



# Accrediting the MD Programme in Sultan Qaboos University: Process, Earned Benefits, and Lessons Learned

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## Abstract

The MD Programme of the College of Medicine and Health Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, has been accredited recently. The College has been preparing for this event for more than ten years and wishes to share its experience with other regional medical colleges. The process of accreditation *per se* took less than three years to complete and most of the time was spent to prepare for the process; to build-up capacity in addition to implementing curricular reforms and other requirements that were needed to comply with accreditation standards. In the end of this exercise, the College has earned many benefits as well as learned some lessons. This article describes the most notable activities and events and discusses how the College responded to the challenges posed.

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## 1. Introduction

In November 2013, the MD Programme of College of Medicine and Health Sciences (COMHS) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) was accredited for a ten-year period (on its first attempt) by the Association for Medical Education in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (AMEEMR) in association with and in accordance with the standards of the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME). The accreditation decision was made on the basis that the MD Programme

complies with the WFME's Basic and Quality Development Standards. It is noteworthy to mention, in this respect, that "Quality Development Standards" are considered by the WFME as best practice, thus, the accreditation decision granted a distinguished status to the COMHS' MD Programme.

### 1.1. Purpose of academic accreditation

In medical education, the question of quality was first raised in the USA by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Education who delegated Abraham Flexner to conduct a study on the status of medical education; Flexner Report was published in 1910.<sup>1</sup> In 1942, the accrediting agency for the U.S. and Canadian medical education programmes i.e. the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) was founded

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after a meeting of leaders of the Association of American Medical Colleges and the American Medical Association. Its mission was to assure the quality of medical education. Notably, the founding meeting between the two organizations expressed a concern over the ‘social responsibility’ of medical education and the importance of translating it into ‘standards of accreditation’ that protect educational quality and foster its improvement.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the process of accreditation was introduced as an instrument of quality assurance and improvement to encourage and assist medical colleges to evaluate their educational programmes.

Currently, the issue of quality assurance and improvement is becoming more pertinent taking the form of accreditation due to the being witnessed large increase in the number of medical colleges (public and private) of which some are of dubious quality and due to the wave of globalization which eases exchange of faculty and students, enhances cross-border education and facilitates communication. These effects further accentuated the need to define minimum criteria for accepting a medical education provider.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there is a public demand to ensure that a medical college actually provides what it claims to provide so that it fulfills the expectations of society for quality education; a factor that further empowered accrediting agencies with more perceptible authority.<sup>4</sup>

However, accreditation is not all about “accountability” as it infers a value-added benefit by recognizing those colleges that meet the accepted minimum standards or those who exceed the minimum requirements and attain academic excellence.

### 1.2. Why the COMHS sought accreditation of its MD Programme?

SQU COMHS pursued to accredit its MD Programme for many reasons. Primarily, however, the College needed to identify areas of improvement as well as areas of strength in its structure and performance. Additionally, the College sought to: (1) *Acquire a certification of professional competence*. The belief that initially motivated the College to pursue accreditation was that, if the College believes that it is providing quality medical education, then there is no reason for it to conceal from public scrutiny and evaluation! The society demands attaining professional accreditation standards to satisfy entry level requirements for any acceptable medical education programme, and it perceives a college which delivers an accredited MD Programme as one that meets the minimum accepted level of professional competence; whereas, a programme from an un-accredited college is considered as one that weakens

the options of graduates’ pursuit of employment and career development. (2) *Obtain a proof of excellence in some areas, if applicable*. An accredited programme that exceeds minimum standards and satisfies “best practice” criteria may not necessarily be guaranteed success. However, such an attainment presents a testimony of excellence to the general public and peers. The COMHS believed in its MD Programme performance as one with many merits that deserved to be acknowledged by public independent evaluation as “best practices”. (3) *Be committed to continuous improvement*. The accreditation process persuades an institution to be committed to improvement by explicit as well as implicit means. For example, the process itself requires periodic evaluation; self-studies mandate commitment to continuous improvement; peer evaluation helps to establish a communication network that assists institutions to reach their full potential; periodic reviews and reports prevent academic stagnation. In addition, the College through constructive self-criticism will maintain the vitality of its MD Programme. (4) *Guarantee societal reliability*. The College elected to communicate to the society its accreditation to enhance its institutional integrity and reliability in terms of human resources capabilities, policies, physical facilities etc. Accreditation requires that adequate standards be met in all these areas. Accredited programmes confirm that they treat staff and students with respect and dignity. Programmes that are accredited follow established principles of management and provide safe and adequate facilities commensurate with their educational purposes. And (5) *boost institutional ownership among its staff and students*. The College envisioned that the accreditation endeavour, as planned, would boost institutional ownership among staff and students, which may reflect on stronger loyalty and, hence, improved performance. Since accrediting the College was of value and benefit to all staff and students, this was taken as an opportunity to solicit and enlist support and solidarity of all staff and students.

### 1.3. COMHS at a glance

For comparison purposes, it is of value, to other regional colleges who want to benefit from our experience, to describe in a glance, some of the College’s relevant information to show its scope, staff, MD Programme history, teaching and support facilities etc. since these were important to the evaluation process.

#### 1.3.1. Background information

The COMHS was one of the first five colleges that started with inauguration of SQU in 1986. At present, SQU comprises nine colleges and, so far, is the only

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