

TOWARDS ACCREDITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF JAZAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE (JCC), KSA

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Abstract— *Academic quality improvement in higher education has recently been considered in many universities over the world. The quality of education in the newly established universities has been regulated through the process of accreditation, which is a state policy tool with multiple and sometimes competing purposes. The purpose of the present paper was to provide an overview of accreditation activities in Jazan Community College (JCC) in order to reveal achievements, deficiencies and trends. The paper investigated the management system prior to adopting the accreditation system and reviewed the implementation process.*

Keywords— *Accreditation, Higher Education, Jazan Community College (JCC), Saudi Arabia.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Experience has proven that universities can provide best services to the community if they have concerns of continuous improvement in the quality of their services [1]. Quality has emerged as a theme adopted as they compete with each other. Competitive pressures have forced colleges to look for alternative strategies. In this context, many college administrators see implementation of quality practices, such as accreditation, as a way to reassure that institutions perform well and that the customers of higher education are being well served [2]. Consequently, many institutions of higher learning have committed themselves to implementation of quality practices.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is progressing from a major oil producer economy to manufacturing economy to a technological and knowledge economy. It is a real fact that an adequate supply of higher education graduates is a necessary pre-condition for achieving and sustaining advanced levels of development in this globalized, competitive, fast-changing world that the Kingdom has to keep up the pace with.

Until the recent years KSA is heavily investing to a well-established higher education system that provided relatively democratized access and enrolling proportionately more students than before. Consequently, we are witnessing an exceptional higher education growth and enrollment rates. However relative to prevailing economic growth where ratios of higher education graduates within a population is supposed to correlate with improved economic development. This is not the case in the Kingdom where many graduates seem unprepared to handle the complex workforce demands of the modern workplace.

Employers and the business community in general have brought up the concern that an inadequate supply of well-trained and prepared graduates is limiting the performance of the business organization. Evidently the quality of education is a matter of great concern. The challenges in assuring workplace performance and quality have forced into the evolution and development of the accreditation of JCC. It is in this perspective that various efforts at establishing accreditation for quality have progressed.

Over the last 20 years, many countries have created quality assurance bodies to assist, check, or regulate their higher education institutions. These bodies exercise their quality assurance responsibility through various modes and methods that essentially fall under one of the three basic approaches – accreditation, assessment, and quality audit. Of these modes and their combinations, accreditation is the most widely used term in many countries around the world and many quality assurance bodies have some form of accreditation practices.

A recent phenomenon in accreditation is that institutions are looking beyond their national borders, and they voluntarily undergo multiple accreditation processes from quality assurance bodies in different countries. What can a foreign accrediting body offer that is not provided by an institution's local agency? The answer lies in addressing the emerging challenges and changes in the higher education sector. The higher education sector in many countries is changing dramatically characterized by increasing international operations of higher education institutions, demand for value for money from the various stakeholders, increasing academic and professional mobility across national borders, demand for recognition of qualifications, and growth of regional and global trade initiatives. These are the new rationales that drive international engagement and put pressure on higher education institutions to take an international approach to accreditation.

JCC did not act to implement an international accreditation process until 2011, when the college management acting with American process of accreditation, brought together knowledgeable team to pursue the subject. It deemed necessary to enhance the level of education and

standard of JCC towards high degree of quality of education and learning outcome. Consequently, Council of Occupational Education (COE), a non-governmental international accreditation body based out of Atlanta, USA was engaged for the initiative. JCC geared up with the initiative in the name of quality improvement and establish another set of standards to which it could aspire in its quest for quality. Accreditation would recognize JCC's efforts by improving overall institutional quality. In doing so it translated into heavy financial strain on the budget. It meant investing in equipment, infrastructural facelift and more research, to meet the higher standards.

Therefore, the purpose of the present paper was to provide an overview of accreditation activities in Jazan Community College (JCC) in order to reveal achievements, deficiencies and trends. In regard to this purpose, the researcher sought to find answers to the following research questions:

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. DEFINING AND DESCRIBING ACCREDITATION

Accreditation refers to examining and affirming the quality of a higher education institution. While there is significant variation in the use of the term among countries, many would agree with the description of accreditation offered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): “(Accreditation is) . . . the outcome of a process by which a governmental, parastatal or private body (accreditation agency) evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole, or a specific higher education programme/course, in order to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined criteria or standards and award a quality label” [3].

Whether called audit, evaluation, quality assurance, or accreditation, most accreditation processes share the following approach:

A guided self-study is conducted by the institution; An external review and site visit is conducted by a peer committee; Based on the self-review data and information gathered on site, an accreditation decision is made by the organization, or a recommendation is given to a governmental ministry for final approval;

Decisions and reports are published and disseminated; and The process is repeated at specified intervals, usually every 4-8 years [4,5].

Accreditation has important benefits for institutions and programs [6]. The mechanism initiated by the accreditation procedure confers external recognition of quality for these tertiary education representatives, a quality that is highly desirable for recognition of credits, degrees, funding, and for

acquiring legitimacy in the higher education system towards employers, stakeholders, students and the general public. In exchange for the willingness of the institution to comply with high standards of quality assurance, the government grants more autonomy at the institutional level. As institutions increasingly gain autonomy, external accreditation is often seen as an affirmation of the self-regulating capacity of the institution. Under these circumstances, the external accreditation becomes more important as student and teaching staff mobility is on the rise, and the credits obtained have to be recognized among different universities [5].

The perfect accreditation mechanism in higher education must serve the needs of a learning society confronted with the present internationalization and globalization issues. Internationalization in higher education addresses the need for student and teaching staff mobility, the transnational transfer of programs, as well as the internationalization of curricula. Therefore, an existing accreditation procedure formulated under national policies has to take into account the need for internationalization, serving the global society through a common denominator mechanism.

2. MODELS OF ACCREDITATION

Accreditation organizations can accredit educational institutions as a whole, or accredit specific programs, i.e, law, business, nursing, etc. Some countries use both models, such as in the United States (US), where 19 institutional accrediting organizations accredited approximately 6300 institutions as a whole, and more than 60 programmatic accrediting organizations accredit approximately 17 500 programs. Accreditation systems can vary in scope and nature of the authority charged with the quality review. In many countries around the world, the government is directly responsible for designing and implementing a process of educational institution quality assurance. For example, the accrediting body in KSA is governmental entity. The National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment (NCAAA) accredits Saudis educational institutions.

The NCAAA has been established in the KSA with the objective of establishing standards and criteria for academic accreditation and assessment. It also accredits post-secondary institutions and the programs. The Commission is dedicated to a policy of encouraging, supporting and evaluating the quality assurance processes of post-secondary institutions. The idea is to ensure that quality of learning and management of institutions are equivalent to the highest international standards. These high standards and levels of achievement

must equate with other recognized institutions nationally and internationally.

The NCAAA regulations stipulate its job to establish standards for accreditation of all post-secondary institutions and all post-secondary programs other than military education. It has a combined accrediting responsibility related to both institutions and individual programs they offer. The Commission is an independent authority reporting directly to the Higher Council of Education.

Accreditation systems can also focus on either the process of the education, or on outcomes, or a combination. A process-focused approach measures an educational program's potential to effectively train students by determining compliance with accreditation standards. For example, an accreditation system utilizing a process model considers if the educational program has established a mission and objectives, employees suitably qualified instructors, uses an approved curriculum, and complies with resource requirements. In contrast, rather than focusing on a program's potential to educate professionals, an accreditation approach based on outcomes focuses on the students' or graduates' actual accomplishments. An outcomes-based accreditation system strives to measure the students' level of achievement of the learning objectives established by the program.

3. THE PRESENT CASE STUDY

4. JCC: INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION

Jazan Community college (JCC) was established to address the needs of the community in offering educational and training programs. This will offer the community members the required education, skills and experience, and improve their educational and practical qualification. The college was founded by the Ministry of Higher Education in 1999 pursuant to Cabinet Decree No. (33). The establishment of community colleges in Jazan marked a qualitative leap in the path of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that provided an opportunity to introduce new patterns of higher education in charge of training mid-level professionals for the economic, social, cultural and other sectors. Currently, JCC offers 7 Associate Degree programs.

Institutional accreditation effectively provides a warrant to operate under the prescribed level of quality. It is usually based on an evaluation of whether the institution meets specified minimum (input) standards such as staff qualifications, skill and training, research activities, student intake and learning resources and outcomes. It might also be based on an estimation of the potential for the institution to

produce graduates that meet explicit or implicit academic standard or professional competence. Institutional accreditation by JCC is undertaken by COE to make formal judgments on recognition [7].

JCC accreditation tends to focus on the overall infrastructure, especially the physical space, along with the IT and library resources, staffing and overall student learning experience. In addition, JCC accreditation is focusing on outcomes and effectiveness that is has in place appropriate control and monitoring processes to ensure satisfactory quality and standards. Institutional accreditation is designed to ensure that institutions of dubious merit do not become established as bona fide higher education institutions. Accreditation also monitors the sector to ensure that accredited institutions continue to fulfill the expectations of a university or college.

2.2 ACCREDITATION PROCESS

Accreditation involves a set of procedures designed to collect facts to enable a verdict to be made about whether JCC should be granted accredited status by the Council. The responsibility is on the JCC to 'prove' its suitability; that it fulfills minimum criteria. The methods by which these facts are collected overlap with methods used in audits, assessments and external examining. The component methods include self assessments, document analysis, scrutiny of performance indicators, peer visits, inspections, specially- constituted panels, delegated responsibility to internal panels often via substitute designation to external examiners or advisors; stakeholder surveys, such as student satisfaction surveys, alumni and employer surveys, direct intervention, such as direct observation of classroom teaching or grading of student work. JCC formed an accreditation committee comprising of academics and administrators to examine ten areas of institutional operation – covering the objectives of the institution, strategic plans, programs and outcomes, the faculty, instruction, library facilities, laboratory, physical resources, student services and administration – across the two program areas of Administrative Science and Computer and Information.

It is principally taken to in account rather than the input-process-output focus, accreditation supposed to be based on recognition that the JCC has in place appropriate control and monitoring processes to ensure satisfactory quality and standards. However, identifying appropriate mechanisms is normally viewed as an auditing function distinct from, but possibly contributing to, a formal process of accreditation of an institution. However, the term (quality) audit is not restricted to an exploration of organizational process.

4.1. THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE

Accreditation is primarily about control of the quarter; this is much more unambiguous in accreditation than in other external quality processes such as audit, assessment or external examining. Even though accreditation involves compliance and indirect accountability, its main purpose is to maintain control of the quarter and the programmes offered. Improvement is a spin-off from accreditation processes, which some agencies emphasize more than others. Institutional accreditation is designed to ensure that institutions of dubious merit do not become established as bona fide higher education institutions. Accreditation also monitors the quarter to ensure that accredited institutions continue to fulfill the expectations of a university or college. These accreditors evaluate whether the study programmes appropriately train graduates to enter a profession.

4.2. ACCREDITATION, AUDIT, ASSESSMENT AND EXTERNAL EXAMINING

Although accreditation is distinct from audit, assessment and external examining there is a degree of overlap between these different external processes [7,8]. One big difference, though, is that audit, assessment and external examining operate on the principle that the institution or programme is functioning appropriately and the external process has to demonstrate compliance. For example, audits often involve a methodology designed to test the truth of institutional or programme claims. Accreditation, though, shifts this round and institutions or programmes have to prove that they are worthy.

2.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF ACCREDITATION

Accreditation thus has three distinctive features. First, accreditation as a process applied to applicant organizations. Second, accreditation is the tag that institutions or programmes may gain as a result of the accreditation procedures. Third, reinforcing the former two, accreditation is an ‘abstract notion of a formal authorizing power’ [9], enacted via official decisions about recognition (the accreditation process). It is this reinforcing concept that gives accreditation its legitimacy. Ironically, this concept, frequently taken-for-granted, is not a traditionally intrinsic aspect of accreditation. As Jones [10] has pointed out, ‘The original audience for accreditation was the academy itself. The process did not arise in response to concerns about quality expressed by external audiences...’ The third characteristic leads to an investigation of the power relationships embodied in the accreditation process. An examination of the perceptions of those who have engaged with accreditation of various types reveals surface views about the benefits and draw-backs. A second-order

examination of the comments will, though, also uncover the political and ideological dimensions.

2.4 PERCEPTION ABOUT ACCREDITATION

It is widely believed that accreditation is either necessary for employment, or enhanced the job prospects of, their graduates. In other words this necessity is closely linked to a concern that the marketability of programmes in some areas is closely tied to accredited status and that failure to achieve accreditation would be problematic. Accreditation is not just necessary or a marketing device to get more students but something that attracted better students. The allusion to real-world relevance is also recognized.

The self-study provides an opportunity for the institution to conduct a formative evaluation and identify both strengths and areas for improvement. The accrediting team can offer a more summative evaluation and an objective external perspective that can potentially strengthen the institution.

4.3. BURDEN OF ACCREDITATION

It required immense amount of work involved in accreditation compounded by rigidity of requirements. The Accreditation Committee – which included all administrators, academics over 20 people altogether – who prepared documentation and saw through the COE Accreditation Panel visit last scheduled for visit in February 2013. We are anticipating full accreditation of JCC. However, this ongoing exercise has cost us over one year of hard work (about 80% of time for core members) and hundreds of hours of work. The process is too bureaucratic and requires too much documentation. It took too much of the valuable time of the academics and takes them away from research and teaching. Despite this, it cannot be thought of any alternative procedure that could ever be as effective as a one-day intensive look at the syllabus, facilities (laboratories, library, etc.) and staffing. This is streamlined, mutually beneficial to all concerned, encourages innovation, and yet COE requirements.

However, not all the extra burden was externally imposed. Sometimes the burden is increased by the quality control processes within the college due to increasing accreditation demands.

There are some disadvantages to accreditation. It is expensive and sometimes accrediting teams will make recommendations that cause money to be shifted from unaccredited programs to accredited ones so that the accredited ones can retain their accreditation. This is an unfortunate consequence.

“Accreditation is most valued by those who are closest to not having it (the marginal) and by those who know how to use it creatively to conduct innovative self-evaluations or to strong-arm funders with “what the accreditors say we absolutely need to retain accreditation.

4.3.1. HIGH-QUALITY ACTIVITY

Accreditation is a game for achieving a high-quality, uniform, and standardized status. It is something that goes beyond engaging the majority neither of staff nor, to any significant extent, exercises the students. Accreditation is a struggle for power and it is not a benign process [7]. Nor does it engage all those involved. It is also not a pure process of identifying those who have met (and continue to meet) minimum criteria to join the club. The evidence from the UK and North America shows clearly that accreditation is just one of a raft of ongoing processes that demand accountability and compliance as managerialism continues to bite into academic autonomy and undermine the skills and experience of educators. Accreditation is yet another layer alongside assessment, audit and other forms of standards and output monitoring.

4.1 PREPARE THE SELF-STUDY REPORT

The report describes how the institution complies with the Conditions and ten Standards of COE accreditation. A Self-Study Workshop—included in the Candidate Academy— informs representatives of the school about specifications for the Self-Study Report. It took JCC over close to two years to prepare this report, the final draft of which is due 45 days prior to the accreditation team visit.

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Through the self-study process, we had an opportunity to systematically address several important questions:

- Are we doing what we say we are doing?
- What are our strengths and our challenges?
- How can we position ourselves for the future?

4.2 APPLICANT STATUS

JCC is committed to institutional self-improvement through the guidance of COE standards requested to become an Applicant Institution.

Requirements:

1- Application letter from the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) which is the Dean, addressed to the COE Board of Directors.

- 2- Submission of the documents supporting the institution's case for acceptance included the institution's objectives, history, organizational structure, principal administrators, number of faculty members, number of students, and any other materials/brochures/manuals/publications.
- 3- Payment of an application fee.

Terms and Conditions:

1. Application status is granted for a maximum period of three (2) a year during which JCC has to conduct self study and submit report to the Council for team visit.
2. Written Annual Progress Report, briefly outlining the progress of the institution in specific areas, is due on or before the first week of May.

COE's Actions and Responsibilities:

- 1- Formal acceptance as an Applicant Institution.
- 2- Review of the Annual Progress Report by the Commission concerned.

4.3 CANDIDATE STATUS

The candidate status is granted to JCC after completing its preliminary surveys and is preparing for initial accreditation. Candidacy is not accreditation and does not assure eventual accreditation. It is an indication that an institution is progressing toward accreditation.

Requirements:

- Completion of a preliminary survey.
- Implementation of the recommendations of the preliminary survey team.
- Completion of an Institutional Self-Survey using COE's Standards of accreditation.
- Submission of the accomplished Self-Survey at least one (1) month prior to the Formal Survey Visit.

Terms and Conditions:

- 1- Candidate status is granted by the Board of Directors until such time that the institution meets the requirements of a Member Institution.
- 2- The institution should implement the recommendations of the preliminary survey teams.

1.3 MEMBER STATUS

If JCC has fulfilled the requirements of accreditation may be granted Member status.

Requirements:

1- The Institution should receive a favorable rating during a Formal Survey Visit conducted by a COE Accrediting Team.

2- JCC should strive to implement the recommendations of the Formal Survey Team.

3- Payment of the membership fee.

4- Terms and Conditions

Favorable evaluation by a COE Formal Team leads to the granting of accreditation for a period of three (3) years. With this, the institution becomes a full member of the Council. At the end of the initial three-year accreditation period, the school undergoes another self-evaluation. It then applies for re-accreditation. If the second formal visit is favorable, then accreditation is awarded for a period of five years.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING JCC ACCREDITATION

Accreditation process brings along additional challenges in its course in a variety of forms. Institutionalizing improved quality education through accreditation requires more than a technical approach. Failure to change the behaviour and attitudes of people and organizations is the commonest cause of ineffective quality initiatives that is experienced at all times. Unwillingness to participate in the process and circumvent from extra work is encountered during the course of production of Self Study Report. Resistance to accept changes and negative approach to nullify improvement is also observed. Sustained improvements often require a change in attitude and acquisition of a sense of ownership with regard to the quality of services provided by JCC. Many supporting initiatives are required to integrate accreditation into the structure and function of an organization. Mixes of challenges were faced in JCC accreditation. The challenges in setting and measuring against standards are mostly technical; the challenges in making appropriate change are social and managerial. Training of staff, students, administration on concepts of accreditation has never been an easy process.

COSTS AND BENEFITS RELATED TO ACCREDITATION

In this case, the idea of cost suggests JCC continues to incur expenses when pursuing accreditation regardless of whether the expense relates to quantifiable issues such as time, money, budgets reviews, infrastructure facelift, equipments, program goals and outcomes. Identifying the costs

encountered as part of the accreditation process and capturing these costs has traditionally been difficult. Additionally, there are direct and indirect costs associated with the accreditation process. For example, the travel expenses for faculty to attend accreditation related meetings are usually lumped into the travel account. Direct costs resulted in infrastructure facelift needs with a heavy spending of USD 260,000 (Saudi Riyals (SAR) 1 million) to meet the standards for accreditation. It includes upgrading classrooms, building smart classrooms, air conditioning, landscaping, safety equipments, etc. Additionally, costs for the accreditation visit were not included as the study purported only to examine issues involving "self-study." Program officials spent an average of over 1500 plus hours in the "self-study" hours in the "self-study" process while staff members spent an average of 100 hours. The major costs (85%) were time spent by faculty and staff with a scant 6% of costs devoted to direct costs other than faculty and staff time. The self-study process appears to be the most costly. Costs associated with "preparing" for the actual site visit would be close to approximately \$50,000 including actual week-long visit cost.

5. EXPECTATIONS AND ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES OF JCC ACCREDITATION

Realistically JCC has heavily invested financially and mobilized its resources to its full capacity in order to achieve "*accredited institution status*". There are monetary costs for annual membership fees and for the periodic accreditation reviews. There are opportunity costs, as college resources are diverted from other tasks in preparation for accreditation reviews. And there can be costs when institutions are driven to implement COE's recommendations.

However during the course of this high quality and time consuming activity all the year round it is worthwhile to ponder about what to expect from this whole process and what would it mean to JCC.

Most importantly it is hoped that it will result in positive change for the education of students and how will be realized for overall learning experience in the future. Can JCC accreditation live up to its promise since accreditation is purely a voluntary process chosen to set good standards and identify quality goals? Although accreditation does not guarantee educational quality nor does it automatically guarantee a student's academic success.

It is a good opportunity to identify JCC's strengths and weaknesses and a chance to rectify and improve upon them.

During the course of accreditation process JCC endeavors to meet the standards of quality set by the COE, in terms of faculty, curriculum, strategic plans, administration, libraries, financial well-being, and student services. While a student who attends JCC after accreditation can be assured that he or she will receive a quality. Aside from the promise of overall quality educational opportunities, JCC accreditation status could provide students with many other benefits including educational programs with opportunities for self-definition and self-reflection, and with feedback on program content and direction, an opportunity for continuous improvement of institutions and educational programs.

"Accreditation protects the interests of students, the academic institutions themselves, and potential employers, by ensuring that the educational programs offered have attained a level that meets or exceeds standards that were developed by experts in the field".

Accreditation of JCC would raise student achievement and enhance the ability to serve students by assuring a focus on quality performance. JCC's ongoing effort would provide excellent equipment, software, and learning resources for students.

Finally, accredited status for JCC would provide recognition of the ability to serve community stakeholders and creates the impetus for relevancy and currency of faculty, programs, and courses to best serve employers.

CONCLUSION

Conceivably the most significant matter is using accreditation to improve institutional quality. It is an effort to perform self-analysis to determine and remedy shortcomings guided Council's parameters. The results are an array of quality improvement. Conversely, the exercise of accreditation at JCC is largely based on evaluation of inputs to quality (facilities, faculty credentials, etc.). The outputs (employability of graduates, service to society, degree to which the JCC's mandate and vision are being met, etc.) are harder to measure given the fact they are ultimately more important. JCC has initiated several processes directed to measure these outputs. In this sense the whole of the accreditation system in JCC can be seen to still be lodged in the more traditional accreditation archetype. Accreditation is a dual judgment (pass – fail) on the award of a status or on an approval. It is a process, primarily an outcome of the evaluation. It can be considered an extreme case of summative judgment after an evaluation process.

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