions from attaining academic accreditation. Potential methods for implementing quality assurance are provided as well as recommendations for Kuwait higher education reforms and improvements.

Introduction

Globally, the nature of quality assurance systems has dramatically changed in higher education over the past two to three decades. Higher education also has globally shifted from traditional to modern systems-based policies, standards, and procedures. However, Kuwait higher education systems, specifically, are still challenged by both national and cultural issues in government and non-government education sectors.

Global forces have shaped global education so that educational processes are being designed to meet needed global competencies (Thomas, Gunden, & Faulkner, 2009). Higher education systems acknowledge the importance of quality assurance through the design of leadership programs that address these competencies (Haakstad, 2001; Pillai, 2006). Quality assurance efforts often require educational reforms and continued improvements in higher education. These reforms often necessitate changes in educational policies that will lead to fundamental and foundational changes in educational outcomes and the quality of education, including higher education. Competition in labor markets, at the national and global levels, motivates educational institutions to provide high-quality education by focusing on improving educational systems (Patrinis, 2000).

Definitions of quality are abundant. Briefly, quality is an organized system of management procedures used to accomplish high-quality outcomes—in the case of interest here, to improve learning in education (Harman & Meek, 2000). Others concerned with education (e.g., Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002) view quality as a systematic monitoring process that identifies acceptable standards in education. Quality assurance is used to implement and ensure continued achievement of standards in educational institutions and to continuously improve educational outcomes by improving student learning and achievement (Kohler, 2003).

Higher education leadership also plays a significant role in improving educational systems and outcomes. Competent international leadership in higher education ensures the

development of educational policies that meet international standards and ultimately the challenges of the 21st century (Al-Omari, 2008). Evaluations of quality are conducted to measure the effectiveness of standards and criteria (Al-Shammari & Yawkey, 2008). In addition, school leadership makes and achieves education improvement goals by developing and forming leadership teams (Winterman, 2008). With the pressure to maintain and even exceed quality standards, teachers sometimes consider leaving the teaching profession—another challenge for education leaders (Kent, Feldman, & Hayes, 2009).

Significance of the Study

Study findings highlight significant issues that warrant implementation of a quality assurance system in Kuwait higher education. Higher education leaders realize the importance of quality assurance to improving educational outcomes. Further, competition in the Kuwait labor market mandates the recruiting of highly qualified graduates to meet global standards and demands. In fact, Kuwait's future development plan involves shifting towards becoming a financial and commercial center in the region, which requires a highly educated labor force. Finally, quality assurance needs to be implemented in policies, standards, and procedures in Kuwait higher education to meet national goals and to challenge global forces.

Selected Discussion and Conclusions

In 1966, the Kuwait government established the first public and state university—Kuwait University. All Kuwaiti citizens may enroll in this university free of cost. At the present time, Kuwait University offers 72 bachelor's degree-level academic programs in over 13 colleges, 36 master's degree programs, and 4 Ph.D. programs. Many programs have received academic accreditation from acknowledged academic organizations. Receipt of accreditation is a serious matter, indicating the presence of quality programs. Due to the quality of its programs, Kuwait University has achieved a consistent position within the scientific world. Examples of accredited faculties in Kuwait University include the following:

- 1- Faculty in the engineering program (except for the Department of Architecture)
- 2- Faculty in the arts (except the Department of Public Information)
- 3- Faculty in the pharmacy
- 4- Some areas among faculty in the sciences
- 5- College of Administrative Sciences (Aldaihani, 2010)

As another example, the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET) was founded in 1972. The goal of the PAAET is to develop national technical manpower and to meet Kuwait's human resource needs through the education and training sectors. At the present time, the PAAET provides many programs within five colleges, six institutes, and special training centers (Alawadi, 2005).

The Private Universities Council (PUC) was founded in 2000 by the Ministry of Higher Education in Kuwait. The PUC is the national body which licenses and controls academics in all private universities. Under the PUC's authority are 12 private universities that are licensed as such in Kuwait. Likewise, several well-known international universities have requested permission from the Ministry of Higher Education to open branches in Kuwait. The PUC also performs the following tasks:

1. Examines applications to found private higher education institutions

2. Determines accreditation requirements for private higher education institutions; accredits their academic programs, and reviews their performance to ensure commitment to the provisions of their founding decree
3. Approves standards and conditions that need to be complied with by academic programs at any private higher education institution; and reconsiders those standards and conditions whenever such a need arises
4. Accredits certificates granted by private educational institutions and equates them based on the relevant rules and criteria
5. Debates whether to suspend or cancel the activities of private educational institutions or even to merge them
6. Looks into any other matter referred to it by the Minister (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010).

All of this is occurring in response to rapid growth in a set of new private higher education institutions. For this reason, the Kuwait higher education ministry, on behalf of the Kuwait government, has had to create new policies, standards, and procedures for licensing and approving these institutions.

As a result, up-to-date changes in policies, standards, and procedures have had to be implemented to ensure accreditation and quality assurance in Kuwait higher education. In fact, policies have been developed to control higher education requirements and procedures. Further, standards adapted from other higher education sources globally ensure consistent quality among private higher education institutions in Kuwait. Overall, however, the practice of quality assurance processes is still incomplete in Kuwait higher education.

While some, if not all, higher education institutions have established quality assurance in practice, delays or weak efforts have arisen due to national and cultural issues in Kuwait. National issues stem from bureaucracy and control by both government and non-government education sectors. Cultural issues stem from a lack of knowledge and resources, or resistance by administrators and educators in higher education, and/or a community in Kuwait. These issues have been noted by educators and those resisting educational reform and higher education improvement. Other problems have arisen via the promotion policies and procedures implemented and followed in the Ministry of Higher Education in Kuwait, while others stem from the educational attainment of relevant players, including high school graduates, teachers and administrators, leading to resistance to change in educational systems.

In conclusion, some research studies conducted in Kuwait have addressed the status and effects of implementing quality assurance in higher education institutions. For example, Al-Hajri (2009) surveyed education faculty members about implementing academic accreditation standards in the College of Education at Kuwait University. She concluded that all faculty members perceived all NCATE standards as being applicable to Kuwait University. A study by Al-Lumai (2010) found that all standards can be implemented for accreditation in the College of Education in Kuwait University. However, some minor weaknesses were identified, such as a lack of clear policies, standards, and procedures in quality assurance offices, technology, a faculty merit system based on performance, electronic databases, and information analysis systems. Al-Atiqi and Alharbi (2009) studied the various quality systems in place in other countries in the Gulf States in order to situate the Kuwaiti quality system among other local practices. They conducted a case study of Kuwait's development of a system of quality management in the private higher education sector. Through their findings, they hoped to

provide others facing this issue with a useful model of how to cope with this recent development worldwide.

Potential for Quality Assurance in Kuwait Higher Education: Reforms and Improvements

Several recommendations may be offered regarding educational reform and improvement in Kuwait higher education. First, both the Ministries of Education and Higher Education should work together to establish quality assurance centers or offices that plan, evaluate, and assess educational outcomes, and assist in the improvement of education.

Second, both ministries should recruit highly qualified administrators and staff who can design, implement, and achieve strategic plans for educational reforms and improvements. This can be done by providing workshops and training programs for all administrators and staff at the national and international levels.

Third, quality assurance centers or offices must provide policies, standards, and procedures for all higher education institutions in Kuwait, so that these institutions are globally recognized and meet national goals. Policies must also be followed and used in rankings of higher education institutions. Standards should guide such institutions in aligning their academic programs and curricula to meet standards set by the Higher Education Ministry in Kuwait. Procedures and guidelines are needed to achieve standards and implement policies.

In conclusion, Kuwait higher education should be based on policies, standards, and procedures that ensure the evaluation and assessment of educational outcomes, and rank all public and private universities and colleges that seek accreditation at the national level. In this way, all higher education institutions will implement policies, standards, and procedures that meet the goals of Kuwait higher education.

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