

Role of the Academic Library in the Overall Accreditation Process: A Case from University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

Accreditation is the process of external quality review used in higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities, and higher education programs for quality assurance and quality improvement. Success results in an accredited institution and/or program (CHEA, 2001). This paper will examine and analyze the role of the UOS libraries in the university's accreditation process. It will further demonstrate how the library plays a significant role in fulfilling the requirements of the accreditation committees. The University of Sharjah is a comprehensive academic institution with a distinctive learning style and a global vision. The university offers the largest number of accredited programs in the United Arab Emirates, covering a wide range of academic and professional disciplines, with a total of 89 academic degree programs including 51 bachelor degrees, 17 master's degrees, 7 PhD degrees, one graduate and 13 associate diploma degrees. In 2011, the University of Sharjah established the Deanship of Quality Assurance, Institutional Effectiveness and Accreditation to act as a central body to coordinate and control activities related to institutional effectiveness and accreditation throughout the university. The UOS libraries play a critical role in the university accreditation process by presenting the library holdings, through submitting an "Accreditation Information Package" that ensures the provision of services, resources and facilities to support teaching, learning and research activities at the university. Furthermore, full documentation is also attached to the report detailing evidence, statistical facts and figures as collected by the library management system and the research tools. The accreditation process will normally cover a wider range of procedures and actions. Moreover, accreditation recommendations are viewed as opportunities for continuous improvement to the library. The library's Strengths and weakness areas are highlighted and shared with the university management and recommendations are implemented whenever feasible.

Keywords: Academic libraries; Higher education; Accreditation process; Academic programs accreditation; University of Sharjah libraries

INTRODUCTION

Accreditation is the process of self-study and external quality review used in higher education to scrutinize an institution and / or its programs for quality standards and need for quality improvement (Corazon 2003). The quality of academic program in

universities has become a universal concern. According to the Commission on Higher Education (1995), accreditation of programs in institutions of higher education is an attempt to ensure that academic programs meet a certain level of minimum quality standards. Furthermore, the accrediting process “is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence and minimizing the scope of external control”. One of the ways of ensuring quality is through the accreditation of academic programs.

The process is designed to determine whether an institution has met the published standard for accreditation which were put in place by an external organization such as a government, national quality assurance agency, or a professional association. It also construes whether the institution is achieving its mission and stated objectives. The process usually includes a self-evaluation, peer review and site visit (Adeola 2014).

Adeola (2014) stated that accreditation helps the institution to evaluate its efforts in enhancing the quality of student learning and the quality of programs and services offered, as well as challenging itself to examine its successes in accomplishing its mission. Accreditation committee members apply their skilled judgment through a preliminary assessment of the institution; to ensure the institution’s compliance with the accreditation requirements. It is also believed that the process of accreditation is undertaken in order to evaluate an institution or programs against minimally acceptable standards which protect the institutions themselves, their students and the public.

Objectives of the Accreditation Process

As reported by Adeola (2014) that the main objectives of the accreditation process in any academic institution are as follows,

- To ensure the provision of a high-quality university education and training that produce competent skilled and qualified manpower to the society
- Accreditation will certify the community that programs offered by the university have fulfilled the minimum requirement of the Ministry of Higher Education
- Ensure uniformity of standards in all programs offered by universities and similar tertiary institutions
- To provide counsel and support to the institutions and the offered programs when needed.

The Process of Accreditation

The process for initial and continued accreditation involves a collective analysis performed by the program under accreditation, followed by a review by external evaluators to the institution, and a site visit ending with a decision by the members of the Accreditation Committee on the program.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2002) explained that the “Accreditation review is ongoing”. The five key features of accreditation are:

- Self-study: Institutions and programs prepare a written summary of performance based on accrediting organization's standards.
- Peer review: Accreditation review is conducted primarily by faculty, administrators, and members of the public.
- Site visit: Accrediting organization normally sends a visiting team to review an institution or program. Team members are volunteers.
- Action (judgment) of accrediting organization: Accrediting organization has commission that makes decisions about the accredited status of institutions and programs.
- Monitoring and oversight: Institutions and programs are reviewed over time in cycles from every few years to ten years.

University of Sharjah (UOS)

The University of Sharjah is a comprehensive academic institution with a distinctive learning model and a global vision. It is a pioneer in teaching, scientific research and the arts within the UAE and the GCC region. The main campus of the University of Sharjah (UOS) lies in the heart of the University City in the Emirate of Sharjah. The University's architecture lends full expression to its Islamic and Arabic heritage with splendid buildings and captivating landscape. The campus provides spacious, outstanding facilities that include multimedia study halls, advanced scientific and research laboratories, dedicated libraries rich with information resources, state-of-the-art IT infrastructure and computing labs, theatres, clubs, two major sports complexes, student centers with access to restaurants and variety of shops, and many other facilities (University of Sharjah Website 2018).

UOS extends its educational reach across five campuses that cover all of the Sharjah regions, including Khorfakkan and Kalba, which are located on the coastline of the Arabian Sea. The University's emphasis on providing purposeful education and its relentless quest for excellence have earned it the respect and eminence among other universities in the region. Harboring a diverse cultural mix, extensive academic programs, and elegant campus setting are but a few of the remarkable characteristics of UOS (University of Sharjah Website 2018).

The Medical Campus includes the Colleges of Medicine, Dental Medicine, Pharmacy, Health Sciences, Medical Research Laboratories, University general hospital, and a Dental Hospital.

The University of Sharjah has expanded in a relatively short span of time to include 14 colleges offering +85 diverse academic programs (majors) at the diploma, bachelor, master and PhD levels. There are currently about 14,000 students enrolled at the university with academic instructions delivered by 610 faculty members having diverse international experience and renowned stature. The institution has sufficient numbers of faculty members to carry out both the classroom and the non-classroom roles of faculty. UOS staff members providing student support services, such as tutoring, financial aid advising, academic advising, and co-curricular activities, are appropriately qualified, trained, and supported in their professional development. The University has

long-term cooperation agreements and strategic alliances with 31 leading academic institutions around the globe. These agreements ensure that the education our students receive meets the highest international standards (University of Sharjah Website 2018).

The main objective of UOS is to provide competitive and resourceful graduates with high moral standards. The university provides high level of teaching and learning opportunity to all people irrespective of race, tribe, religion or political inclinations, which is being achieved through effective programs and services based on provision of adequate facilities as well as professionally qualified and competent staff. All programs offered presently have been granted accreditation status by the National Universities Commission (NUC) (University of Sharjah Website 2018)

Deanship of Quality Assurance, Institutional Effectiveness and Accreditation (DQAIEA)

The Deanship of Quality Assurance, Institutional Effectiveness and Accreditation (DQAIEA) was established in March 2011 as a central body to coordinate and control activities related to institutional effectiveness and accreditation throughout the university of Sharjah. The deanship supervises, assesses and plans issues related to institutional research, institutional effectiveness and accreditation. One of the deanship's main responsibilities is to coordinate and prepare for national and international accreditation while determining factors that are critical in obtaining institutional accreditation

University of Sharjah Programs' Accreditation

The University is completely licensed, and all its programs are accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) of the Ministry of Education in the United Arab Emirates; (<https://www.caa.ae>). Furthermore, the UOS maintains the International Accreditation and Recognition such as ABET for College of Engineering, AACSB for College of Business Administration, programs offered by the College of Communication are accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) <http://www.acejmc.org/>. The Bachelor in Biotechnology program is accredited by The Royal Biological society and the Chemistry Program is accredited by Royal Chemical society. There are various accreditation and recognition provided to UOS institutions such as,

- The Clinical Training Center (CTC) which is accredited as a medical training and testing
- International Federation of Surgery and Obesity and Metabolic Disorders (IFSO)
- European Association for Endoscopic Surgery (EAES)
- American Heart Association
- Ministry of Health in United Arab Emirates

Role of Academic Libraries in Universities

The library is the cornerstone of any academic institution. Universities arm their students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they need to integrate themselves into their respective societies and become productive, well-rounded members of their communities. Academic libraries across all colleges are designed to supplement school programs as well as the teaching and learning process (Agbetuyi, Adegbilero-Iwari, Subair 2017).

Subair (2015) mentioned that a library, the effective heart of the university, actively performs activities relating to: learning and teaching, research and generation of new knowledge, dissemination of research results, conservation of ideas/knowledge and the extension of services.

Moreover, it facilitates the work of the classroom teacher and ensures students' equitable access to resources. Although the official purpose of a universities is teaching, research and society service are emerging as important and essential functions of higher academic institution. Chiedu (2014) pointed that for the university to be able to carry out its tripartite mandate of teaching, research and community development (service), certain elements that contribute to the existence of the university must be present in adequate qualitative and quantitative measure.

The library must be stocked with current books and journals in hard and soft (electronic) copies to enrich the knowledge of the teacher/ researcher and learners. There is a positive and proportional relationship between libraries and educational development and achievements.

As reported by Agbetuyi, Adegbilero-Iwari & Subair (2017), academic library involvement benefits five stakeholders: universities, libraries, programs, librarians, and students.

In supporting this, Umaru (2013), reported that libraries play integral roles in educational development through its activities of research, services, acquisition, organization and dissemination of relevant information and education carrier materials in both print and electronic media to its users. He stressed that the goals of education cannot be achieved without emphasis on the proper and adequate management of libraries and that quality education is impossible without quality libraries in any given educational institutions. Also, Lonsdale (2003) opines that positive relationship exists between libraries and students' academic performances. This indicates that if education is the transmission of knowledge, skills, values and norms from one generation to another, then the management of libraries in achieving these goals cannot be overemphasized. It can therefore be concluded that the library performs vital and irreplaceable activities related to learning and teaching, research and generation of new knowledge, dissemination of research results, conservation of ideas/knowledge and the extension of services.

University of Sharjah Libraries

The University of Sharjah (UOS) Libraries, at the Deanship of Academic Support Services, provide students and faculty with resources and services they need to succeed in their educational and research undertakings.

Resources are housed in eleven attractive, state-of-the-art library buildings occupying more than 30,000 square meters of space on the main campus and at satellite branches. The buildings offer users ample study and computing common areas; halls for meetings, seminars and conferences; classrooms; faculty development centers; prayer rooms; and executive meeting rooms. The Libraries provide knowledge based and up to date information resources to support academic programs and research activities.

Furthermore, with a diversified collection that includes 320,000 books, 150,000 E-books, 62 Online Databases, 60,000 Electronic Journals, 1,600,000 full text Theses and Dissertations, UOS libraries are considered one of the most comprehensive libraries in the region. Access to resources is provided anytime and anywhere through electronic resources acquisition, providing access to some of the top content providers worldwide including ScienceDirect, Scopus, IEEE, Emerald, Clinical Key, EBSCO, JSTOR, SciFinder, Cochrane Library, UpToDate, and others. Libraries aim to continuously develop and improve library resources and services in response to changing needs of a new generation of students and to support their learning, teaching and research at UOS. They participate proactively in the enrichment of the educational experience; improve information technology and multimedia assets; repurpose available space to accommodate the changing library role; improve community outreach and branding; and enhance administrative structure and commitment to due process.

Providing sufficient library resources to support the nature and scope of the various programs offered by the institution was a necessity. The library also maintained adequate and well organized collection which are accessible to all students, faculty, administrative and research staff.

“The Library Homepage” is the main portal to explore UOS libraries and to access the electronic resources 24/7. To enhance the use of library resources and to ease the search process, a discovery tool was obtained that searches all full text library resources along with the OPAC at once. Off-campus access to our electronic resources is offered to faculty and students through the RemoteX software. Research citations can be prepared by using “Refworks citation manager”. Electronic books and journals are retrievable through E-books and E-Journals Portals, in addition to many tools that help the researchers reach information on books and journals.

Qualified librarians with appropriate education and experience in library and information resources were appointed to provide a wide variety of services that fulfill the faculty and students’ needs. Services include reference services, book-iPad-laptop loans, research assistance, database and Internet searching, and much more. UOS libraries ensure that users receive timely instruction on the use of library resources.

Research papers and documents that are not available at the library can be ordered through the Document Delivery Service from the British Library. Current Awareness Service delivered to faculty and students, keeps them updated of the new library collection and services.

Various activities are conducted to introduce the libraries to the university community and to promote library resources and services such as the open days, book sales, workshops, product presentations, symposiums, and many other events.

UOS Libraries IT infrastructure, systems and facilities

An integrated library system (Sierra) is currently operating that embeds all library functions, services, and auxiliary tools. The libraries are fully automated and linked to all faculty and university offices through the university network. Multi-media rooms equipped with state-of-the-art systems, computers, projectors, etc. Along with an Internet lab equipped with networked computers uploaded with the latest applications. Several networked public access computers are available for students' use, loaded with the latest applications to access research resources and connected to networked printers and scanners. Wireless Networking is enabled in all University of Sharjah libraries to allow library patrons use their own laptops and access the Internet as well as the library resources.

UOS Libraries and Academic Programs' Accreditation

The UOS libraries played a stirring role in the accreditation process of the university programs. The University of Sharjah management stocks the library with adequate, relevant and up to date collection. Books, journals, audio-visuals, online databases and other electronic resources were acquired to build up holdings that support each program offered at the university.

Since the information resources and services provided affect the quality of students' educational experience and achievement, librarians at UOS are systematically engaged in the accreditation process providing high quality and consistent documentation across all programs.

During the accreditation process, UOS library staff ensures that the library meets up with the accreditation committee expectations; working tirelessly to provide the required documentations to the concerned UOS department that is expecting the accreditation visit, as follows,

- Comprehensive reports on the UOS libraries, and its resources, services, IT infrastructure, working hours, facilities, space, ...etc.
- Lists of library collections that support the investigated program. Lists include electronic and print books, journals, online databases, theses and dissertations, audio-visual materials, auxiliary research tools, collection development resources, ...etc.

- Allocated budget to support the designated college and the investigated program along with a report on the development and increase of the library collection for that program
- Full description of the library orientation and instructional program provided to freshmen, graduate and postgraduate students, to equip students with the necessary skills for effective learning
- Copy of the Libguides that include the program resources and tools along with a UOS Libraries user manual
- Authentication and the availability of the library online resources access, on and off-campus. The acquired software should be explained
- Policies and Procedures should be provided to overview the circulation, general services, acquisition, collection development, weeding, ..etc.
- Results of the most recent and updated survey regarding the library resources, services, environment, space, facilities, ..etc.
- Number of library staff, indicating the professional librarians, para-professionals and administrators

Usually the committee from the program under accreditation collects the documents and submits them to the Deanship of quality assurance, institutional effectiveness and accreditation. Furthermore, the librarians collaborate and communicate with faculty members to receive their selection of relevant and adequate information resources. Librarians conduct workshops and sessions throughout the year to introduce the library resources and research tools for each college / program. Meanwhile, customized sessions and workshops are offered to the faculty and students of the programs under accreditation.

Impact of Accreditation Process on UOS Libraries

UOS libraries welcomed the challenges encountered during the accreditation process. Becoming embedded into the accreditation process of university programs has offered tremendous opportunities for UOS Libraries. Participation in the process can result in improvement and enhancement of the library operations that leads to the library and the university benefits. It also enhances the library profile on campus.

Although the UOS libraries implement many techniques to assess its holdings, services and facilities, being engaged in the accreditation process is still essential to identify potential gaps and weaknesses that lead to evaluation and development. On the other hand, accreditation reviews provide an additional mechanism to ensure periodic and regular assessment and examination highlighting the library strength. An updated collection is highly required by the accreditation committee investigators, therefore, the library was advised to weed some of the programs' outdated resources

Collection development resulted from many of the visits as an action to update some of the existing and acquire new resources on specific topic. Librarians consult significant databases and auxiliary tools subscribed by UOS libraries for the acquisition purposes, such as Global Books in Print (GBIP), Resources for College Libraries (RCL) along with the OASIS database, the libraries' book supplier. Orders for information resources, such as

books, periodicals and online databases, are placed to receive books on time, prior to the accreditation follow up visit.

Allocation of a sufficient and supportive library budget was given a remarkable consideration by the university management. New or existing programs that will be evaluated in future are well recognized by the DQAIEA. Cost of resources needed to support the programs either in print or electronic subscribed databases / journals are considered in the planned budget. Accordingly, a notable growth in the library and increase in the information resources were recorded.

Preparation for accreditation visits builds channels of communication between the colleges and the library. Provision of required documentations, conducting sessions, follow up with the program's coordinator and receiving the visiting accreditation committee members at the library, all contributed to the library promotion. Moreover, accreditation process has a significant impact on the library staff's progress. It helps the librarians engage in their occupation and gain valuable experiences.

Finally, being involved in the institution's programs accreditation process provided the library staff with an extensive experience gained with practice. UOS libraries staff give some recommendations for other academic libraries in the UAE when considering integration into an initial program accreditation

CONCLUSION

Academic libraries have a significant role in the accreditation of university programs. University of Sharjah libraries put a tremendous effort to fulfil the accreditation committees' requirements and to meet the high expectations of the programs' coordinators. Provision of the "Accreditation Information Package" describes the libraries' holdings and services that support existing and new academic programs. UOS libraries value the accreditation committees' recommendations and consider them as opportunities for continuous development and enhancement to the library. Moreover, the university management provides the libraries with a full support, takes into consideration and implements the recommendations whenever feasible.

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