

Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Post Secondary Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*

Suudi Arabistan'da Yükseköğretim Akreditasyonu ve Kalite Güvencesi*

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia has a diverse system of post-secondary education, and it is expanding rapidly in response to demographic changes and increasing demands for participation. There is also very rapid economic and industrial development and increasing exposure to international competition in many areas of activity. Post-secondary education must continue to expand and standards of education and training that are equivalent to international best practice must be achieved and widely recognized. The standards must be achieved in all institutions and in all programs. These requirements have led the government to establish the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment as an independent agency for quality assurance and accreditation. The Commission has responsibility for establishing standards, supporting quality improvement, and accreditation and in all post-secondary institutions other than those in defense. Its focus will be on both quality of institutions as a whole, and the quality of education and training programs. Principles underlying the system the Commission is developing include encouraging continuing improvement rather than being satisfied with minimally acceptable standards, encouraging diversity, ensuring cooperation and mutual support among the different agencies involved and designing approaches tailored to Saudi Arabia's traditions and requirements rather than adopting a system developed elsewhere. In doing this the Commission is drawing on the best ideas we can find elsewhere in the world, but the system we develop will be our own. Pilot programs have been conducted in two universities involving institutional and program self-studies and independent external reviews to trial and refine the procedures involved. Developmental reviews are being carried out in a number of other universities and colleges to provide experience with the new processes. Most higher education institutions conducted initial self-evaluations based on the Commission's standards for accreditation and have prepared strategic plans for introduction of quality systems prior to the commencement of the formal accreditation procedures in 2010. This paper gives a description of what has been done and concludes with a brief summary of some significant issues and challenges that must be dealt with in the effective implementation of the new system for quality assurance and accreditation in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: National commission for academic accreditation and assessment, Higher education, Quality assurance, National qualifications framework, Saudi Arabia

ÖZ

Suudi Arabistan'ın farklı bir yükseköğretim eğitim sistemi vardır ve bu demografik değişikliklere ve artan talebe yanıt olarak hızla büyümektedir. Ayrıca, çok hızlı bir ekonomik ve endüstriyel gelişme vardır ve birçok faaliyet alanında uluslararası rekabete maruziyet artmaktadır. Yükseköğretim eğitimi büyümeye devam etmeli ve en iyi uluslararası uygulamalara eşdeğer eğitim ve öğretim standartları sağlanmalı ve yaygın olarak kabul görmelidir. Standartlar tüm kurumlarda ve tüm programlarda gerçekleştirilmelidir. Bu gereksinimler, hükümetin bağımsız bir kalite güvencesi ve akreditasyon ajansı olarak Ulusal Akademik Akreditasyon ve Değerlendirme Komisyonu'nu kurmasına neden olmuştur. Komisyon, savunma dışındaki yükseköğretim kurumlarında standartların oluşturulması, kalite geliştirme ve akreditasyonun desteklenmesi sorumluluğunu yüklenmiştir. Odak noktası hem bir bütün olarak kurumların kalitesi, hem de eğitim ve öğretim programlarının kalitesi olacaktır. Kabul edilebilir asgari standartlarla yetinmekten ziyade sürekli gelişimi cesaretlendirmek, çeşitliliği teşvik etmek, ilgili farklı kurumlar arasında işbirliği ve karşılıklı desteğin sağlanması ve başka bir yerde geliştirilen bir sistemi benimsemekten ziyade Suudi Arabistan'ın gelenek ve gereksinimlerine uygun yaklaşımların tasarlanması, komisyonun geliştirdiği ilkeler arasındadır. Komisyon, bunu yaparken dünyada başka yerlerde bulabileceğimiz en iyi fikirlerden yararlanmaktadır; ancak geliştirdiğimiz

*Presented as an oral presentation at the 2013 QA Islamic Seminar And Roundtable Meeting (October 27-29 2013, Manama, Bahrain).

*Bu çalışma 2013 QA Islamic Seminar And Roundtable Meeting'de (27-29 Ekim 2013, Manama, Bahreyn) sözel bildiri olarak sunulmuştur.

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Received/Geliş Tarihi : 18.11.2013

Accepted/Kabul Tarihi: 09.12.2013

sistem kendimize özgü olacaktır. İlgili prosedürleri sınamak ve iyileştirmek için, iki üniversitede kurumsal ve programa özgü çalışmalar ile bağımsız dış değerlendirmeleri de içeren pilot programlar uygulanmıştır. Diğer bazı üniversite ve kolejlerde de yeni süreçlere ilişkin deneyimi sağlamak için gelişimsel incelemeler yürütülmektedir. Çoğu yüksek öğretim kurumu Komisyonun akreditasyon standartlarını temel alan ilk kendi değerlendirmelerini yapmış ve 2010 yılında resmi akreditasyon prosedürlerinin başlamasından önce kalite sistemlerinin tanıtımı için stratejik plan hazırlamıştır. Bu makale neler yapıldığının bir açıklamasını vermekte ve Suudi Arabistan'da yeni kalite güvencesi ve akreditasyon sisteminin etkin bir şekilde uygulanması ile üstesinden gelinmesi gereken bazı önemli konular ve zorlukların kısa bir özeti ile sona ermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Ulusal akademik akreditasyon ve değerlendirme komisyonu, Yükseköğretim, Kalite güvencesi, Ulusal yeterlilikler çerçevesi, Suudi Arabistan

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia has a diverse and rapidly expanding system of post-secondary education. The number of public universities has more than doubled over the last five years with twenty four now operating or in final stages of planning. There are approximately 28 private universities and colleges, a number which has also doubled over the same period. Further private institutions are in various stages of development.

Significant restructuring is also taking place. Over 100 women's colleges and 18 teachers colleges have been incorporated into public universities, and the responsibility for a system of nursing institutes has shifted from the Ministry of Health to the Ministry of Higher Education. In addition to these there are a number of specialized institutions established by other Ministries in medical and health sciences and other fields, community colleges and military colleges and there is an extensive technical training system. The training system is also expanding rapidly with a public sector that includes men's technical colleges and higher technical institutes for female students and several hundreds of private technical institutes.

The provision of higher education within the Kingdom has emphasized undergraduate programs to provide for the large and growing numbers of young people wishing to study. This growth is continuing, but there is also increasing recognition of the need for increased post graduate programs. Post graduate programs are being expanded in a number of universities but there is very high demand, not only for research and professional positions in industry, but also to provide academic staff for the rapidly expanding higher education system.

Some of the institutions are familiar with commonly used quality assurance processes and in several cases there is extensive experience with international accreditation agencies. However there is wide variation and many institutions have had no such involvement and have little familiarity with accreditation and quality assurance systems.

Programs in higher education range from one year diplomas up to doctoral degrees. Although there are similarities in standards and requirements for academic awards there are also variations that reflect the planning processes and expectations of different Ministries, and relationships that have been established over time with organizations in other countries.

The Government of Saudi Arabia has recognized the need to provide a national mechanism to ensure that educational standards are consistent throughout the country, and comparable to those of other countries with highly regarded educational systems. This is essential to support the country's economic and social development and to enable young people to participate fully in the developing global economy. Saudi Arabia's recent entry to the World Trade Agreement will create important opportunities, but will also require high levels of skills in the working population, and confidence both within the country and internationally that those levels of skills are being consistently achieved. To help achieve these objectives the Government has established a National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) with responsibility for academic accreditation of all post-secondary institutions and programs with the exception of military education.

The newness of the Quality Assurance (QA) and accreditation system and the relative inexperience with such systems in many institutions is a major challenge. However it also presents a great opportunity to develop and implement a system that draws on most recent international experiences and adapts that experience to the particular requirements of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The NCAAA is an autonomous body, financially and administratively independent, but responsible to the Council of Higher Education. It has the responsibility to establish standards and criteria for academic accreditation, determine rules and regulations for academic practice, and conduct periodic assessments for accreditation and quality assurance of post-secondary institutions. These assessments are of two kinds, whole of institutional quality, and quality of programs. Its responsibilities will include planning to promote more effective performance in various fields of study, cooperation with international quality assurance agencies, conduct of research, and development of publications to support quality assurance in Saudi Arabian institutions.

There are different perspectives on the nature of quality on the part of quality assurance agencies in different parts of the world. The main variations being a focus on "generally accepted standards" as a basis for accreditation, or "fitness for purpose", a concept that emphasizes the importance of diversity to reflect the differing mission and objectives of autonomous institutions. The NCAAA does not see these ap-

proaches as being in conflict, though the relative importance of the different perspectives will vary for different situations. A major concern for the NCAAA in working with higher education institutions is to achieve, and to be widely recognized as having achieved, high standards that are comparable to the best international institutions. However we also recognize that there are significant differences in the nature and capacity of higher education institutions and legitimate differences in their mission that reflect the circumstances in which they operate. Consequently the judgments made by the Commission will be based on the achievement of high standards and the extent to which the institutions are achieving their goals and objectives. The NCAAA will also consider whether those goals and objectives are appropriate for the institution in the communities in which it is operating. In other words, "Fitness of Purpose". In summary the criteria used are consistency with generally accepted standards, fitness for purpose, and fitness of purpose.

PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING the SYSTEM for ACCREDITATION and QUALITY ASSURANCE

In developing system for accreditation and quality assurance the following principles should be followed:

a. Responsibility for quality rests with institutions delivering programs. The institutions delivering programs in Saudi Arabia are responsible for the quality of those programs and for the quality of all of their facilities and activities.

The principle of institutional responsibility has several implications:

First, while an external organization such as the Commission, or a Ministry or other organization administering a system of colleges, can have an important role in assisting institutions this does not remove responsibility from the institution. An external authority can help and can verify, but it cannot deliver quality.

Second, although an institution may decentralize some of its responsibilities or delegate authority to an internal unit such as a College or Department, this does not remove responsibility from the institution as a whole.

Third, if an institution in Saudi Arabia delivers a program that has been developed elsewhere, it is still the institution in Saudi Arabia that must accept responsibility and will be accountable for the quality of the programs it offers.

b. Quality relates to all of an institution's functions and activities.

Quality assurance processes in institutions should involve not only their educational programs, but also other matters such as facilities and equipment, staffing, relationships with the communities served by the institution and the administrative processes that link all these together. For an institutional evaluation all functions carried out within the institution must be considered. For a program evaluation all functions that impact on the quality of the program must be considered regardless of whether they are managed by the department or college concerned or by central administrative units or centers within the institution.

c. Emphasis should be on support for continuing quality improvement rather than on satisfying required standards.

The primary objective of the system for accreditation and quality assurance is continuing improvement and this orientation permeates all of the Commission's activities. Institutions are encouraged to work towards continuing improvement beyond minimum requirements in all of their activities and the existence and effective use of quality improvement mechanisms is included within the standards that must be met.

d. Supportive relationships are essential.

Relationships of trust and support are essential within institutions and between institutions and the Commission and the reviewers with whom it works. It must be possible for individuals, for groups within institutions, and for institutions as a whole, to frankly acknowledge difficulties and discuss plans for overcoming them. On the other hand attempting to conceal problems is a serious weakness that will be open to criticism.

The style of interaction within an institution in working for quality improvement, and between the Commission and the institution during external reviews should be characterized by cooperation, openness and transparency, sensitivity to mission and objectives and constructive support in identifying and resolving difficulties.

e. Assessments of quality must be evidence based and independently verified.

Conclusions about quality should be based as far as possible on directly observable evidence rather than subjective judgments. Indicators of achievement should be identified in advance, related to valid benchmarks to establish appropriate standards of performance, and systematically reviewed. Where interpretations are required, for example where indicators provide indirect evidence of achievement of objectives, interpretations should be independently verified.

f. Diversity should be encouraged provided standards are met.

Flexibility in organizational arrangements is necessary to meet the needs of different communities, to respond to differing missions and to reflect the differing circumstances and resources of different institutions. Allowing diversity is also essential if creativity and innovation are to be encouraged and improvements are to develop over time. Specific requirements for meeting quality standards may vary for different types of institution. For example research may be an important element in the work of some institutions and not for others, and the way an institution interacts with its community should differ for a large public university and a small college in a remote community.

g. Standards of learning outcomes must be consistent for all institutions.

While diversity in mission and approach is supported the quality of learning expected for academic awards does not vary. If community confidences in the system of post-secondary education are to be maintained it must be possible to rely on

consistent standards of student achievement no matter what kind of institution students attend or how their programs are organized. This does not put a ceiling on quality that is achieved and of course some institutions will do better than others. However it must be possible for the community to be confident that necessary standards are being achieved everywhere.

h. Stakeholders should have substantial involvement in planning and review processes with feedback regularly obtained, analyzed, and responded to.

Stakeholders include students and graduates, staff, employers, providers of funds, members of the communities served by the institution and any other groups with which the institution is involved. The stakeholders have a right to be involved, but even more importantly, have perspectives that need to be considered if a system for quality assurance is to be effective.

i. Quality improvement should be achieved through effective leadership and widespread involvement.

A good higher education institution should be a learning organization, in which all faculty and staff are involved in evaluating their performance and that of the units within which they work and offer ideas and plan for improvement following that evaluation. This will not happen unless there is effective leadership and coordination at the level of the institution as a whole. While effective leadership is at least equally important at the level of internal academic and administrative units.

j. The quality assurance and accreditation system must be tailored for the requirements of Saudi Arabia and monitored and improved over time.

A final general point is that the system must be designed specifically for the requirements of this country. Although good ideas from quality assurance and accreditation systems in operation elsewhere have been carefully considered, they have been adapted as necessary and combined in a system that fits the circumstances and requirements of Saudi Arabia as closely as possible. The impact of the new system will be monitored as it is introduced and procedures modified as required. The NCAAA's processes are subject to quality assurance procedures comparable to those that will be expected of educational institutions.

STAGES of DEVELOPMENT

The development of the system for accreditation and quality assurance is occurring in three overlapping stages. The first of these was the development of procedures, basic materials and standards.

The second stage of transition involves training and preparation for institutions, and the development of additional illustrative and reference material that may be helpful to them. During this period pilot reviews were conducted in two institutions in which self-studies of a sample of programs and of the institutions themselves were carried out, and external reviews were conducted by international quality review teams.

All higher education institutions were asked to conduct initial self-evaluations based on the NCAAA standards and strategic plans were prepared for quality improvement to deal with any problems found and introduce internal quality assurance systems. A number of developmental reviews were carried out and others are under way to provide experience with those processes before the actual accreditation assessments begin.

The third stage of full implementation is started this academic year 2009/2010. It involves periodic self-studies of programs and institutions on a five yearly cycle, and we hope, continuing improvement and international recognition of the high quality of the Saudi Arabian system. A number of requirements for eligibility for accreditation assessments have been developed to ensure quality systems are in place, and accreditation reviews in a number of public and private institutions are scheduled for 2010 and 2011.

KEY DOCUMENTS

The documents that have been produced are:

- *Handbooks describing processes and requirements and providing templates for use by institutions.* The handbooks are presented in three parts. Part 1 (NCAAA, 2012a), giving a general overview and explaining key terminology Part 2 (NCAAA, 2012b), describing internal quality assurance arrangements and providing templates for use by the institutions and Part 3 (NCAAA, 2012c), describing the external review processes.
- *Standards for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education (NCAAA, 2012d & 2012e).* Eleven standards have been identified, comparable to those used in many other quality assurance systems. Each standard is then broken down into sub-sections that provide greater detail. The standards are presented in two forms. In one, there is a statement of requirements for processes and other requirements for accreditation. In the second form the standards are presented as self-evaluation scales in which institutions are asked whether the things asked for are done at the institution and if they are done, how well they are done (NCAAA, 2012f & 2012g). Responses to this quality judgment are requested using a five point starring system with provision for verification by an independent observer, and priorities for improvement.

The statements of standards and the self-evaluation scales are provided in different documents for institutional evaluations and for assessments of the quality of programs.

The eleven standards that have been identified relate to:

1. Mission goals and objectives
2. Governance and administration
3. Management of quality assurance and improvement
4. Learning and teaching
5. Student administration and support services
6. Learning resources

7. Facilities and equipment
8. Financial planning and management
9. Employment processes
10. Research
11. Institutional relationships with the community

A different set of standards that are appropriate for technical training have been prepared for use in that sector and are available in draft form.

Standards have also been prepared for programs offered by distance education that follow the general standards, but include a number of elements that are considered important for that mode of program delivery.

- *National qualifications framework.* This document describes learning standards expected for each qualification level. Five broad areas or domains of learning have been identified.
 - i. Knowledge
 - ii. Cognitive skills (creative thinking and problem solving etc.)
 - iii. Interpersonal skills and responsibility (abilities such as leadership and group participation, ethical behavior, commitment to and capacity for independent learning etc.)
 - iv. Numerical and communication skills (generic basic skills expected of everybody including oral and written communication, basic mathematical skills, and use of ICT)
 - v. Psychomotor skills in fields of study where these are relevant

The Framework is an important element in the strategy for improving the quality of learning outcomes. Attention to this range of skills has obvious implications for techniques of teaching and student assessment, and particular attention to these are given in recommended planning and reporting processes and the templates for program and course specifications and reports and in the standards for learning and teaching.

A multi sector qualifications framework is also available that includes expectations for the technical training sector and describes relationships between technical and higher education.

- *Other documents*

Additional documents are also available including a list of key performance indicators to guide institutions in their own evaluations and provide the NCAAA with information through which to monitor the quality of the system as whole, examples of student evaluation surveys, brochure describing the activities of quality centers in institutions. A further project is under way to define and circulate for discussion learning outcomes in various professional fields.

ISSUES INVOLVED in DEVELOPING the NEW SYSTEM of ACCREDITATION and QUALITY ASSURANCE

There are a number of issues involved, some that would relate to any new system of accreditation and quality assurance, and some that may be particularly relevant to Saudi Arabia.

a. Dealing with the diversity of the system

Post-secondary education and training in Saudi Arabia is provided by many different kinds of institutions, large and small, public and private, administrative oversight and support from different ministries, different sectors with differing requirements (technical, academic, professional) Learning outcomes must be consistent but diversity to suit differing requirements must be supported.

The Commission faces a significant challenge in the scale and diversity of the post-secondary institutions with which it must work. These range from large comprehensive universities (the largest with over 100,000 students, to small single purpose public and private institutions in different ministries, some of which offer only one year programs in a limited number of fields. It is necessary to define standards of good practice that can be applied appropriately to these very different organizations, and to support development of systems for internal and external accreditation and quality assurance that will be suitable for them.

The differences relate not also to the size and range of programs, but also to the nature of teaching and learning involved. For example there are fundamental differences between the competencies based training driven by employability requirements involved in most technical and vocational training programs, and the higher education approach giving much greater emphasis to research, and the development and application of new knowledge.

b. Implementing quality systems at a time of rapid growth

This will place heavy demands on a relatively small number of individuals, institutions and government agencies. The requirements for quality assurance must be met at the same time as key people are required to plan and implement strategies for expansion and the establishment of new institutions.

c. Recruitment of large numbers of international reviewers

In the early stages of the new system it will be necessary to rely to a major extent on international reviewers. These people have other commitments and the availability of substantial numbers of appropriate people will be of concern. It will also be a very expensive exercise. We have been extremely fortunate in receiving assistance from other quality agencies and from many individuals who have given help.

d. Development of commitment to a wider range of learning outcomes and skills in new teaching strategies

The need to change from what has been a traditional emphasis on rote learning and shifting to creative thinking and problem solving, and the development of personal attributes of personal and group responsibility, leadership, is recognized.

However it is a more substantial and difficult task to spread this commitment to a majority of teaching staff and to ensure they are able and willing to use appropriate teaching strategies to develop these abilities. Some resistance is to be resistance from faculty members who are not convinced of the need for these changes, or who lack the skills in different forms of teaching. Institutions are beginning to introduce training in teaching and a lot of attention will need to be given in institutions to management of change strategies.

e. Responding to developments in technology and educational delivery systems

These developments are occurring throughout the world, and Saudi Arabia is in a similar position to many other countries in dealing with these changes. They represent both challenges and opportunities. It is necessary to be open to constructive change, but also to exercise some caution to make sure that good practice is preserved and the necessary learning outcomes are achieved.

f. Increasing requirements for defining and verifying learning outcome standards

The system must be consistent with worldwide trends to emphasize standards of learning outcomes and to verify achievement equivalent to high standards achieved internationally. However benchmarking of standards is not a common practice can be both time consuming and potentially threatening. It is necessary to not only meet existing standards of learning in other countries but to continue to improve to keep pace with what is occurring elsewhere.

g. Increasing demands on institutions

Considerable effort will be required on the part of institutions to implement and maintain an effective system for internal quality assurance, and the imposition of independent external evaluations may cause negative reactions if judgments made are critical. This means that the system must be managed in such a way that the processes are no more expensive or demanding than absolutely necessary, that they are sufficiently flexible to reflect the institutions' own objectives, and that they are recognized as providing real value to them. The relationship between the Commission and the institutions must be one of cooperation and support, with the shared objective of improving quality. At the same time there cannot be any compromises in quality, so a delicate balance must be achieved. Initial reaction from institutions involved in pilot studies and developmental reviews, and from participants in training programs suggests a high level of cooperation and support.

h. Achieving acceptance and credibility for a local system for quality assurance and accreditation

The institutions that have so far been most involved in quality assurance activities have relied primarily on external judgments by international accreditation agencies. This is obviously appropriate when the concern is that programs are at least equivalent in quality to those of good international institutions. However the credibility of a new national system must also

be established. As the system evolves it is intended to make use of combinations of local peer reviewers and experienced international evaluators. If too much reliance at an early stage is placed on local reviewers there may be reluctance to accept judgments by staff from other local institutions and doubts about whether valid international standards are being applied. On the other hand too much reliance on international experts may lead institutions to dismiss critical evaluations by external reviewers if there are any doubts about whether local circumstances or the procedures of institutions are fully understood.

To respond to this issue considerable effort will be made to ensure that processes are transparent, that external reviewers are carefully selected and trained for their role, that those going to an institution are seen to be totally independent of that institution, and that an appropriate balance of Saudi and international participation is provided. A process for appeal will be provided if institutions believe that judgments are wrong. The mix of local and international participants on evaluation teams may differ for different types of institutions, but it is anticipated that over time the proportion of Saudis involved in evaluation teams will increase as experience is gained and local credibility is established. However since international comparability of standards is an important objective, at least some external participation will always be involved from countries against which Saudi Arabia wishes to benchmark itself.

i. Professional accreditation of programs

Qualifications frameworks developed as part of quality assurance systems are usually expressed in generic terms that apply to all fields of study. This is also the approach that has been adopted here. In most countries there are also separate requirements for programs in professional and technical fields that relate to the requirements for the practice of that profession or occupation. These are often separately developed by professional associations, largely independently of the higher education authorities or quality assurance agencies. In Saudi Arabia these separate professional registration requirements exist to a very limited extent. This is a challenge but it also makes possible an approach in which statements of professional registration requirements can be combined with the qualifications framework and the other quality standards for programs, so that the academic and professional accreditation requirements are integrated.

j. Quality assurance for the commission itself

As a quality assurance agency the Commission should model the quality assurance processes it believes are necessary in the educational institutions with which it deals. This involves establishing mission and objectives, adopting standards of good practice, and a system for monitoring and progressively improving its performance and its impact on the system in which it operates. The Commission has prepared a good practice statement to guide its own activities that is consistent with the Code of Practice adopted by the International Network of Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education and will adopt quality assurance processes comparable to those it is requiring of post-secondary institutions.

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The major objective of the quality system is to support the institutions to achieve and to be seen to have achieved standards that are at least equivalent to high international standards. This applies to all their areas of activity, but the most important element is the quality of learning outcomes achieved by students. However this is probably the most difficult to assess and continuing efforts must be made to support this result.

Mechanisms we have incorporated to help with this include:

- Providing detailed descriptions of generally recognized standards of good practice in documents and procedures that call for comprehensive self-evaluations and external verification of those evaluations.
- Establishing expectations for basing evaluations on evidence, including local and international benchmarks.
- Using experienced international quality reviewers able to provide advice and make reliable comparative judgments.
- Developing a qualifications framework that specifies generic standards for different qualification levels and domains of learning outcomes and describing processes for verifying consistency with the framework.
- Requiring as important elements within the standards processes for verifying standards of student achievement.
- Developing, in consultation with local professional bodies, learning outcome requirements and processes for program delivery that are consistent with international expectations in those fields and with the general quality assurance requirements for the Kingdom.

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