

**National Commission for Academic Accreditation  
and Assessment**

**Introduction to  
Accreditation and Quality Assurance**

The National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment has been established by the Higher Council of Education as an independent authority with responsibility for accreditation and quality assurance in post secondary education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Its mission is:

*To encourage, support and evaluate the quality of post secondary institutions and the programs they offer to ensure that:*

- *the quality of student learning outcomes,*
- *the management and support services provided within institutions,*
- *the contributions to research and the communities served by post secondary institutions,*

*are equal to high international standards.*

The responsibilities of the Commission include all post secondary education other than defence. They relate to both technical training and to higher education, and to the quality of institutional activities and the quality of educational programs.

This booklet provides an introduction to the system of accreditation and quality assurance that is being introduced in the Kingdom by the Commission.

## **Accreditation and Quality Assurance**

Quality assurance means the processes that are followed to ensure that high quality is achieved and improved, and that students, parents, employers, and others can be assured that this is the case.

Accreditation is one of the mechanisms that are used for this purpose. It gives public recognition that standards are being achieved and that people can have confidence in what is provided.

However meeting required standards is only part of the story. Competition is increasing, students and parents want the best programs available, and employers want the best prepared staff they can find. The real objective of quality assurance is continuing improvement. The aim is to meet and then if possible exceed international standards. The Commission wants to support educational institutions in achieving that objective.

The terms “quality improvement” and “quality enhancement” are sometimes used to refer to the quality assurance processes that relate particularly to improvements in quality.

### **What Do We Mean by *Quality*?**

Quality is something that everybody talks about, but is difficult to define.

In its planning for a system of accreditation and quality assurance the Commission sees it as involving three elements:

- Performance in relation to generally accepted standards of good practice. These standards need to be based on the latest and best thinking in post secondary education throughout the world about the most effective ways of developing students learning and managing an educational institution.
- Fitness for purpose. Institutions have different objectives and priorities, and offer different kinds of programs. Their performance has to be judged in relation to what they are trying to achieve.
- Fitness of purpose. An important consideration is how appropriate are the objectives and priorities of an institution in the circumstances in which it is operating and the communities it has been established to serve.

While these considerations are expressed in relation to institutions as a whole, the elements are equally relevant for individual courses and programs, for internal units offering support services within an institution, and for individual faculty and staff with particular administrative or academic responsibilities.

## What Does Accreditation Mean?

Accreditation is the formal certification by a recognized authority that an institution or program meets required standards.

The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment has been established to accredit all post-secondary institutions and programs, other than defense, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

### Forms of Accreditation

Accreditation can take different forms and be used for different purposes. Among the most common examples are:

**Institutional Accreditation**—The accreditation of an institution certifying that its resources, processes and students learning outcomes meet required standards for an institution of its type and the level of qualifications it offers. (An institution in this context means the total institution including all its colleges, departments and programs, not any single college or department.)

**Program Accreditation**—The accreditation of an individual program of study certifying that the resources and facilities provided, processes of teaching and support services, and the quality and extent of students learning meet required standards for the qualifications that are offered.

**Professional Accreditation**—The accreditation of a program designed to prepare students for a profession, certifying that it develops the knowledge and skills needed to practice in the profession concerned.

**International Accreditation**—The accreditation of an institution or program by an international accreditation body or quality agency, established in another country, certifying that its standards have been met..

In Saudi Arabia the Commission will carry out institutional and program accreditations. Professional accreditation may be introduced at a later stage.

Some institutions have found it useful to seek accreditation for their programs from international accreditation agencies to see whether they meet the standards established by those organizations. When this is done details of the procedures followed and the judgments made may be submitted to the Commission which will consider them along with other material it requires in making its own accreditation decisions.

## Why are Accreditation and Quality Assurance Important?

Achieving high standards has always been important, but there are a number of recent developments that make it even more necessary now.

Scientific and technological developments are occurring at an increasing rate with major impacts on scientific, commercial and cultural activity. Many low skill jobs are disappearing, and those that remain require new skills and higher and continually increasing levels of ability. If graduates are to have the necessary skills for employment in the changing work environment standards must rise.

The professional and technological workforce is becoming internationally mobile and if young graduates from Saudi institutions are to participate fully in this global economy their qualifications must be recognized and acceptable on a world wide basis. The international reputation of Saudi graduates will depend on standards at all institutions, not just a small number of major universities.

Post secondary education is no longer something for the elite, as higher proportions of young people complete secondary education and continue their studies. This can involve personal sacrifice for students and families facing extra costs and postponement of employment. They have a right to know that the quality of their education is high.

If standards are to be maintained as larger proportions of the age group participate, the effectiveness of teaching and learning must be improved. As this is done it is important that there be independent verification of the achievement of standards so the community can have confidence in what is done.

There is increasing diversity in the kinds of institutions offering post secondary education. This is expected to increase as the system expands, more private institutions are established, and new forms of delivery are developed. It is essential that standards are maintained as this diversity increases, that there is independent verification of quality, and that confidence is maintained.

Most other countries that do not already have them are introducing new quality assurance and accreditation systems. This is being done for all the reasons noted above and because governments facing increasing costs want to be sure their money is well spent. As more and more countries introduce quality assurance systems there will be doubts about the quality of education in places that don't.

## **How do Quality Assurance Systems Work?**

Everyone should be involved in self assessment and planning for improvement, quality can only be improved by those doing the job. However help and support is needed, and arrangements have to be made for reporting, accountability, and verification that quality is achieved.

Within institutions quality centers are established, reporting to senior management, and assisted by a quality committee drawn from all sections of the institution.

Quality centers provide leadership and advice, and work with colleges, departments and other administrative units to develop quality systems appropriate for their institution. They design common formats for planning and reporting, and coordinate institution wide quality assessments.

Within each program and course of study plans should be made by those responsible for the program specifying what is to be learned, how it will be taught and how learning will be assessed. Decisions need to be made about indicators that can be used as evidence that desired quality has been achieved. At the end of each year reports should be prepared on what happened, and plans made for improvements.

Similar processes should be followed for non-teaching functions with plans made, objectives set and indicators of quality identified by those responsible for the activity concerned. Periodic evaluations should take place, reports prepared on what has been achieved and plans made for further improvements.

Approximately once every five years there should be a comprehensive institutional self-study in which the institution reviews the quality of all aspects of its operations, including its programs, services and administrative arrangements. Similar self-studies should be made of each major program. Reports on these institutional and program self-studies, and the plans made following what is discovered are the primary focus of external reviews conducted by the Commission for program accreditation and institutional assessment.

Self-studies of programs and whole of institution activities can be conducted separately. However there is a strong relationship between the two and action should be taken to coordinate the timing and organization of these self-studies and the external reviews that follow them.

## Recent Trends in Quality Assurance Systems

Accreditation and quality assurance in post secondary education is not new, but there have been a number of important recent developments that will be reflected in the processes adopted by the Commission. Among the most important trends are:

**Emphasis on Quality Improvement Rather than Just Meeting Minimum Required Accreditation Standards.** While necessary standards must be met this is seen as only the beginning. There is widespread recognition that standards must be continually improved. Objectives are set that involve demanding but achievable targets for improvement with priorities established that reflect the mission of the institution and its strategic priorities. It is now common for institutions to define special student attributes beyond minimum requirements that they want their students to develop, and to prepare quality improvement plans designed specifically for quality improvement in areas of strategic priority.

**Requiring Evidence of Quality.** General impressions or assumptions that quality is provided in “prestigious” institutions are not good enough. Indicators of quality of performance that can be used to provide evidence must be identified in advance, and referred to specifically in forming quality judgments. Evidence may be indirect and require analysis and interpretation. It is now widely accepted that interpretations and conclusions should be independently verified by someone knowledgeable about the matter considered.

**Support for Diversity.** There has been recognition that the wider range of students involved and the needs of different communities require differences in approach. New techniques of instruction are emerging and creativity and innovation require flexibility in how programs are delivered and institutions are organized. However with diversity comes requirements for accountability, and rigorous mechanisms are needed to ensure quality is maintained.

**Focus on Learning Outcomes.** There has been a shift in emphasis away from inputs, essentially the level of resources provided, to outcomes, the quality and extent of students learning and what they can do as a result of their studies. Although resources and the processes of teaching and management are still important, it is the quality and extent of learning outcomes that is of greatest interest to students and employers and the most important consideration in quality assurance.

**Consistency in Standards for Academic Awards.** It is recognized that standards of learning for academic awards must be consistent in all institutions if students and the community are to have confidence in the system of education and the value of qualifications that are awarded. They must be equal to those of high quality international institutions. A mechanism now widely used to help achieve this consistency is publication of a qualifications framework and steps must be taken to compare the quality of students performance with achievements in other respected institutions.

**Emphasis on Thinking and Action Rather than Memorization.** Much greater emphasis is being placed on use of knowledge, ability to think and solve problems, and personal qualities of responsibility, capacity for self directed learning, and

generalizable skills rather than just memorization. This has important implications for teaching strategies, and for how the effectiveness of programs is evaluated.

**Integration of Quality Assurance into Normal Operations.** It has been recognized that treating quality assurance as a separate add-on activity is ineffective and creates problems because of perceptions of extra work requirements. Quality assurance must be integrated into normal planning and administration and managed routinely as part of normal activity.

**Total Institution Involvement.** Quality cannot be achieved by the central administration in an institution, or by a few people associated with a quality center. It requires commitment in all parts of an institution, with individuals departments and colleges and other organizational units setting objectives, deciding on indicators and benchmarks for performance, planning for improvement and monitoring results.

## What Will the Commission Do?

The responsibilities of the Commission are extensive and are set out in its Bylaw. However in this general description of its role in the system of accreditation and quality assurance key responsibilities that will initially have major importance are to:

- Establish standards, criteria and procedures for academic assessment and accreditation in different post-secondary educational institutions;
- Provide training for faculty and staff involved with the development of quality assurance systems in institutions, and support them as they introduce quality systems there;
- Assess proposals and grant provisional approval and accreditation of programs in new universities, colleges and institutes;
- Arrange for external reviews of programs and institutions after self studies have been undertaken, and grant approval and accreditation after considering reports on those reviews. The Commission will schedule these reviews over a transition period lasting several years;

## What Standards and Criteria be Used?

The Commission has developed two important documents setting out standards for higher education: An equivalent set of standards and criteria are being prepared for vocational education and training at post secondary levels.

A *National Qualifications Framework* setting out descriptions of standards of learning outcomes expected for academic awards. Standards of learning have been described at each higher education qualification level in four domains:

- Knowledge
  - Cognitive Skills
  - Interpersonal Skills and Responsibility
  - Communication, Information Technology and Numerical Skills
- Psychomotor skills are also provided for in fields of study where they are of major importance.

A handbook on *Quality Standards for Post-Secondary Institutions* describing eleven general standards in the administration and operations of post secondary institutions.

- Mission and Objectives
- Governance and Administration
- Management of Quality Assurance and Improvement
- Learning and Teaching
- Student Administration and Support Services
- Learning Resources
- Facilities and Equipment
- Financial Planning and Management
- Faculty and Staff Employment processes
- Research
- Institutional Relationships with the Community

A separate list of expectations for an institution classed as a university is provided.

Each of these standards is described and subdivided into major components, and lists of actions that are generally considered good practice are provided. To assist in self evaluation by those responsible for different activities within institutions rating scales have been included for their use.

These documents are being prepared specifically for use in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and relate to the circumstances and requirements of this country. However the standards and criteria are based on good examples drawn from all over the world and adapted to local requirements.

## **Stages in the Accreditation Process**

The Commission will conduct external reviews of institutions and programs and grant provisional or full accreditation at several stages.

### **New Institutions**

When plans for new institutions are being considered by the Ministry of Higher Education the Commission will examine those plans, assessing them against standards and requirements for institutional quality assurance. If they meet those requirements the institution will be given provisional accreditation.

Plans for the initial programs to be offered in new institutions will be considered for provisional accreditation by the Commission. If they meet requirements the programs will be given provisional accreditation and the Ministry will recommend that a license be issued for the institution to begin operating..

After a license has been given for the new institution to operate and the first students have completed their programs the institution will be asked to complete a self-study of itself and of its programs, and the Commission will conduct external reviews. If the requirements are met they will be granted full approval and accreditation. If the institution and its programs do not meet the requirements but appear likely to do so the provisional approval and accreditation may be extended for a short period. However if there are serious deficiencies the Ministry responsible for the institution may take action to remedy the problems or cancel its license.

### **Existing Institutions**

Existing institutions that have not already done so will be asked to introduce systems for quality assurance.

Quality centers and institutional quality committees are expected to evaluate the existing level of quality in relation to quality standards, to develop strategic plans for improvement, and to provide leadership and support for academic and administrative units throughout the institution as the quality systems are introduced.

The systems for quality assurance will involve processes for strategic and operational planning that meet quality standards, and monitoring quality of performance using clearly defined evidence, and making adjustments over time as required. The systems for quality assurance should be used for all programs and courses, and for each major operational area within the institution.

After quality systems have been introduced institutions will be asked to complete self-studies of the institution as a whole, and of their programs. When self-studies have been completed the Commission will conduct external reviews. If criteria and standards are fully met the Commission will grant accreditation. If they do not yet meet requirements but appear likely to do so the Commission may grant provisional accreditation subject to additional requirements being met. There will then be a further review after which they may be fully accredited. As for new institutions if

there are serious deficiencies it will be the Ministry responsible for the institution that may take action to remedy the problems.

After institutions have been fully approved and programs fully accredited institutions will be asked to conduct self studies and have an independent external review towards the end of each seven year period.

## What Help Will the Commission Provide?

The Commission recognizes that quality in post secondary institutions can only be achieved by action taken in the institutions delivering programs. Its role must be to assist that action by providing training, giving encouragement, support and advice, and independently verifying the standards that have been achieved.

In keeping with this approach the emphasis in conducting external reviews will be on assisting institutions to evaluate and improve the quality of their activities. External reviews will be primarily based on the reports of self-studies, though other matters may also be considered, and the main activities will be to verify the conclusions of those self-studies and offer constructive suggestions for improvement. However if there are serious deficiencies the Commission will have an obligation to take account of these and deny accreditation.

To assist institutions with their quality assurance arrangements the Commission has developed three handbooks describing policies and procedures and setting out requirements.

- Handbook 1 *The System for Quality Assurance and Accreditation* provides a general introduction including principles underlying the system the stages of accreditation and approval, the standards to be applied and a description of concepts and terminology used.
- Handbook 2 *Internal Quality Assurance Processes* sets out processes to be followed within institutions in planning and reporting on programs, and in conducting self-studies. The document includes templates for use in carrying out these tasks.
- Handbook 3 *External Quality Assurance Arrangements* explains what needs to be done in preparation for external reviews, and what is done during those reviews by the external review teams.

The Commission will arrange workshops at which the main elements of the system of quality assurance can be explained, and provide training programs for those needing assistance in developing and implementing quality assurance arrangements in their own institutions.

The Commission will continue to arrange conferences and symposiums at which there can be discussions of issues and developments in quality assurance systems, and will establish additional mechanisms for provision of information and the exchange of ideas.

## **How Will External Reviews be Conducted?**

To carry out its reviews and form its opinions on accreditation the Commission will use panels of expert reviewers familiar with the kinds of programs being considered, and the type of institution involved.

Panel members will be carefully selected to ensure that they can give fair and honest opinions, that there are no conflicts of interest, and that they will be completely independent. They undergo special training for their role.

In the early years of the program use will be made of experienced reviewers from other countries, together with some experienced staff members from Saudi Arabian institutions in combinations appropriate for the institutions and programs involved. Over time there will be increasing reliance on individuals from Saudi Arabia as local knowledge and experience is gained. In the longer term it is expected that there will continue to be some involvement from other countries, and that some Saudi Arabian reviewers will be involved in reviews elsewhere, so that comparability with international standards can be assured.

For the provisional approval and accreditation of new institutions arrangements will be made on a case by case basis as the new proposals are considered, and early developments in those institutions occur. Full briefings on requirements will be given by the Commission, and scheduling of reviews of plans will be done in consultations between the Commission, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the developers of the new institution.

For existing institutions a schedule of reviews will be developed by the Commission in consultation the institutions, so that time is available for the introduction of quality assurance systems and completion of self-studies.

## **When Will the New System be Introduced?**

The system will be introduced progressively over a period of years as quality systems are introduced and experience is gained in quality assurance arrangements. This transition period is expected to last for approximately five years beginning in 2006, with external reviews for accreditation beginning towards the end of that period.

Emphasis will be given in the initial years to training and preparation, with help provided to institutions as they establish their quality assurance systems.

Briefings and training programs will be available each year and arrangements made for advice to institutions on the development of their quality assurance systems.

A schedule of external reviews will be developed following consultation with institutions about the implementation of their internal quality systems.