

Saudi Higher Education Accreditation: From Policy to Practice: Cultural Inquiry into Saudi Academics' Practices during the Implementation of Accreditation Standards

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationships between Saudi cultural factors and the practices associated with the implementation of accreditation standards in Saudi higher education institutions (HEIs). Through a qualitative study involving document analysis, interviews, and observations, data was collected from a sample of 33 academic leaders and faculty members at three Saudi universities. The findings reveal a strong correlation between cultural elements and the practices of Saudi academics during the accreditation process. Using a social practice theory (SPT) approach, the study demonstrates how cultural issues influence common practices and actions, highlighting the integration of Saudi identity, traditions, and contemporary values in the implementation methods. The research underscores the importance of cultural awareness in addressing the gap between policy and practice, suggesting that modifications to accreditation guidelines should consider these cultural factors. The study also discusses the positive impact of recent educational reforms and the empowerment of women in supporting the accreditation process. These insights aim to enhance the effectiveness of accreditation efforts in Saudi Arabia, ensuring they meet international standards while respecting the local cultural context.

Keywords: Higher Education; Social Practice; Culture; Accreditation; Standards; Religion.

Introduction

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has embarked on a transformative journey to enhance the quality and global competitiveness of its higher education system. Central to this transformation is the implementation of rigorous accreditation standards designed to ensure academic excellence and institutional effectiveness. The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) plays a pivotal role in this process, setting the benchmarks for quality assurance and accreditation of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Kingdom (National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment, 2021).

This study explores the intricate interplay between Saudi cultural factors and the practices associated with implementing accreditation standards in Saudi HEIs. By examining these cultural dynamics, this research seeks to understand how traditional and contemporary cultural practices influence the accreditation process, and how these influences can be leveraged to achieve successful accreditation outcomes. The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing document analysis, interviews, and observations to gather in-depth insights from academic leaders and faculty members across three Saudi universities (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 underscores the importance of high-quality education in fostering a knowledge-based economy and promoting sustainable development (Vision 2030, 2021). This vision has catalysed significant reforms in the education sector, emphasizing the need for international standards and best practices in educational quality assurance. However, the unique cultural context of Saudi Arabia presents both challenges and opportunities in aligning with these global standards (Al-Fadhli, 2018; Alharbi, 2020). This research aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on educational reform in Saudi Arabia by highlighting the cultural dimensions that shape accreditation practices and proposing strategies for effective implementation.

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The Higher Education Context in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has experienced remarkable social, cultural, and economic transformations, establishing itself as a dynamic and influential nation. The country's ambitious Vision 2030 plan underscores its commitment to diversifying the economy, reducing dependence on oil, and advancing public service sectors, including health, education, infrastructure, and tourism (Vision 2030, 2021). This comprehensive vision aims to propel Saudi Arabia into a knowledge-based economy, fostering innovation and global competitiveness.

Central to Vision 2030 is the transformation of the Kingdom's education sector. The initiative prioritizes enhancing the quality and outcomes of higher education to cultivate a skilled and innovative workforce. This strategic emphasis aligns the educational system with global standards, considering the unique cultural and religious context of Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Education, 2022).

The Kingdom's higher education sector has seen significant growth, reflecting its commitment to improving educational infrastructure and quality. The number of universities has expanded substantially, demonstrating the government's dedication to modernizing and enhancing the educational landscape. This expansion includes the establishment of new state universities and numerous private institutions, underscoring a national priority to provide high-quality education and research opportunities (Ministry of Education, 2022).

The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA), established in 2004, plays a pivotal role in this transformation. As an independent body under the Ministry of Education, the NCAAA is responsible for enhancing quality and accreditation in higher education. It aims to align Saudi higher education with international standards while accommodating local cultural and educational needs (NCAAA, 2021).

The NCAAA's accreditation framework, developed with input from international experts, encompasses eleven standards, categorized into institutional and program-specific criteria. These standards ensure that student learning outcomes, research contributions, and institutional management meet high global quality benchmarks. Despite significant progress, challenges remain, as evidenced by the 2017 NCAAA report indicating that only 9 out of 50 HEIs had fully met accreditation standards, highlighting the ongoing efforts to achieve comprehensive quality assurance (NCAAA, 2021).

Vision 2030 has intensified efforts to improve higher education quality, setting ambitious targets for HEIs to achieve accredited status. This drive is essential for fostering innovation, research excellence, and economic diversification, positioning Saudi Arabia as a leader in global education (Al-Fadhli, 2018).

In summary, Saudi Arabia's higher education sector is undergoing a transformative journey, driven by Vision 2030 and continuous modernization efforts. The commitment to achieving comprehensive accreditation and quality assurance reflects the Kingdom's dedication to fostering a globally competitive and innovative educational environment.

Aim and Questions

This study aims to investigate the discrepancies between the expectations set by the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) and the actual implementation of these policies in Saudi Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Specifically, it examines the cultural factors and issues that may impede the effective application of accreditation requirements. The research also seeks to identify potential strategies for bridging these gaps.

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the cultural issues influencing the implementation of national accreditation standards, this study addresses the following research questions:

To what extent do Saudi cultural factors influence the practices of individuals during the accreditation processes?

How can a social practice approach elucidate the impact of Saudi cultural characteristics on the practices of Saudi academics during accreditation?

This research employs a Social Practice Theory (SPT) framework to analyse the interplay between cultural elements and accreditation practices, providing insights into how cultural identity, religion, and tradition shape the implementation processes within Saudi HEIs. The study's findings aim to contribute to the development of culturally informed accreditation policies and practices that align with both global standards and local contexts.

Gap in Literature

Despite significant reforms, there is limited understanding of how Saudi cultural factors impact the implementation of accreditation standards. Existing studies often focus on policy development and institutional growth, without addressing the cultural context influencing these processes. For instance, Alharbi (2020) discusses the advancements in policy but does not delve into the cultural intricacies that shape the implementation of these policies. Similarly, Alhazmi (2013) emphasizes the rapid expansion of higher education institutions but overlooks the cultural barriers that may hinder effective accreditation.

Research by Alqefari (2018) highlights the administrative challenges in implementing accreditation standards but falls short of examining the cultural factors that influence these challenges. Moreover, Aldiab et al. (2017) provide insights into the technological advancements and their integration into the education system, yet they do not consider how cultural values and norms impact these advancements.

This research aims to fill this gap by exploring how cultural factors affect accreditation practices in Saudi HEIs, using Western theoretical models adapted to the Saudi context. By employing a Social Practice Theory (SPT) approach, this study investigates the extent to which cultural elements such as identity, religion, and tradition influence the implementation of accreditation standards. This approach not only enriches the understanding of accreditation processes in Saudi Arabia but also provides a framework for integrating cultural considerations into policy and practice.

Saudi Culture

Saudi Arabia's culture is rich and multifaceted, characterized by a blend of traditional values and modern influences. The cultural landscape of Saudi Arabia is marked by strong kinship ties, a deep sense of community, and a commitment to hospitality and generosity.

One of the defining features of Saudi culture is its strong kinship and tribal traditions. Family is the cornerstone of Saudi society, with extended family networks providing social support and playing a crucial role in the lives of individuals. These strong family ties foster a sense of belonging and mutual assistance, contributing to the social cohesion of the nation (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2004).

The cultural practice of hospitality is another prominent aspect of Saudi life. Saudis are renowned for their generosity and welcoming nature, which are integral to social interactions and community life. This tradition of hospitality is deeply ingrained and extends to both personal and professional relationships, enhancing social bonds and fostering a collaborative environment (Long & Maisel, 2010).

Education is highly valued in Saudi culture, reflecting the nation's commitment to progress and development. The emphasis on education is evident in the significant investments made in educational infrastructure and initiatives, aimed at fostering a knowledge-based economy. This cultural value aligns with Saudi Vision 2030, which prioritizes education as a key driver of national development (Vision 2030, 2016).

Saudi culture also places a strong emphasis on respect for elders and authority figures, promoting a hierarchical yet respectful social structure. This respect is manifested in everyday interactions and contributes to a sense of order and stability within communities (Yamani, 2009).

Moreover, the cultural significance of arts and heritage in Saudi Arabia cannot be overlooked. The country has a rich tradition of poetry, music, and visual arts, which are celebrated and preserved through various cultural festivals and institutions. These cultural expressions are not only a source of national pride but also a means of preserving and transmitting cultural values to future generations (Al-Farsy, 1990).

In summary, Saudi culture is characterized by strong family bonds, a tradition of hospitality, a commitment to education, respect for authority, and a rich heritage of arts and traditions. These cultural attributes play a vital role in shaping the social fabric of Saudi society and have significant implications for various sectors, including higher education.

Accreditation: From Policy to Practice

The successful implementation of accreditation systems is contingent upon numerous factors, including the specific environmental conditions of the country or institution involved, the nature of the accreditation standards, and the methods of their application. In Saudi Arabia, the effective implementation of accreditation standards is a critical concern within the framework of the government's higher education reform agenda. This issue was highlighted by the 2008 Report to the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) from external reviewers, which examined the educational performance of a higher education institution (HEI) in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia. The report identified significant institutional academic weaknesses and areas necessitating substantial development. Notably, it pointed out the persistent use of outdated examination methods and the disconnection between student learning assessments and educational outcomes. The report recommended a stronger emphasis on defining clear learning outcomes, aligning them with teaching methodologies, and establishing robust evaluation processes (Al-Hattami, Muammar, & Elmahdi, 2013).

Despite substantial financial investment and extensive time allocated to accreditation programs, research has not consistently demonstrated the impact of accreditation on the quality of education or its practical relevance. Furthermore, there is limited empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of the accreditation standards employed. The scarcity of literature addressing the challenges of implementing accreditation may stem from the relatively recent adoption of accreditation processes by Saudi universities. For instance, Al-Fattah and Al-Misned (2019) argue that the novelty of these processes in the Saudi context presents unique challenges and opportunities for HEIs. Similarly, Al-Qahtani (2020) underscores the necessity of contextualizing accreditation practices to better suit the cultural and institutional landscape of Saudi Arabia.

In summary, while accreditation is intended to enhance educational quality, the practical challenges of its implementation in Saudi HEIs underscore the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation of accreditation standards to ensure their effectiveness and relevance.

Social Practice Theory (SPT)

Social Practice Theory (SPT) is a cultural theory primarily concerned with explaining and understanding actions through symbolic structures of meaning (Reckwitz, 2002a). Emerging from sociology, SPT provides a novel framework for comprehending social change (Schatzki, Knorr, & von Savigny, 2001; Warde, 2005; Reckwitz, 2002b).

The origins of SPT can be traced back to the 1960s, significantly shaped by Pierre Bourdieu's pioneering work. Bourdieu's contributions are encapsulated in his seminal books "The Logic of Practice" (1990) and "Outline of a Theory of Practice" (1977), alongside numerous articles that highlight the role of practices in society. Bourdieu's theoretical advancements offered a new lens for analysing and understanding societal structures, emphasizing the crucial roles of cultural characteristics and pre-existing structures in shaping individual practices.

Central to Bourdieu's SPT is the concept of "habitus," which he describes as a set of deeply ingrained patterns of sense, taste, thought, and behaviour (Bourdieu, 1985; Ozturk, 2004). This concept forms the basis for a cultural approach to structural analysis, underscoring the interplay between social practices and

social structures. Habitus is instrumental in elucidating the relationship between social action and structural constraints, providing insights into the rules that guide social behaviour.

Reckwitz (2002b) expanded on Bourdieu's ideas, refining SPT within the context of sociology. He defines practice as “a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood” (Reckwitz, 2002b, p. 250). This definition underscores practice as a series of bodily and mental activities occurring across various contexts, embodying individuals' understanding, and interactions with their world (Reckwitz, 2006).

SPT posits that practices are the fundamental units of social life, serving as the primary focus of social analysis. Every action or activity is considered an integral part of the diverse practices constituting the fabric of social existence (Warde, 2003). This perspective positions practices at the core of social being, emphasizing their significance in shaping and reflecting the myriad dimensions of social life.

Understanding the Cultural Role from the Perspective of Social Practice Theory (SPT)

Social Practice Theory (SPT) underscores the integration of individuals with their surrounding environment, emphasizing the intricate relationship between culture and context in shaping common practices and actions (Herndl & Nahrwold, 2000). This theoretical framework accentuates the role of culture in molding human thoughts and social actions by examining daily behaviors and routines, recognizing that cultural structures influence individual practices, and individuals, in turn, reinforce their culture. Shove and Pantzar (2007) posited that culture is inherently a component of practice, arguing that cultural dimensions significantly shape people's lifestyles (Shove, 2003).

Individuals are born with a general capability for agency, yet specific cultural characteristics refine this agency (Kipo, 2013). Archer (2000) argued that culture possesses an objective reality independent of individuals, proposing that the ideas of past performers continue to influence contemporary societal practices (Archer, 1988). Similarly, social practices have the potential to shape future cultural landscapes.

Trowler (2004) affirmed the importance of cultural diversity, stating that even within a single institution, cultural diversity and dynamism are prevalent. Social practices and their underlying beliefs, values, emotions, and frames of reference vary significantly across different contexts, highlighting the existence of diverse cultural worlds within any given environment.

The impact of culture on implementation processes is evident in various societal structures. The effectiveness of governmental policies, institutional performance assessments, and the decisions made by educators, students, researchers, and external collaborators are all influenced by cultural values and norms (Saunders, 2011). Understanding these cultural dynamics is crucial for comprehensively analysing the implementation of practices within any social context.

Here is a summary figure of Social Practice Theory (SPT) that includes the key components and their interrelations:

Summary of Social Practice Theory (SPT)

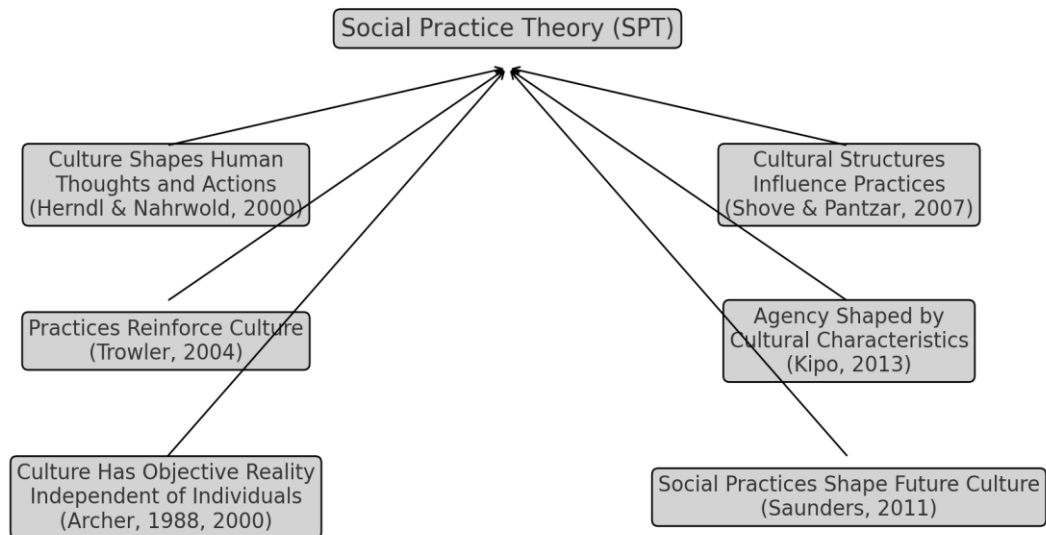


Figure (1): Social Practice Theory (SPT)

Methodology and Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach to investigate the implementation of accreditation standards in Saudi Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The qualitative approach was chosen for several reasons. First, it allows for a detailed exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences, which is crucial for understanding the complex process of implementing accreditation standards (Creswell, 2013). Second, qualitative methods are effective in capturing the context-specific factors and cultural nuances that influence practices within Saudi HEIs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Finally, qualitative research facilitates a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study, enabling the researcher to identify patterns and themes that might not be evident through quantitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The qualitative methodology is justified for this study due to its effectiveness in exploring complex phenomena within their contexts (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is particularly suitable for understanding the nuanced and multifaceted experiences of individuals, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of their perspectives and practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study primarily relies on document analysis, supplemented by interviews and observations. Document analysis provides an overview of Saudi accreditation standards and the conceptual framework of the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) regarding these standards. Interviews with Saudi academics help uncover the rationale behind their actions, while observations offer insights into their actual practices. These methods are integrated to comprehensively address the research questions, enabling access to the experiences of Saudi universities and the collection of qualitative data pertinent to the study.

Participants

The study was conducted across three Saudi universities of varying academic standings, sizes, and locations, utilizing a case study approach. A total of 33 participants were involved, representing four distinct groups within the universities:

Heads of Departments (HOD): Eight male heads from various accredited departments participated, reflecting the predominantly male leadership in Saudi universities.

Faculty Members (FM): Sixteen faculty members from different accredited departments, representing both genders.

Deanship of Quality and Accreditation (DOQA): Nine participants from the Deanship of Quality and Accreditation, including three male deans and six assistant deans (both males and females).

All participants were actively involved in the accreditation processes at their respective universities. Their selection was based on their knowledge, experience, and beliefs regarding the implementation of accreditation standards. Participation was voluntary, and all data were kept confidential to ensure the privacy and integrity of the responses.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the influential role of culture in shaping people's lives, as highlighted by Bourdieu (1991), Shove (2003), Archer (2000), and Trowler (2004). Despite the implementation of new Saudi accreditation standards to address global challenges, national accreditation documents emphasize the importance of Saudi cultural characteristics within education. Saudi higher education maintains a traditional system, which is crucial for preserving Saudi identity amidst globalization and increased interconnectedness.

The distinction between Saudi cultural practices rooted in religion and those based on tradition is essential. Kurtz (2007) argues that religion is inherently part of a culture, and even in secular states, it constitutes a significant cultural element. This study supports this view, as these practices significantly impact the performance of participants, indicating areas for improvement.

Document analysis revealed that the national accreditation documents stress the importance of maintaining Saudi cultural identity. The documents highlight the role of religious and traditional values in shaping educational practices and policies. The accreditation guidelines emphasize the integration of these cultural values to ensure that educational reforms are aligned with the national identity. This alignment helps in fostering a sense of continuity and respect for cultural heritage while meeting global educational standards.

Observations within the universities revealed a strong sense of community and collective responsibility. This cultural trait fosters a supportive environment where faculty and staff work collaboratively towards common goals, such as achieving accreditation standards. Observations indicated that community values facilitate effective teamwork and shared accountability, which are crucial for successful accreditation processes. This is supported by Al-Ghamdi and Al-Shehri (2020), who noted that community support and collective effort are vital in driving institutional success in Saudi higher education.

The study also observed that cultural values emphasizing respect for authority and hierarchical structures positively influence the accreditation process. These values ensure that policies and procedures are followed diligently, which is essential for meeting accreditation requirements. Participants expressed that this respect for established procedures and standards contributes to a more structured and reliable implementation of accreditation guidelines. According to Al-Qahtani (2021), adherence to hierarchical structures and respect for authority play a significant role in the smooth operation of Saudi universities.

Interviews with participants provided numerous examples of the impact of cultural practices within universities. Gender roles in Saudi culture, previously seen as restrictive, have undergone significant transformation, promoting a more inclusive environment for women. Female participants noted that recent changes have positively influenced their roles, behaviours, and opportunities, enhancing their satisfaction and effectiveness in their roles. This progressive shift supports the implementation of accreditation standards by ensuring that all faculty members, regardless of gender, can contribute effectively. Al-Harbi (2019) highlights that these changes have empowered women, providing them with more significant roles in the educational sector.

Moreover, interviews highlighted the integration of Islamic principles, which advocate for equality, honesty, and fairness, into every aspect of university life. Aligning practices with these values ensures a more ethical and just environment, facilitating the acceptance and successful implementation of accreditation standards. Al-Rashidi (2018) suggests that incorporating Islamic values in educational policies promotes a balanced and fair academic environment.

Participants also noted the positive influence of recent educational reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of higher education. These reforms, supported by Vision 2030, emphasize the importance of innovation, quality assurance, and continuous improvement. Interviewees acknowledged that these reforms have brought about significant improvements in the accreditation process, aligning it with international standards while respecting local cultural contexts.

The findings indicate that cultural dynamics, including the recent positive changes in gender roles and the emphasis on community and respect for authority, significantly contribute to the effective implementation of accreditation processes. By leveraging these cultural strengths, Saudi universities can enhance their accreditation efforts, ensuring they meet international standards while respecting and incorporating the unique cultural context of the country.

To provide a clearer understanding of these findings, the following figure summarizes the major cultural influences identified in the study and their implications for the accreditation process.

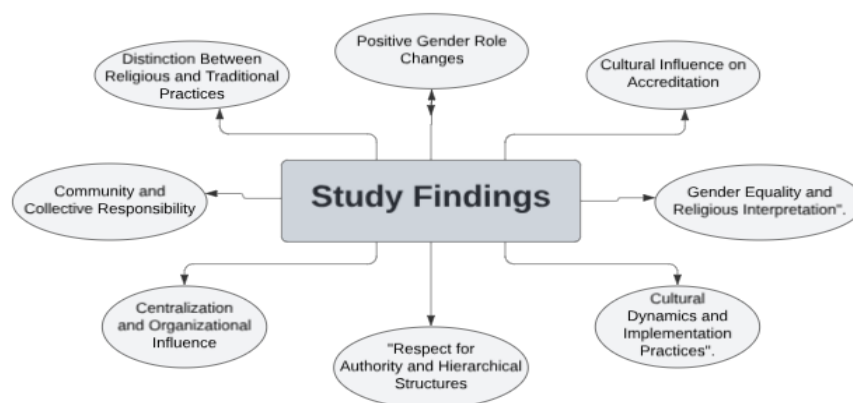


Figure (2) study findings

Suggestions for Improvements

Enhance Faculty Training and Development Programs

To enhance faculty training and development programs, it is recommended to implement comprehensive training and development programs for faculty to enhance their skills and knowledge in line with accreditation standards. Continuous professional development ensures that faculty are well-equipped to meet the evolving demands of higher education and contribute effectively to the accreditation process. Al-Qahtani (2021) highlights the importance of ongoing training for faculty to adapt to new educational standards and methodologies.

Promote Gender Equality and Inclusivity

Promoting gender equality and inclusivity is crucial. Strengthen policies that promote gender equality and inclusivity within the academic environment. Ensuring equal opportunities for all faculty members, regardless of gender, enhances the overall quality of education and supports the successful implementation of accreditation standards. Al-Harbi (2019) emphasizes the positive impact of empowering women in Saudi higher education, leading to greater contributions to academic excellence.

Leverage Community and Collective Responsibility

Fostering a culture of community and collective responsibility among faculty and staff is essential. Collaborative efforts and shared accountability are crucial for achieving accreditation standards and driving institutional success. Al-Ghamdi and Al-Shehri (2020) note that community support and collective effort are key factors in the success of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia.

Decentralised Decision-Making Processes

Decentralising decision-making processes to allow greater autonomy for universities in developing their own staffing, academic policies, and budgeting is recommended. Increased autonomy enables universities to tailor their strategies to meet accreditation requirements more effectively. Greater decentralization can lead to more responsive and adaptive management practices, as suggested by Trowler (2004).

Integrate Islamic Principles into Accreditation Guidelines

Ensuring that accreditation guidelines and policies are aligned with Islamic principles of equality, honesty, and fairness is important. Integrating these principles creates a more ethical and just educational environment, facilitating the acceptance and successful implementation of accreditation standards. Al-Rashidi (2018) argues that incorporating Islamic values in educational policies promotes a balanced and fair academic environment.

Implement Feedback Mechanisms

Developing robust feedback mechanisms to gather input from faculty, students, and other stakeholders on the accreditation process is necessary. Regular feedback helps identify areas for improvement and ensures that the accreditation process remains relevant and effective. Continuous improvement based on stakeholder feedback is essential for maintaining high educational standards (Shove, 2003).

Strengthen International Collaborations

Establishing and strengthening collaborations with internationally accredited institutions to share best practices and gain insights into successful accreditation strategies is beneficial. Learning from global best practices helps Saudi universities enhance their accreditation efforts and align with international standards. Al-Ghamdi and Al-Shehri (2020) suggest that international collaborations can significantly improve the quality of higher education.

Promote Awareness and Understanding of Accreditation Standards

Conducting awareness campaigns and workshops to educate faculty and staff about the importance and requirements of accreditation is vital. Increased awareness and understanding of accreditation standards ensure that all stakeholders are committed to achieving and maintaining these standards. Effective communication and education about accreditation processes are critical for successful implementation (Bourdieu, 1991).

By implementing these recommendations, Saudi universities can enhance their accreditation processes, ensuring they meet international standards while respecting and incorporating the unique cultural context of the country.

Conclusion

Implementing accreditation in educational environments that have long relied on traditional cultural structures requires meticulous and strategic planning. Integrating well-designed strategies into the accreditation development process is essential. One effective method is to learn from the successes of distinguished higher education institutions (HEIs) in developed countries. These institutions can offer valuable guidance and share their experiences, fostering positive changes and mitigating negative influences.

While it may not be feasible to modify all religious, cultural, and social aspects, the likelihood of successful accreditation in Saudi Arabia increases when essential modifications and changes to current accreditation guidelines and policies are made with a thorough understanding of Saudi cultural elements. By leveraging these cultural elements, Saudi accreditation efforts can be more effectively tailored to the local context.

Strategic planning should encompass culturally aware strategies for implementing accreditation within the Saudi educational context. Engaging in collaboration and learning exchanges with successful HEIs in developed countries can provide invaluable guidance and experiences. Adjustments to accreditation guidelines should respect and incorporate Saudi cultural elements, ensuring they are both effective and culturally sensitive. Continuous refinement and improvement of accreditation practices, based on feedback and experiences, can align them with both global standards and local cultural contexts.

Adopting these approaches will enhance the effectiveness and acceptance of accreditation processes in Saudi Arabia, ensuring they meet international standards while respecting and incorporating the unique cultural context of the country.

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