

Chapter 2

Navigating Academic Program Accreditation: Key Insights and Strategies for Achieving Excellence in Saudi Universities

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ABSTRACT

Accreditation is critical to improving the status of an academic program, increasing student enrollment, improving student skills and learning environments, reducing attrition rates, and providing more funding opportunities. Each accreditation body has its standards for the accreditation of academic programs. As such, the NCAAA plays a central role in managing the accreditation of academic programs offered in Saudi universities. In this book chapter, the authors adopted a mixed methods design where a focused literature review was conducted and uncovered program accreditation standards adopted by the NCAAA. Second, the authors used qualitative research with an autoethnography approach and described the procedures for program accreditation, including meeting eligibility criteria, completing self-assessment scales, preparing self-study reports (SSR), managing accreditation visits, and addressing review panel recommendations. This chapter discussed the key strategies that academic programs should adopt to achieve academic accreditation in Saudi Arabia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Accreditation is the process when higher education institutions (HEIs) and/or programs undergo periodic assessments based on specific criteria and standards using a quality management approach. This evaluation is carried out by officially designated external regulatory bodies at the government level (Akdemir et al, 2021; Van zanten 2008). In Saudi Arabia, the National Center for Academic Accreditation

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and Evaluation (NCAAA) plays a pivotal role in this process by setting standards that are recognized as best practices at the global level while being tailored to the local context (Mohieldein AH, 2023). NCAAA accreditation serves as a critical mechanism for assessing quality within Saudi HEIs and it guarantees that academic programs adhere to established criteria, which is vital for upholding educational standards and promoting trust among its stakeholders. It was established in 2004 as the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment as an independent body, administratively and financially, to oversee the quality assurance and academic accreditation of post-secondary education in Saudi Arabia. After the merger of the Ministry of Higher Education with the Ministry of Public Education to become a unified Ministry of Education (MOE), the Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC) was established in 2016. As a result, the NCAAA moved from the Ministry of Education umbrella to operate under ETEC as one of the centers. The ETEC oversees the evaluation, measurement, and accreditation of education and training qualifications in the public and private sectors. ETEC's objective is to improve the quality and efficiency of qualifications, aligning them with the needs of the labor market and the goals of the 2030 Vision and the Human Capacity Development Program (NCAAA, 2024a). As part of its efforts, ETEC has created a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for Saudi Arabia, establishing core learning outcomes standards for each qualification level, and the NCAAA has adopted this framework.

1.1. Overview of NCAAA Accreditation

The NCAAA is responsible for accrediting HEIs and academic programs in Saudi Arabia, each with specific standards and criteria. In addition to granting accreditation, the NCAAA also monitors the quality of accredited institutions and programs. Apart from nationally established institutions, the NCAAA also oversees the accreditation of international institutions and programs seeking accreditation in Saudi Arabia or abroad. Further, the NCAAA is involved in organizing and monitoring programs applying for academic accreditation to international bodies by ensuring that these international accreditation bodies have high academic and scientific status (NCAAA, 2024b). The NCAAA offers four primary services related to institutional accreditation: academic program accreditation, international accreditation oversight, and ranking of HEIs based on the Saudi framework for ranking education and training institutions. Additionally, NCAAA administers surveys to evaluate and enhance the quality of education and training, contributing to ongoing improvements in the learning experience, faculty competence, and educational goals achievement (NCAAA, 2024c).

NCAAA grants accreditation at two levels, viz. Institutional and Academic Programs, with separate standards and criteria, are established for each. It is obligatory that universities need to be accredited before seeking accreditation for their academic programs. Concerning postgraduate program accreditation, there are six standards and fifty-six criteria against which each academic program is evaluated, whereas, at the undergraduate level, it comprises five standards and forty-eight criteria. The five quality standards for undergraduate programs include (i) Program Management and Quality Assurance, (ii) Teaching and Learning, (iii) Students, (iv) Faculty, and (v) Learning Resources, Facilities, and Equipment. In addition to these accreditation standards, Research and Projects are included in postgraduate program accreditation. Academic programs' adherence to these standards is evaluated during the accreditation process. Every standard is examined in the context of the specific program being evaluated during program evaluation; however, some standards—like teaching and learning, program management, and quality assurance—are given more weightage than others.

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