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الاعتماد الأكاديمي لبرامج دراسات المكتبات والمعلومات في منطقة الخليج العربي: الخيارات، الفرص، التحديات

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ملخص:

هدف الدراسة: الاعتماد، الشهادة، ضمان الجودة، هي المرتكز الأساسي (الشائع / الغالب) للتقييم. التقييم يأخذ عدة أشكال ونتائج نهائية متنوعة. تتناول هذه الدراسة الحاجة إلى تقييم درجة برامج (المكتبات ودراسات المعلومات) في منطقة الخليج العربي طبقاً للملف الشخصي (Profile)، تطبيقات التقييم، واستخدام الدراسة الذاتية (Self-Study)، وتنفيذ الاعتماد. **المنهجية:** وجّه استفتاء لسبعة برامج تعليمية في (المكتبات ودراسات المعلومات) في منطقة الخليج العربي وتم الحصول على خمسة من الردود التي تم تحليلها طبقاً للملف/البيانات الشخصية، تطبيقات التقييم، استخدام التقييم الخارجي، صلاحية وكالات الاعتماد، تصورات المشاركين، الاعتماد، الشهادة، ضمان الجودة. **النتائج:** وجد أن هذه البرامج لديها موارد ومصادر حاسوبية/إلكترونية كافية، تسهيلات تعليمية، هيئة تدريسية، ولكن أربعاً من أصل خمس مدارس لا تمتلك مصادر إلكترونية كافية، بما في ذلك الوصول إلى قواعد بيانات مفيدة، ومجلات علمية. هذه البرامج كانت نشطة في التقييم كمثل (مؤسسة للمتخصصين في مجال المكتبات والمعلومات للمكتبات والمعلومات وإدارة المعرفة – CILIP)، وقد أجرت تقييماً مكثفاً لبرنامجين؛ مما أدى إلى اعتمادهما. أوضح برنامجان آخران عن استخدام مقيمين خارجيين للقيام بتقييمات دورية. **الخلاصة:** توصل المديرون الأكاديميون للمدارس وخبراء أكاديميون آخرون بالإجماع حول القيمة، والفائدة، والتنفيذ المحتمل للاعتماد. تم التعبير عن وجهات نظر متباينة حول اعتماد الوكالات وإدارة عملية الاعتماد وحل آليات أخرى. وعليه؛ يوصى بمواصلة المناقشة لحل القضايا العالقة.

المصطلحات الأساسية: الاعتماد، ضمان الجودة، التقييم، التعليم فى المكتبات والمعلومات، منطقة الخليج العربي.

Accrediting LIS Programs in the Gulf Cooperation Council: Possibilities, Options, Opportunities and Challenges*

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Abstract:

Objective: Accreditation, certification, and quality assurance have the common denominator of assessment. Assessment takes various shapes, and it has diverse end-results. This study addressed the need of taking stock of LIS degree education programs in the Arabian Gulf region for their profile, assessment practices, use of self-study, and implementation of accreditation. **Methodology:** A questionnaire was administered to seven LIS education programs in the Arabian Gulf region; five responses were obtained and analyzed for profile, assessment practices, use of external assessment, viability of accrediting agencies, and perceptions of participants about accreditation, certification, and quality assurance. **Results:** It was found that these schools had adequate computing resources, instructional facilities, and faculty. However, 4 out of 5 schools did not have adequate electronic resources including access to useful databases and scholarly journals. These programs were active in assessment, as CILIP conducted extensive assessment in two programs, resulting in accreditation. Two other schools reported use of external assessors who were doing periodic assessments. The academic managers of schools and other academic experts reached a consensus about the value, usefulness, and possible implementation of accreditation. **Conclusion:** Divergent views were expressed about accrediting agencies, management of accreditation process, and resolving other mechanics. Continued discussions are recommended for resolving pending issues.

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Introduction

Library and information science (LIS) education has diverse practices in the degrees they offer, faculty members they employ, resources and facilities they use, research they produce, and employment opportunities they provide. While certain extent of diversity could be desirable in national and regional contexts (Mehra, Olson & Ahmad, 2011), yet these programs have always wished to have some formal recognition from a credible agency.

Accreditation adds value to the efforts of LIS programs in keeping themselves current and relevant. Changes in the LIS profession have been swift and these need to be reflected in academic policies and curricula. Accreditation is a source of authentication that the accredited programs are satisfying standards and pursuing changes.

Enser (2002) examined CILIP and its accreditation role and proposed that the scope should be enhanced as to cover archives, records, and museum sciences. Also, standards for lifelong learning of the British government higher education need to be incorporated and adjusted in the CILIP criteria.

Problem

Different academic practices and assessment strategies are expected in the Gulf region. Considering the peculiarities of the GCC region and a lingering desire, on the part of academics, there is a need for examining assessment, accreditation possibilities, and prospects in the region comprehensively by covering all the aspects of the process.

The process of assessment can be viewed from three approaches of quality assurance, accreditation, and certification. The three terms have a common denominator- a built-in mechanism of continuous assessment.

Review of Literature

In the following section we are providing a review of relevant studies, serving as conceptual frame for this study.

Accreditation: Accreditation means continuous examination of a program, conducted by designated authorities such as agencies or societies. They use definite criteria for conducting periodic assessment of academic programs. Graduates of accredited programs are permitted their induction in the professional careers. Accrediting agencies have

their distinct structure, norms, and practices for the field of library and information science; according to the American Library Association (ALA), which has been engaged in accrediting library and information education programs, defines accreditation as follows:

> Accreditation is a voluntary system of evaluation of higher education institutions and programs. It is a collegial process based on self-evaluation and peer-assessment for improvement of academic quality and public accountability. Accreditation assures that higher education institutions and their units, schools, or programs meet appropriate standards of quality and integrity. Accreditation is both a process and a condition. The process entails the assessment of educational quality and the continued enhancement of educational operations through the development and validation of standards. The condition provides a credential to the public-at-large indicating that an institution and/or its programs have accepted and are fulfilling their commitment to educational quality.

Back in 1924, ALA established the Board of Education (BOE) for Librarianship. This forum started accrediting education programs, a 5th year undergraduate degree, as a precursor of Williamson's Report of 1923 (Vann, 1961). It was during the 40s and 50s when the Master's degree was accepted as a norm for accreditation. Later ALA formed an accreditation committee that has been responsible for North American schools.

In 1962, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) started assessing the library and information education program. Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) has assumed the same role in that region. ALA published Dickinson's work (2005) that also covered Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) introduced in 2000.

Quality Assurance: As compared to accreditation, IFLA has been active in introducing quality assurance; its Section on Education and Training (SET) has been active in developing a model of quality assurance that was applied in the European continent (Tammaro, 2005). IFLA published monographs on quality assurance (Ameen, 2007; Miko & Miyahara, 2015). Quality assurance, as a concept, means planned and systematic activities implemented in a quality system so that quality

requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled. Essential ingredients of the term include the concepts of quality control, transparency of operations, mobility of professionals, and uniformity in the application of criteria. Quality assurance implies continuous checking that the products and services satisfy the criteria for production and delivery. It connotes optimal uniformity, interchangeability, and transferability for the purposes of admission, employment, and administration of rewards and remunerations.

Certification: As a process of assessment, certification literally means the action or process of providing someone or something with an official document attesting to a status or level of achievement. Business dictionary defined certification as "formal procedure by which an accredited or authorized person or agency assesses and verifies (and attests in writing by issuing a certificate) the attributes, characteristics, quality, qualification, or status of individuals or organizations, goods or services, procedures or processes, or events or situations, in accordance with established requirements or standards".

Professional forums have been conducting certification in all the professional domains such as health, law, education, psychology... etc., including examinations after the practitioners have obtained a degree in the field of practice. In the USA, state agencies have been responsible for certifying those who had to pursue a career in a library, media center or school resource center (Woellner,1980).

Quality assurance, assessment, and accreditation have common ingredients. We understand that there is an institutional framework under which assessment is conducted to confer a degree of satisfaction of primary criteria of assessment of formal degree programs in the field of library and information education. Using general professional perspective, it is the conduct of an entrance examination, beyond the minimum of a professional degree, by a competent professional body that awards certificates to those who are allowed to practice.

Accreditation, as an essential means of systematic, intensive, and periodic assessment, is the foundation of both the processes of quality assurance and certification. However, accreditation has been more like a norm until many academic programs joined the fold of iSchools.

Accreditation stipulates a foundation of clearly defined objectives,

their satisfaction and potential for continued sustenance. Accreditation serves as a mechanism for quality assessment and quality enhancement, with quality defined as "the effective utilization of resources to achieve appropriate educational objectives". Majid, et al. (2003) considered it a process that assures quality and integrity, using self-evaluation, peer assessment and expert examination for the improvement of academic quality and public accountability.

Regional Forums of Accreditation

As afore-mentioned, ALA, CILIP, IFLA, and ALIA are professional forums that have pursued assessment of LIS education programs. ALIA's process is labeled as course recognition in Australia, covering both undergraduate and graduate degrees. Conversely, ALA only accredits graduate programs in North America (Willard & Wilson, 2004). IFLA, being an international forum, proposed its own accreditation guidelines. The web links of the four associations, globally recognized as bona fide accrediting agencies, are as follows:

ALA Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies

(<http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Our_Association/Offices/Accreditation1/pub/standards.htm>)

IFLA Guidelines for Professional Library/Information Educational Programs-2000 <http://www.ifla.org.sg/VII/s23/bulletin/guidelines.htm>)

ALIA Education Policy Statement n° 1 (<http://www.alia.org.au/policies/education/entry-level.courses.html>)

ALIA The Library and Information Sector: Core Knowledge, Skills and Attributes. (<http://www.alia.org.au/policies/core.knowledge.html>)

CILIP Accreditation instrument: Procedures for the Accreditation of,courses.(http://www.cilip.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AB7FB628-3922-4681- 5AA3E75593A0389/0/ACCREDITATIONWEB.pdf <http://www.cilip.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AB7FB628-3922-4681-85AA-3E75593A0389/0/ACCREDITATIONWEB.pdf>)

Development of iSchools and ALA Accreditation of Master's Program

A major development in library and information education has been the recent emergence of the community of iSchools. Wiggins & Sawyer (2012) provided a detailed account of the development of iSchools.

The movement, though initiated in the US, is now globally recognized with its membership exceeding fifty. This movement does not essentially recognize ALA-accredited degree to be a viable credential for its members, though its members in North America are still seeking accreditation, possibly to capture the large employment market of libraries. Based on a comparative study of iSchools and ALA-accredited non-iSchools, Chu (2012) concluded that a better coordination will further the cause of information education. Chow, et al. (2011) noted that emergence of iSchools in the field of library and information science (LIS) has been a point of discussion; one theme in the discussion centres on whether those iSchools, deriving from LIS programs, are indeed different from traditional programs. These researchers noted that there are points of convergence between the two categories.

Wu, Jiang, Dong & Vo (2012) investigated research and education efforts of about 25 iSchools, using both quantitative and qualitative methods on Web. They found that iSchools shared the same vision and mission of working on relationships between information, people and technology and have established themselves as appropriate institutions for researchers from diverse subject areas to study this interdisciplinary integration. They viewed that despite the emerging iSchool identity and a defining iField, there were still many important developments to make.

Accreditation criteria

By taking a stock of the accreditation guidelines of ALA, CILIP, and ALIA, the following common criteria are identified.

- Context of the program
- Institutional support
- Relationship with the parent institution
- Mission, goals, and objectives
- Curriculum
- Faculty and staff
- Research productivity

- Students
- Instructional resources and facilities
- Employment market

ALA defined core competencies in 1999; the first draft was presented to a number of committees and conferences for review. In 2005, the exercise resulted in a document that outlined core competencies. McKinney (2006) used these statements for examining the curricula of accredited, accreditation-candidates, and pre-candidates. The core competencies identified included professional ethics, resource building, knowledge organization, technological knowledge, Knowledge dissemination, life-long learning, inquiry, and management. IFLA had presented eleven competencies that included information environment, information policy and ethics, the history of the field; information generation, communication and use; assessing information needs and designing responsive services; the information transfer; organization, retrieval, preservation and conservation; research, analysis and interpretation; applications of information and communication technologies (ICT); library and information products and services; information resource management and knowledge management; management of information agencies; and quantitative and qualitative evaluation of outcomes of information and library use.

Mechanics: Abundant documentation is needed before the arrival of accreditation team. Self-study involves dialog and collaboration with stakeholders such as faculty members, parent institution, professional bodies, students and alumni, accreditation body, and other schools and programs in the region (Miwa & Miyahara, 2015; Rehman, 2008). Accreditation programs are essentially preceded by self-study. (Tammaro, 2005; Tammaro, 2007).

The regional situation of accreditation in Asia

The situation of information education varies from region to region; Southeast Asian nations have tried to develop their own mechanics (Khoo, Maid & Chaudhry, 2003).They gathered data from 14 LIS programs in five countries proposing Congress of Southeast Asian Libraries (CONSAL) as a regional professional forum in that region.

They reported the problems of non-availability of funds, limited understanding of the needs, lack of experts in developing and

implementing accreditation, logistic issues, resistance form the LIS programs, fear of these programs to be exposed to external agencies, and the bureaucratic inhibitors.

Until 2006, about 120 Indian universities were offering bachelor's degrees, 78 Master's degrees, and another 21 two-year integrated Master's degrees, and 63 offered Ph.D. programs in library and information science (Sarkhel, 2006). The University Grants Commission (UGC) was responsible for monitoring higher education in India. The UGC had established the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), which pursued institutional and departmental accreditation. However, this body had not initiated any activity for the LIS education programs. Singh and Shahid (2010) also stressed the need for the Indian UGC to be proactive in introducing curricular frame and guidelines.

In Pakistan, nine LIS programs are offering Master's degrees and post-Master programs. Eight of them are functioning in the public sector. Rehman (2016) noted that LIS education in Pakistan faced quality of its graduates. Professional associations such as Pakistan Library Association (PLA) were ineffective in the assessment of LIS education programs. HEC has also been an advisory forum in the design of curricula of Master's degrees. HEC has been active in maintaining quality assurance in Pakistani universities. One of its divisions has been responsible for equivalence of degrees and evaluating academic aspects to secure quality assurance among universities. In this pursuit, they have applied institutional performance evaluation standards in these universities.

In Bangladesh, two universities offered bachelor's and Master's degrees in LIS and twelve universities also offered post-graduate diplomas. They were producing about five hundred graduates; an insufficient number to satisfy the national needs. They were critical about the quality of graduates and maintained that no system of quality assurance or systematic assessment was available. These programs faced several major problems, such as absence of infrastructure, scarcityof reading materials, inadequate faculty, paucity of academic research, lack of job structures, career development opportunities, and absence of national policies.

The status of GCC member nations

The six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that have linguistic, socio-politico-economic, and cultural similarities comprise the following countries: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain, whose economies are mainly based on petroleum.

In LIS education, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, and the UAE have formal degree programs; Saudi Arabia has the largest number of LIS schools located in universities that offer both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Kuwait University has a graduate degree program and an undergraduate minor in information studies and other programs of the Public Authority for Applied Education & Training (PAEET) in Kuwait produce undergraduates with LIS degrees. Sultan Qaboos University of Oman has both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. A range of graduate of undergraduate programs in this region is broad, producing thousands of graduates from both undergraduate and graduate streams, most of whom are undergraduates.

Objectives

This study is intended to examine assessment and accreditation possibilities and prospects in the GCC region, and to address this issue the following research objectives were set for this study:

1. To examine the assessment and accreditation profiles and practices in the GCC.

2. To find out suitable modalities for implementing accreditation of LIS programs in the GCC.

3. To outline the challenges and obstacles facing the implementation of accreditation in the region and how to address them.

Importance

Since there is a strong need for instituting systematic processes of assessment and accreditation of LIS programs in the GCC, the findings of this study are expected to fill-in that gap. This study may also present a viable proposal for implementing accreditation in the region. The findings may generate the needed awareness in the academic community about the issues and challenges involved in the process of conception,

design, implementation, and evaluation. A scenario for accreditation prospect is expected to evolve from the results of this study.

Procedures

A survey method was used for this study, launched on Web, using SurveyMonkey®. SurveyMonkey®, which is an online survey development cloud-based software for data analysis available for use on the internet. Data have been analyzed using frequency distributions and other descriptive mechanics.

The scatter of LIS programs in the Arabian Gulf

Among the 6-member nations of the GCC, three have LIS programs; Qatar closed its program several years ago; the UAE's private school was recently established, and this program does not have essential qualifications to be included in an assessment study; Bahrain has never offered any degree program. One of the only-women programs in Saudi Arabia is a ditto replica of one established university, and its representative failed to establish the credential of any autonomous identify despite repeated requests of contact. The remaining seven programs are disseminated as follows: Saudi Arabia (4), Oman (1), and Kuwait (2); thus, seven programs had qualified to be the participants of this study.

Participants: The academic heads of seven LIS programs in the GCC were requested to participate in the study; we used department websites and personal contacts to identify the heads of these departments who were requested to respond to the Web survey.

Instruments: A questionnaire was designed for gathering basic information about the department, assessment policies and practices, and perceptions about these assessment aspects. The questionnaire was pre-tested, using three faculty members of Kuwait University faculty.

Data Collection: Since all the departments were requested to participate, no sampling was needed or used, as population of the study was small. A Web survey was used for data collection, and the participants were sent emails and personal reminders containing links and basic information. Despite intensive persuasion, most Saudi Arabian departments did not provide input. It turned out to be a frustrating experience that despite extending data collection to about one year, two

schools did not cooperate, and we gathered only five responses out of 7 administered. Thus, we had 71.4% response rate.

Terminology

We have used terms of *accreditation, assessment and quality assurance* following the standard definitions presented in the introduction section above.

We have used *library and information science (LIS)* as a generic term that covers *information studies, information management* and *information science*.

The term *program* is used synonymously for *school* and *academic program*.

The term *Gulf* is used synonymously for *Arabian Gulf,* which has six members of the *Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)*.

Findings

Five schools from the Arabian Gulf participated in the study, and for the sake of identity protection, we shall use the labels of A, B, C, D and E when referring to these five schools in this study. Regarding program titles, three of these schools used the title "*information studies*", one used "*information science*", and one used "*library and information science*". The oldest among these schools was the Saudi school, which was established in 1973, while the others were established in the years 1977, 1987, 1996, and 1998 respectively. All these schools had their own websites, and two of them were affiliated to the faculties of Social Sciences, while the other three were affiliated to the faculties of Arts, Business, and Information Science respectively.

Name Change

Four of the five participant schools had changed their names during the last five years. It was claimed that name change entailed subsequent changes in overall academic thrust, curricula, and course content.

Offered programs and enrollments

A significant question was about the degree programs that these schools offered. Three schools offered Bachelor's degrees, and one other school was planning to offer a bachelor's degree in information studies in 2020. It was found that 4 schools offered Master's degrees, while 3

schools offered Ph.D. degrees. The numbers of students admitted to these schools in the year 2018 varied between 150, 218 and 750. Enrollment in Master's programs was also reported as 47, 140, 300 and 500 respectively.

Table 1.

Teaching and Administrative Staff
N=4

Ranks	A	B	C	D	E
Professors	2	8	4	10	--
Associate Professors	3	4	4	4	--
Assistant Professors	9	8	12	10	--
Teaching Assistants	2	20	4	0	--
Administrative Staff	2	4	2	2	

Teaching and administrative staff

Another significant dimension was related to the strength of faculty. Four respondents provided this information. The schools have larger numbers in senior faculty ranks of Professor and Associate Professor. Cumulative number in two ranks were reported to be 14, 12, 8 and 5. An exact number of 30 assistant professors served in these schools and the descending number was found to be 12, 19, 9 and 8. It is inferred that this distribution is consistent with the norm prevalent in universities.

It was found that these schools had extensive computing facilities; one had as many as five laboratories, two had 3 laboratories, one had two and the last school had one laboratory. At micro-level, it is pertinent to ascertain the number of terminals, networking capacity, and capacity of these facilities.

Regarding the availability of electronic classrooms, two departments had three rooms whereas three had two classrooms. All these rooms were equipped with projecting facilities.

Contribution to scholarly work is best measured by the presence of the full-text databases; two departments reported subscribing to many full-text databases. Central facilities of these universities, such as libraries are normally responsible for such subscriptions and an active liaison is needed for that purpose. Only two respondents indicated the extent of English language monographs, being 5000 and 3000. The other three

departments provided no such detail. Yet it is more important if these collections are continually updated.

Table 2.

Resources and Facilities
N = 5

Resources & Facilities	A	B	C	D	E
Computing Facilities: Laboratories	5	3	3	2	1
Electronic Classrooms	3	2	2	3	2
Audiovi-suals/Multi-media	LCD Projectors	LCD Projectors	LCD Projectors	LCD Projectors	LCD Projectors
Journal Subscrip-tion	Arabic: unsure English: 3 full-text databases	Arabic: English: uncertain	Arabic: English: 2 full-text databases	Arabic: English: 5 databases	--Databases
Mono-graphs	3000	Don't know	English: 5000	Unsure	Unsure

Another significant aspect was the databases that these schools provided for their students and faculty members; Table (3) below displays data about the availability of databases in these five schools, which shows that only ERIC was available in all the schools. This is a public domain facility and it is no surprise all schools had it. ISI Web of Knowledge was available in three schools. Ulrich, Classification Web, Dewey for Windows, and Encyclopedia Britannica were available for the user community of 2 of 5 schools. All other databases such as Psychinfo, Dissertation Abstracts, ABI/Inform, Readers Guide, and BIP Plus were reportedly available only in one school. This may not reflect positively.

Table 3.

Databases

Emeraldfull-text	60.00%
General Science Index	20.00%
ABI/Inform	20.00%
Readers Guide Index	20.oo%
BIP	20.00%
Web Dewey	40.00%
Psych Info	20.00%
ERIC	100.00%
Academic Search Primer	40.00%
Encyclopedia Britannica	40.00%
ISI Web of Knowledge	60.00%
Dissertation Abstracts Online	20.00%
LISTA	60.00%
Ulrich's Plus	60.00%
Classification Web	40.00%

Automation packages used in instruction

All five schools reported using the automation system implemented in the library systems of parent universities. It is expected that all of them use Arabian Advanced System's Horizon, as it has Arabic language applications. These systems can access Arabic databases for authority control and consistency. Horizon, in this respect, has definite edge and better instructional value.

Evaluation

The primary objective of this research was to examine and assess evaluation or accreditation practices used in these schools. A significant finding was that these five participant schools had engaged in evaluation or accreditation during the five preceding years. In two programs, CILIP (a European professional body that conducts external evaluation) had been formally engaged in a 6-month period for a thorough exercise of evaluation. Faculty profiles, coursework syllabi and other details were used in preparing self-study reports for the visiting external assessors who paid two visits in a 6-month period

One program had a practice of external assessment by an international expert every six years. Last evaluation was done in 2014, and an expert from the USA had made a one-week visit. Prior to the expert's visit, the department prepared a self-study report containing extensive documentation. The Graduate College of the university sponsored the exercise and the dean followed up with the recommendations provided in the referee's report. The consultant met with academic managers, faculty, students, alumni, and other stakeholders during her visit.

Two programs had conducted self-evaluation, using faculty expertise in the department. They used this exercise for introducing changes in department name and curricula. Academic managers and faculty leadership played a significant role in the preparation of the report.

Table (4) below displays how assessment reports were applied in implementing certain changes. They were unanimous about changes in curriculum, admission, and enhancement of physical, computing and library resources. They reported changes in administrative management. Three respondents mentioned that faculty had become proactive in their academic activity. Three programs introduced changes in strategic planning and as many used assessments for studying markets through surveys.

Table 4.

Assessment Results in Changes
N = 5

Changes	%
Strategic plan of the department	66.67%
Student's admission, graduation, needs, perceptions, etc.	100.00%
Curriculum (content, syllabus, readings, etc.)	66.67%
Student evaluation methods and techniques	66.67%
Faculty (number, qualifications, capabilities, etc.)	66.67%
Research output of faculty and department	66.67%
Administrative management of the department	100.00%
Computing resources and facilities	100.00%
Library resources and facilities	100.00%
Market needs and surveys	66.67%

Specific changes resulting from assessment

When respondents were asked about specific changes in curriculum, two reported making changes or adjustments in curriculum; two had made changes in core curriculum and three made changes in elective content. Even one of them mentioned that they had introduced instructional changes. Five respondents mentioned that assessment exercise had resulted in specific changes. Two of them indicated that because of assessment, they produced a fresh strategic plan having new statements of mission and objectives. Two of them mentioned changes in admission policies and procedures that affected enrollment of students.

Certification

All five schools favored certification of degrees to facilitate induction of their graduates in school libraries or resource centers. One of them was specific to note that its Ministry of Education, being responsible for school education, needs to assume the duty of certification. Another respondent wished to administer certification but did not specify who should assume such a responsibility.

Accreditation Possibilities

All five schools favored the proposition of implementing a system of accreditation for all the academic programs in the region. This implies that all the schools consider this prospect viable and valuable. However, there is a need to have the mechanics and logistics worked out through consultation.

First question arising from this phenomenon was about the agency that can be entrusted to serve as an accrediting agency; Table 5 below displays the different options and their respective percentages.

Table 5.

Accrediting Agencies: Options
N = 5

Agencies	%
International agencies such as ALA, etc.	40.00%
Regional professional body such as SLA/AGC	80.00%
National professional association	20.00%
Ministry of education in the country	0.00%

Four respondents favored the option of a regional agency for accreditation. This agency is the

Arabian Gulf Chapter of the Special Libraries Association. This is a worthwhile option, yet this agency has never undertaken any such responsibility anywhere. They lack norms, traditions, and infrastructure. ALA and CILIP have been accrediting LIS education programs; however, ALA restricts itself to the North American continent, and this agency has not assessed any academic program beyond this region. CILIP has accredited two programs in the GCC region, and this agency might be a viable option. Yet, it is unclear if this agency can cater to the peculiar conditions of this region.

Quality Assurance

Another significant aspect was related to any arrangements for quality assurance among these programs. It entailed uniform policies for admission, academic transfers, employability, and the exchange of both students and graduates. Three schools preferred enacting such an arrangement, whereas two respondents did not support it, as they considered it impractical. It makes sense if schools have a national affiliation that may have no issue with quality assurance.

Overall impact

The respondents had a unanimous view that self-studies, assessment practices, and accreditation of two schools were quite helpful in introducing and implementing much-needed changes and enhancements. These were instrumental in making changes in the structures, academic offerings, and curricula of these programs.

Perceptions about accreditation

It is pertinent to examine faculty views about accreditation. All the respondents asserted that they wished to have accreditation in place. However, about the choice of an accrediting agency, the respondents had different views, which may be summed up as follows:

1. A regional body
2. A forum under the consortium of GCC universities.
3. Units in ministries of education in the six nations.
4. A forum of the LIS programs in the region.

5. An accreditation body working under the auspices of IFLA

Rehman (2012) viewed that IFLA, as a probable accrediting agency, might have pros and cons. On the side of cons, sensitivities may abound about experts, autonomy, local idiosyncrasies, issues, prerogatives, etc. However, on the pros side, it is an established forum, it may have dedicated staff and place, it already has elaborate guidelines, and it may well coordinate with local professional bodies.

Conclusions

The LIS programs in this region are quite rich in physical and computing resources. Availability of electronic classrooms and computing laboratories are indicative of richness of academic facilities in the region. It is yet to be examined how these facilities are updated and replenished, as advancements in ICT applications leave it as a challenge. It is a genuine subject of research that electronic academic applications are used as well, as these have changed the pedagogical aspects of instruction.

The size of faculty in these academic programs also appears to be satisfactory. It is consistent with academic norms of the developed nations. Another reassuring aspect is that a Ph.D. is a minimum academic qualification for induction in academic ranks in these universities. Research is warranted for intensive evaluation of research productivity of faculty in these schools. In two programs, there appeared to be an inadequate number of faculty in senior ranks of Professor and Associate Professor.

One area where serious deficiency was evident is the availability and access to electronic resources needed for both learning and research. Only one school reported that it had access to all major databases that are considered significant for academic and scholarly world. This paucity of database access may pose many problems for graduate studies and faculty research.

Four out of five programs have strong undergraduate programs; having 500 students in Master program also appears to be a large number if the student ratio of 1:10 to 1:14 has to be maintained. In the Arab world, an undergraduate degree has been accepted as the basic professional degree for employment. The civil service of these nations

does not provide structural provision for Master's degree holders. There is a need to investigate this aspect in the six Gulf nations.

We have noted that the policies and practices of evaluation largely vary in the LIS programs. These schools are using evaluation outcomes for improving their academic programs and revision of curricula in different ways.

It was noted that self-study exercise is a norm in the academic programs surveyed in this study. Self-study is considered a prerequisite for any exercise of formal assessment. Self-study entails engaging all the stakeholders and developing elaborate documentation. It provides an opportunity for inward inquiry of all the pertinent factors of market, curricula, facilities, enrollment, and other academic practices. Indeed, self-study is viewed as a point of strength in the assessment scheme of any academic program.

In four programs, external evaluation was applied. Two programs used it for accreditation with CILIP-a UK-based LIS agency. One school reported that it had a periodic assessment every 6^{th} year by inviting an international expert. This external assessment is based on self-study, documentation about instruction, and strategic view held by these schools. In accreditation, the team paid two visits in two schools. Exercise was elaborate, detailed, and incisive.

When accreditation and external assessments are compared, accreditation appears to have a clear edge. Accreditation brings recognition, value, and promise for future development. For quality assurance, it has an assured advantage that graduates of these schools are accepted for further studies or employability in other schools. Since many graduates of these schools proceed overseas for doctoral studies, these are valuable considerations.

We have noted that assessment exercises use different standards and patterns. This flexibility is quite innate, as two schools are similar with each other. Flexible practices lead to divergence and openness. It is quite natural that different programs conduct evaluation exercise differently in terms of objectives, strategies, instruments, outcome, and application.

Quality assurance requires that there should be common parameters for achieving cross-acceptance of degrees in the region. What might be the most credible for achieving this objective is to introduce systems of

accreditation, which is quite a challenging task, but it will surely bring prestige, status, and respectability to the LIS programs.

This study provided valuable insights about assessment and accreditation. A consensus prevailed about the value of accreditation. However, there are different views about possible mechanics and logistics to be applied for implementing accreditation. A forum that is represented by all the schools that are the apparent stakeholders needs to be constituted. Issues about agency, experts, duration, and management need to be discussed and resolved. Only open discussion may bring forth possible solutions of the unresolved issues. Challenges are apparent, yet resolution should be worth the effort.

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