

Accreditation in the Gulf: The Case of Qatar

By Amy Kirle Lezberg

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In 1999, impelled by a worldwide initiative of UNESCO, the six states of the Gulf Cooperating Council (GCC)—Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—began formal consideration concerning establishing a regional accrediting agency. Although the recommendations were positive, it was clear that several years would pass before the agency (if it became a reality) would begin to function, and therefore several of the individual countries decided to start the process internally. Qatar, which had no separate ministry of higher education and only one national university, was well positioned to adopt the U.S. model, establishing a system that would depend on peer review by institutional faculty and administrators, rather than the government-driven model frequently found in Western Europe, and could directly involve representatives of many constituencies outside the national government.

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As part of an effort to establish standards and implement self-evaluation and institutional improvement, the president of the University of Qatar, Dr. Abdulla Al-Khulaifi, empowered the academic vice president to set up and chair a committee with representatives from each of the six colleges comprising the institution. Assisted by a former staff member of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the committee undertook what was the nation's first participative process that would establish regular, written procedures to assess the current status of the institution and suggest improvements. After a review of the standards at the Quality Assurance Agency of the United Kingdom and at several U.S. regional accreditors, it was determined that the standards for

Qatar should build upon those used by the NEASC and that the university as a whole (rather than just its individual programs) should be evaluated. In addition, the committee decided to have its findings validated through a visit by the Quality Assurance Agency of the United Kingdom, which would indicate how the university was conforming to its own standards as well as how conforming to those standards would position it in terms of international standards of excellence in higher education.

Throughout the two-year process of establishing standards and assessing compliance, the University Evaluation Committee, as it was called, determined that its most pressing issues were, first, credibility—that is, there had been too many attempts at writing reports on the university's status that read more like public relations documents than serious self-studies. A number of complaints had been brought by faculty and others (often reported in the local press) that were extremely critical of the university. Many faculty believed that, absent meaningful follow-up, the effort required to establish standards would scarcely be worth their time and energy. Second, a cultural centralization and authoritarianism meant that most evaluations were carried out at the behest of the administration with little or no participation by the nonadministrative faculty who were actually carrying out the university's mission. Third, the committee cited the long tradition of teacher-centered education and called for a substitution of credentialing and rote memorization of material with student-centered learning that would allow knowledge to be applied in new and challenging situations. In addition, the State of Qatar was engaged in importing highly reputable institutions (e.g., Cornell Medical School, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Art and Design) with the standards enforced by outside agencies, without reference to internal personal or political considerations and with no provision for collaborating with the university to establish joint projects as models of excellence.

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The earliest task of the committee was to confront, rather than ignore, these obstacles to its success: first, as always in accreditation, the description of the university's performance in each area was accompanied by an analysis of whether the university met the standard as well as a realistic projection of what the university

needed to do in order to remedy its deficiencies. More importantly, and in order to lend the study credibility by presenting a balanced picture, the discussion of each standard had to be followed by a list of the university's five greatest strengths and five greatest weaknesses relating to that standard. The committee's insistence that for each of the areas under consideration—mission, faculty, programs, library, governance, planning and evaluation, research, physical and financial facilities, and student services, etc.—there be a balanced view of each facet of the institution was very different from previous reports. The existence of these lists, which were widely distributed, made it equally difficult for administrators and faculty to discount the study's findings as obviously biased toward one side or the other.

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To ensure that this not be perceived as a document prepared by and for the central administration, the committee arranged various kinds of feedback: newsletters on its progress, universitywide presentations, and workshops where methods for assessing were demonstrated and practiced, with the new emphasis on outcomes. Questionnaires on various (sometimes sensitive) topics were distributed to multiple constituencies on campus and then followed up by interviews with faculty and administrators chosen both hierarchically and at random. Not only were the resulting comments discussed and incorporated into the final report but frequent feedback assured those who had participated (as well as others who had withheld their participation because of previous experiences) of the dispositions of their comments.

The institution moved (or, rather, is moving) slowly but inevitably toward becoming learner- rather than teacher-centered. Impelled by the needs of the global marketplace as well as the concern of the government, the university has developed learning objectives for all its programs and is mapping places in the curriculum where the outcomes for these objectives can be found as well as the various ways of assessing their degree of

achievement. Several of the best and most innovative teachers at the institution have begun to experiment with alternative ways of teaching and assessing their students; later this year a series of workshops will be held at which these instructors will describe their experiences and model the ways in which their approach can be generalized.

The university community realizes that the road to complete implementation is long and that, in fact, the cycle of assessment, analysis, and revision is a never-ending search for excellence. Nevertheless, as the GCC moves toward establishing a regional accrediting agency, the University of Qatar is well positioned to assume a leadership role in overcoming entrenched obstacles (some of them cultural) to develop into a university whose graduates will be able to move effortlessly into the world of work as it evolves into new and as yet unknown fields. The three-year activity in establishing and beginning to implement American-style accreditation has, therefore, more than validated the psychological and physical energy expended. ■

International Linkages in Malaysian Private Higher Education

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In many parts of the world, the need for increased access to higher education has led governments and educators to look for alternative sources of financing as well as cheaper and innovative modes of delivery. Private-sector higher education and transnational education constitute recent developments in many higher education systems. In Malaysia, private higher education has expanded tremendously since the 1980s. Malaysia offers a case in which the response for cheap, innovative access has largely involved foreign linkage programs.