Quality Assurance and Accreditation at University of Kurdistan Hewler

ABSTRACT

The University of Kurdistan Hewler (UKH) attained accreditation from the Accreditation Service of International Schools, Colleges and Universities (ASIC) based in the United Kingdome (UK) on December 19, 2018. Achieving accreditation was the conclusion of a 2-year comprehensive internal audit, conducted as a self-assessment process by the office of quality assurance and accreditation in the UKH. The purpose of this review is to explore if the existing QA status at UKH met the requirement of ASIC criteria for the attainment of international accreditation. The process included a qualitative study and documentary analysis, interviews, and questionnaires. The accreditation process revealed that the quality areas of learning and teaching, course delivery, QA and enhancement, premises and health and safety, student welfare, management and staff resources, and marketing and recruitment, are significantly efficient.

Keywords: Accreditation, Internal Audit, Qualitative Study, Questionnaire

1. BACKGROUND

Thirteen years ago, authorities in the Kurdistan Region Government (KRG) discerned that there was a need to develop and achieve higher standards in the fields of science, technology, and management to investing in people and raising the human capacities of professional teams. There was no doubt that universities and institutes of higher education and scientific research would play a major role in this task. For example, the region's economy was booming and demand for professionals in the tourism, oil and other industrial sectors were increasing exponentially; meanwhile, our universities were busy teaching conventional topics which, failed to keep pace with the developments. In this regard, in December 2009, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) adopted a new vision and strategic plan that led to the design of a new road map for the reformation of the higher education system (Ala'aldeen, 2009). The mission was to achieve quality in higher education and scientific research. The report offered clarity in terms of the mission and the mechanisms of implementation.

More recently, MHESR's introduction of the National University Ranking project, coupled with society's demand for skilled and educated graduates, created a fair competition between the universities to fill the existing gaps. Measures were reviewed by the quality assurance (QA) bodies of each university, which focused on areas such as academic curriculum, upgrading program specification and validation, student learning outcome, quality improvement, and enhancement (to mention but a few examples).

1.1. University of Kurdistan Hewler (UKH)

UKH was founded in 2006 as a public university funded by KRG and was accorded full academic autonomy. The main objective of establishing UKH was to pioneer the advancement of learning, not only through teaching but also through research – emphasizing its potential application for the benefit of individuals and society as a whole (GRT, 2009). UKH vision is to produce graduates that meet clear academic standards or professional competence.

1.2. What is Accreditation?

Accreditation is a QA process whereby, as a result of inspection or assessment, an institution or its programs are recognized as meeting minimum acceptable standards (Adelman, 1992). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defines accreditation as the process by which a non-governmental or private body evaluates the quality of higher education institution as a whole or a specific educational program, to formally recognize it as having met certain criteria or standards.

Accreditation is a mean of motivating and accelerating the institutional growth and development of schools desiring to achieve excellence, relevance, and effectiveness. Eventually, the goal of accreditation is to ensure that the education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality (Khoo et al., 2003).

1.3. Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QA and A) at UKH

UKH consists of a diverse community of students, academics, scientists, and admin staff, who are responsible for offering a high standard education in different areas. Therefore, the need to initiate a QA and A directorate inside UKH campus was inevitable.

The directorate of QA and A was established in August 2016 to ensure that a good quality of education is offered, that internationally recognized academic standards are achieved, and that students are provided with the knowledge and skills that are relevant to the job market locally and internationally. Procedures and processes for QA are compatible with the QA policies of a number of international universities.

Most QA bodies use similar input and outcome criteria for accreditation (Alterman, 2006), nonetheless, the details of the processes vary markedly (Brennan and Shah, 2000). QA and A at UKH uses peer review, student feedback, and head of department feedback in the assessment of its teaching staff.

1.4. The Accreditation Process

During the academic year of 2017–2018, the office of QA and A at UKH examined the teaching and learning processes, and delivery of courses of the whole university to ensure that the required standards were met. This internal assessment included the administration system of the university as well. Consequently, members of the Executive Management Board were confident enough to apply for international accreditation. The primary purpose of seeking accreditation was to further raise UKH's international profile.

Two senior members from UKH were assigned to make contacts with international accreditation bodies with emphasis on British ones. After months of investigation and contacts the decision was made and the "Accreditation Service for International Schools, Colleges and Universities" (ASIC) was chosen.

ASIC is an independent, UK government approved accreditation body, specializing in the accreditation of schools, colleges, and universities. It is also a member of the council for higher education accreditation International Quality Group in the USA.

2. METHODOLOGY

Communications between ASIC and UKH began in May 2018. Both agreed on opening a dropbox, which is one of the most popular available cloud-based online file storage/sharing services. UKH provided all necessary documents that ASIC requested into the dropbox to be examined by ASIC. This initial stage is known as the eligibility stage.

The first task of UKH was to submit an application form for accreditation, which was required to be sent before any inspection took place. On its receipt, the application form was checked by the ASIC assessors. The application form contained 19 pages of detailed questions and requests about:
1. The University's governance and administrative structure, legal, and financial status
2. Policies and procedures
3. Details about the premises
4. Health and safety issues
5. Details on academic, admin staff, and students
6. Copyright and data protection
7. Academic progress
8. Student welfare
9. Special needs
10. Academic program
11. Selection and admission of students
12. Alumni.

To answer the above requests, a checklist of documents was provided to ASIC between May and November 2018 to help complete Stage 1 of the process. The checklist and documents included: Infrastructure; QA system; Curriculum, Staff titles and Qualifications; Equipment, ICT facilities; Library space and Service; and Enrolment and Enrolment Statistics, Student Support System.

2.1. The Site Visit

The site visit started after UKH paid the accreditation fees. A team of two inspectors from ASIC arrived at UKH, where they conducted a number of meetings and interviews with the senior management team, including the Vice Chancellor, Pro-vice Chancellor, Director of Quality Assurance, Director of International relations, and the Registrar. The team also conducted interviews with administrative managers and staff, academic leadership (Deans, Chairpersons, and Program Coordinators), lecturers, and students. The inspectors then evaluated and rated the UKH's provisions for offering

programs against the documents, which had already been submitted to the dropbox; they also conducted interviews and physical checks. The inspection process included assessment of the facilities (laboratories and infrastructure that support education), course documents and course-related documents (program specifications, program validation, module descriptors, lecture notes, textbooks, lab reports, exam sheets, project reports, etc.). Meetings with faculty members, as well as students, were conducted separately in two batches. The team visited and toured the facilities and observed the display of various documents, including statistical data, theses, and reports. Before preparing the final report, the inspectors highlighted the preliminary findings and recommendations to the senior management of UKH. Sufficient time was offered to UKH to reply to the comments and recommendations.

2.2. The Final Report and the Outcomes
On December 19, 2018, ASIC awarded accreditation to the UKH as a Premier University. In the process, ASIC examined UKH as an institution as a whole, including the administration systems, teaching, and delivery of the courses, to ensure that the required standards were met.

Throughout the whole process, which lasted 7 months, ASIC awarded UKH commendable grades in the areas of (1) premises and health and safety (2) management and staff resources (3) learning and teaching: Course delivery (4) QA and enhancement (5) student welfare, and (6) marketing and recruitment.

2.2.1. Premises and health and safety
The final ASIC report states that there are many fully operational fire exits and very effective emergency signage; external and internal general signage is of outstanding quality throughout. All relevant certificates, agreements, and logos are on display. The University's premises are well furnished; standards and cleanliness (including in the toilets) are exemplary throughout. Student common rooms at various locations and libraries for independent studies are comfortable. There is free access to internet and facilities. There is Wi-Fi connectivity throughout. Students have access to the full refreshment facilities of the refectory.

There are dedicated teachers' rooms; all administrative and academic staff have their own workspaces with IT stations. All staff are provided with lockable desks for their personal belongings; refreshment facilities for staff are available from the staff and student refectories.

All regular classrooms are equipped with projection facilities; laboratories have state of the art equipment relating to Surveying, Concrete Technology, Building Materials Technology, Environmental Engineering, and Soil Mechanics. From their feedback, the students and staff consider the facilities, in general, to be excellent and are happy with the teaching and learning resources available, while looking forward to the prospect of more expansive facilities on the new site.

All policies, risk assessments, and safety certificates are up to date. Some staff and students interviewed had participated in fire drills; other drills are scheduled. All fire exits are clear and fully operational.

2.2.2. Management and staff resources
The academic board is responsible for governance. The vision and mission statements are the basis of the university's work, and there are appropriate cross-references to them in other documentation. There are regular meetings of administrative staff, academic staff, and senior management, as well as full staff meetings. All minutes show clear evidence of actions carried through and recorded with an audit trail, confirming that actions noted have been carried out by a named individual.

All written procedures and policies are in place, and appraisals have been correctly conducted, and outcomes kept on record. The staff handbook is given to new members of staff on their appointment; it is considered to be useful by staff.

Assessment materials are stored on a secure, dedicated computer drive or in paper format in a safe room with high-security locking devices and closed-circuit television. Assessments are set up by teams, not by individual instructors. There are double-marking and routine use of external examiners and moderators; invigilation arrangements are robust.

The procedures of classroom observation are made more systematic. There is heavy reliance on student feedback, peer, and management review mostly carried out by QA and A office. The peer review is largely focused on new teachers, although observation also occurs in a team teaching setting. The appraisal system also considers the delivery of research by academic staff, as they are expected to be engaged in their own research activity. Some research is in collaboration with the corporate sector, particularly in relation to the oil and gas industry.

2.2.3. Learning and teaching: Course delivery
Student feedback and classroom observation reports show clearly commendable levels of quality of teaching and learning.

Four classes were formally observed at undergraduate degree level: Two in Business, one in Civil Engineering and one in Politics and Public Relations; all were deemed to provide a commendable learning experience. Students confirm that they found the teaching very effective and staff considers student workloads to be appropriate for their programs. The classes observed were characterized by an appropriate range of pedagogic approaches, and excellent interaction with students and hand-out materials were of high quality.

The delivery of research degrees will continue to focus on the economic and social development needs of Kurdistan. Much field research is carried out in collaboration with corporate entities, for example, in the evaluation of potential oil and gas reserves. Research students are supported by supervisory teams, which usually include one overseas supervisor. Research students meet at least weekly with their principal supervisor. There are written guidelines for undertaking supervision. Academic staff publishes widely in peer-reviewed journals and research activity features their appraisal. The university also publishes its own biannual Journal of Science and Engineering and Journal of Social Sciences. These journals are members of both the Crossref Agency and the Directory of Open Access Scholarly Resources (ROAD), and also, the Directory of Open Access Journal.

The library is well managed and houses around 40,000 hard-copy items with a generous provision of study places and workstations. There is a fast-expanding provision of e-learning resources, including ten major subscription services. Students and staff express satisfaction with library provision. Effective guidance is given on further study and careers and backed up by materials in the library.

2.2.4. QA and enhancement

There is a full annual program review, with more frequent standardization meetings. Student feedback is crucial in this process, but they do not, as of yet, participate in review meetings. There are extensive written procedures. Course review would be usually supplemented by full institutional self-evaluation from time to time. There is a fully developed system of course review and consequent quality enhancement.

There is a comprehensive analysis of student performance data within each school; this is now beginning to include cohort analysis, but there is a future scope for more comparison across modules and between schools. Despite UKH's reputation for rigor, there are impressive pass rates, comparing very favorably with other universities in the Kurdistan Region. Performance analysis is undertaken for cohorts, and identified trends permit actions regarding curriculum content, assessment methodology, and allocation of lecturers.

Feedback questionnaires are used extensively and analyzed to assist in the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning. Students are informed of response to feedback through staff-student liaison meetings, as in the case of amendments to the teaching methods in some classes. Issues involving particular staff members are dealt with in individual meetings with the Deans. There is documentary evidence that student feedback is responded to effectively.

Staff showed awareness of the written procedures; full data are kept, monitored, and acted on. All courses are internal to UKH, and there are full records of curriculum development, in which teachers play a leading role, including materials revision procedures. There are positive reports from external examiners, some from universities outside Kurdistan, which are also recognized as an effective source of advice.

2.2.5. Student welfare

UKH provides a pre-arrival pack in addition to its on-site accommodation service. It will also provide a meet-and-greet service when required. There is an induction program from which students clearly benefit. The Student Handbook is distributed and discussed at induction; it is considered useful by students.

Welfare issues are overseen by the qualified counseling staff. Advice is provided by experienced and qualified staff, including a medical doctor and a clinic on campus, and specialists in holistic therapy relevant to those suffering from post-traumatic stress. The application form makes provision for students to declare any special needs. There is viable wheelchair access to all relevant areas. Some members of staff have training in meeting the needs of dyslexic students.

Written student complaints and grievance procedure are updated to include non-academic issues. The student union serves as the vehicle for complaints. There will be a clear process describing both informal and formal routes ultimately overseen by the Vice Chancellor.

There are full written procedures for formative and summative assessment. With regard to re-sits and retakes, some further clarification of the regulations is recommended.

There is extensive written guidance on academic misconduct and associated penalties.

2.2.6. Marketing and recruitment

Implementation of the ethics policy is monitored at a senior level and UKH takes responsibility for training and updating its staff. The website and prospectus were found by students to be both informative and accurate. Students are counseled to ensure they will benefit from courses. Minimum admission requirements are set by UKH in line with Ministry of Higher Education requirements. Staff and students both considered that students had been placed on appropriate courses.

2.2.7. Systems management

There are flowcharts, as well as descriptions, for several procedures. There is a clear awareness of the part of relevant staff in the key processes. There is a review process for the refund policy. The enrolment form is comprehensive, and students are satisfied with the process of applying and receiving an offer.

Student files are securely held in the administration offices. All members of staff are fully aware of the processes. Students are aware of the update form for personal contact details, which can also be uploaded electronically. UKH uses electronic systems to record and monitor student attendance through the Academic Support Unit. The Deans are responsible for the management of student progress. Student progress is monitored through meetings between tutors and individual students.

The senior management and the HR department are responsible for procedures relating to employment. Staff files are in good order and include appropriate verifications, based on the submission of original documents. All current members of staff had been shortlisted and interviewed, and where appropriate had given a short presentation as part of the process. All members of staff have the right to work in Kurdistan and all have contracts of employment. The HR department is responsible for staff records. Staff files are held securely in locked cabinets and comply with ASIC requirements. Updating of personal contact details is through the electronic system. Staff was aware of this facility.

3. CONCLUSION

This accreditation process suggests that the existing quality status unconditionally shows that quality areas of students, curriculum, facilities, leadership, governance, staff, and QA process development, are commendable. Nevertheless, a number of recommendations have been submitted by ASIC for UKH to conduct:

1. To arrange another fire drill before the end of academic year 18–19
2. To produce periodic self-evaluation reports at an institutional level, including target dates
3. To broaden student representation on committees, including those relating to course review
4. To review the standardization of grading between schools
5. To widen the scope of the student complaints and grievance procedure
6. To provide further clarification of the re-sit and retake regulations.

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