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INTERNATIONALIZING THE TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM AT SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY: THE PROCESSES, CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

Khalaf Al -Abri ^a, Sulaiman Al-Balushi ^b and Mahmoud Emam ^c

^a *Department of Educational Administration,*

Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

Email: kabri@squ.edu.om

^b *Department of Curriculum and Instruction,*

Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

Email: sbalushi@squ.edu.om

^c *Psychology Department*

Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.

Email: memam@squ.edu.om

ABSTRACT

The current paper presents briefly the case of the accreditation of teacher education at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) as an exemplary program that has been successful to gain recognition from top international accrediting body of teacher education program in the world, namely National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). The paper discusses how internationalization has informed the accreditation progress of the teacher education program accreditation and how this helped SQU to stand out as an exemplary case of internationalizing its teacher education program not only in the Gulf Cooperating Council (GCC) countries but in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The paper begins with providing some background of the college of education at SQU. To give a full picture of the process, the SQU teacher education program was described, elaborating how international standards informed its restructuring in order to align the program with international standards. It has been stressed that the process of accreditation has led to creating a climate for accreditation with the need to focus on evidence and assessment across all areas of the college and programs. The paper also points out to the cognitive and organizational restructuring that happened at all the levels. The paper closes with challenges that faced the program in gaining NCATE accreditation and the benefits that were gained.

Keywords: Teacher Education Program, Internationalization, Accreditation, Sultan Qaboos University

Subject area: (Please put a "X" as appropriate)

X	a) Accreditation (In its broadest sense)
	b) Research (related to Internationalisation either linked to students or partnerships with international establishments)
	c) Affiliation (with International partners involved in HE)
	d) International students and sponsorship

Name of presenter/key speaker:

Dr. Mahmoud Mohamed Emam

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Khalaf Al -Abri ^a, Sulaiman Al-Balushi ^b and Mahmoud Emam ^c

^a *Department of Educational Administration,
Sultan Qaboos University, Oman
Email: kabri@squ.edu.om*

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The current paper presents briefly the case of the accreditation of teacher education at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) as an exemplary program that has been successful to gain recognition from top international accrediting body of teacher education program in the world, namely National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). The paper discusses how internationalization has informed the accreditation progress of the teacher education program accreditation and how this helped SQU to stand out as an exemplary case of internationalizing its teacher education program not only in the Gulf Cooperating Council (GCC) countries but in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The paper begins with providing some background of the college of education at SQU. To give a full picture of the process, the SQU teacher education program was described, elaborating how international standards informed its restructuring in order to align the program with international standards. It has been stressed that the process of accreditation has led to creating a climate for accreditation with the need to focus on evidence and assessment across all areas of the college and programs. The paper also points out to the cognitive and organizational restructuring that happened at all the levels. The paper closes with challenges that faced the program in gaining NCATE accreditation and the benefits that were gained.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The debate about whether teacher preparation and certification are related to teacher effectiveness and has an impact on student learning is particularly contentious worldwide. Effective teaching has always been important, and, in recent years, the effectiveness of programs to produce high-quality teachers has become an issue of international concern. The internationalization of such concern has led to a similar internationalization of standards for teacher preparation. Traditionally, teacher preparation programs relied on measuring program inputs such as faculty qualifications, faculty-student ratios, competitiveness rankings, enrollment data, or general requirements. Recently, however, there has been a trend toward measuring more meaningful processes which has moved the field closer toward using measures that provide more useful information for stakeholders desiring to ensure program improvement and accountability. Although the research on this trend is still developing, a growing consensus suggests that three aspects of program processes are important for program effectiveness: (1) program selection, (2) program content (i.e., what is taught in the teacher preparation program), and (3) program structure (i.e., the extent to which candidates have access to high-quality clinical experiences throughout their preservice experience; NCATE, 2010). More recently, however, there have been calls by many researchers to move away from the measurement of these processes to measuring outcomes which will provide evidence of program effectiveness (Coggshall, Bivona, & Reschly, 2012; Boyd et al., 2009). Nevertheless, arguments continue regarding the utility and limitations of each the three aforementioned perspectives: evaluation of inputs, evaluation of

processes, and evaluation of outcomes.

Oman has witnessed a similar debate on teacher education program and teacher performance assessment in the last decade. The establishment of the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority has opened the gate for discussions on the quality of higher education academic programs including teacher education. The majority of academic program in public and private higher education institutions sought national and international recognition from specialized program associations. In 2016, the teacher education program at Sultan Qaboos University was the first teacher preparation program in a public university in the Gulf region to be accredited by National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). This achievement has led to further discussion on the importance of connecting teacher education programs with teacher performance particularly as the Ministry of education embraced an array of teacher performance assessment known as Key Performance Indicators (KPI) in 2016. Such connection would require an emphasis on the extent to which teacher education programs impact student learning in schools. Similarly, there has been considerable developments in school leadership towards supporting student learning (Al-Mahdy, Emam, Hallinger, 2018). Given these developments, the current project seeks to evaluate the outcomes of teacher education programs in schools based on national KPI and international standards as well as exemplary models for preparing teachers and for evaluating teacher program effectiveness. Additionally, the project examines how such evaluations can inform the redesign of teacher education programs and whether the newly designed program can provide evidence of impact on student learning in schools.

The central role of the teacher in the teaching and learning processes requires that teacher education (TE) must be of the highest quality toward achieving cherished educational goals. This theme has become internationalized as a result of the emergence of accrediting bodies across the globe which have extended its activities beyond borders; coloring themselves with the international cliché. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) which is now known nowadays as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) is one of such examples. As a result, a number of TE program in the Middle East and North Africa region have considered linking themselves with CAEP. In Oman, the TE program at Sultan Qaboos University is among of the first TE programs in the region to have taken this step. In 2010 the College of Education at SQU took the decision to seek accreditation from NCATE; In 2016, it was “Accredited without any further conditions” for a seven-year period by the NCATE; and now the college is seeking accreditation from the new CAEP. The synoptic historical overview reflects how accreditation of TE at SQU from the US NCATE body has contributed to the internationalization of higher education (HE) in the Sultanate of Oman. The aim of the paper is to showcase the experience of the College of Education at SQU in redesigning its TE program according to the US standards. The internationalization processes through the accreditation of TE program will be presented, focusing on the challenges faced and the benefits gained. Overall, the paper gives an account of how the Omani context of the TE program has responded to the international requirement of the US standards, leading to some changes.

1.1. Background about the College Accreditation

The College of Education at Sultan Qaboos University, private institutions in Oman, and institutions abroad are the Ministry’s sources for preparing newly qualified teachers. Between 1997 and 2005, Education Colleges located in six different regions in Oman provided teacher preparation courses awarding a bachelor degree. The colleges were transformed into Applied Sciences colleges and education as a specialization was discontinued. Recently, however, increased demand meant that one of the colleges – Rustaq College – reintroduced some courses in education/ teacher training (Al Shabibi and Silvennoinen, 2016). The College of Education at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is the leading institution in Oman involved in the training of new teachers. However, SQU provides training for only about 15% of newly qualified teachers; the rest come from private institutions in Oman and institutions abroad. The variable standards in these institutions is a matter of concern and it is widely claimed that levels of subject knowledge and teaching skills of newly qualified teachers is

dependent on which institution they have graduated from (World Bank, 2012).

Although most of the staff in the College of Education Faculty in SQU was trained as teachers, many were immediately selected for sponsored postgraduate programs abroad and later returned to join the College. As a result, most have limited experience in teaching in a school setting. Similarly, most of the educational staff at private universities is foreigners who were initially trained as teachers, but few have had careers teaching school-age students. These patterns have resulted in a theoretical lecture approach in education (World Bank, 2012). Teacher education for Cycle 1 (Grades 1 to 4) applies to female teachers only, as all Cycle 1 teachers are all female. These programs emphasize pedagogy, with approximately 30 percent of the coursework devoted to teachers' areas of specialization (e.g., mathematics, science, English, or the humanities). Programs for Cycle 2 teachers place greater emphasis on subject specialization, with approximately 50 percent of coursework devoted to areas of specialization.

College of Education recently received accreditation for 7 years (2016-2022) under the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards. NCATE's performance-based accreditation system for teacher preparation ensures that teacher candidates are prepared to make a difference in P-12 student learning. Academic accreditation has brought a wide variety of benefits to the College of Education. This includes but not limited to the establishment of a system for quality assurance and assessment system, improvements in the field experience and field training, new placement system of student teachers in the training schools based on established criteria, introduction of new courses in different programs based on standards and introduction of new experience for student teachers to deal with students of diversified backgrounds and special needs (Squmedia, 2016). An integral part of the accreditation process was to seek National Recognition for six (6) of our programs that fell under the aegis of Specialty Professional Associations (SPA) in the United States. All six programs were aligned with the standards of these specialized associations. After an extensive self-study and collection/analysis of assessment data for each of the programs, SPA reports were submitted for review. The programs are: Science Education (recognized by the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA)), Early Childhood Education (recognized by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)), English Teaching and Learning (recognized by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)), Instructional & Learning Technology, (recognized by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)), Physical Education (recognized by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE)), and Math Education (recognized by the (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)) (Squmedia, 2016).

2. INTERNATIONALIZATION AND ACCREDITATION OF TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

Internationalization in HE is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of HE (Knight, 2015). Saying it differently, it is about the movement of programs, people (faculty, students, etc.), degrees, campuses, standards, etc. across the national borders in the HE system. In this paper, we are talking about the implementation of US TE standards to a national context (Oman), showing how that has impacted the national Omani context of TE.

A number of scholars have argued that globalization has brought to the education arena new issues not considered a few decades ago, which are the import and export of HE as well as their connections with quality assurance (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Van Damme, 2000). Accreditation and certification, on the one hand, are the usual way universities assure quality and acquire recognition in their communities and overseas. Additionally, accreditation and certification are a manner in which universities change radically and become connected with the market economy. Internationalization is the process of establishing relationships with foreign countries. It includes the import and export of HE in modalities such as transnational corporate universities, campus franchising, and online learning, as well as mobility of programs, faculty, and students (Al'Abri, 2016; Knight, 2015). Although several local public and private universities in the MENA region are well recognized in the region and sometimes overseas, yet there is a need for additional efforts to assure quality and recognition. The adoption of quality international standards by local institutions, as well as the commitment to

internationalize their campuses, are necessary steps to counterbalance the competition of foreign universities (Castle & Kelly, 2004).

3. METHODOLOGY

Grounded in the interpretivist epistemology, the current study uses the case study approach to examine the contextualization of CAEP standards to the Omani context. The authors use the narrative method to reflect on their own experiences as members of the Accreditation Steering Committee that led the college to obtaining NCATE accreditation in 2016 and in transitioning to CAEP standards. The paper is also framed around CAEP standards, the assessment tools, and the NCATE report in the last cycle of accreditation.

The paper adds to the contemporary TE internationalization efforts and presents the SQU TE program as a case study of leading the change in teacher preparation programs in the Gulf region. Adopting a case study method and employing a reflexive narrative, the authors attempt to highlight how such changes can be successful in making amendments to the structure of teacher preparation, type of teacher training pursued, and pathways to teacher development in The Sultanate of Oman. It examines how the question of having a vision and strong will for improvement of TE program can lead to a change in outcomes and hence teacher effectiveness based on international standards. The authors advocate that leading change in TE should be a goal oriented process. Implications of presenting the case of TE program at SQU are discussed in terms of the need for exemplary models of best practices in bringing internationalization to TE in Oman as well as in the Gulf region.

4. FINDINGS

In this section we reflect on the processes, challenges and benefits which characterize the case of SQU teacher education program accreditation. The discussion of these three aspects is weaved through the internationalization perspective as accreditation was seen as a newly Western and international phenomenon.

4.1 Processes

The accreditation process involves working towards fulfilling external standards which are approved as being the correct metrics for judging the quality of the teacher education program and therefore its graduates. To fulfil the NCATE requirements and to currently work on fulfilling the CAEP standards as the college is making such transition, several processes have to be considered. We will describe them as follows. (1) The college went through the first process of aligning all College's programs to CAEP standards, which focus on the quality of teacher education programs and their candidates throughout the phases of admission, progression, graduation and employment. (2) This was followed by aligning all College's programs to the InTASC standards, which emphasize the importance of knowledge, skills and dispositions of teacher candidates (see figure 1). (3) It was important to expand the school-based training as field experiences and teacher preservice training are two core issue of the accreditation process. (4) Developing an assessment system in order to evaluate candidates' attainment of the standards-related competencies using well-established assessment tools. (5) Connected to the aforementioned process was the formation of a committee of Jury to review the assessment system and its instruments in terms of authenticity and fidelity. This entailed testing validity and reliability by collecting data using the instruments as a type of pilot administration. (6) The process of data collection and data analysis are pivotal for proving the claims of quality that the college has been working on. Each program has to collect data on the candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions, analyze the data, and report the results. This is followed by using the results to inform future changes and improvements. (7) the role of the departmental, college and college advisory boards is significant as they supervise the whole process of accreditation, ensuring that the data and feedback inform program improvement. The boards also adopt evidence based decisions, i.e. no decisions are taken unless. (8) An important phase is that which comes at the exit stage. In that stage surveys are administered to measure the impact of the graduates in the educational field and on students' learning. These surveys include graduate survey, employer survey and school student

perception survey. (9) CAEP standards emphasize the importance of building up a strong partnership with the educational field including the Ministry of Education and its schools. An official Letter of Understanding has been signed between Sultan Qaboos University and the Ministry to guide the collaborative efforts to prepare teacher candidates. (10) Finally, the process of involving stakeholders in reviewing data related to different programs and providing their feedback on the performance of teacher candidates has been an essential element of the accreditation process by CAEP.

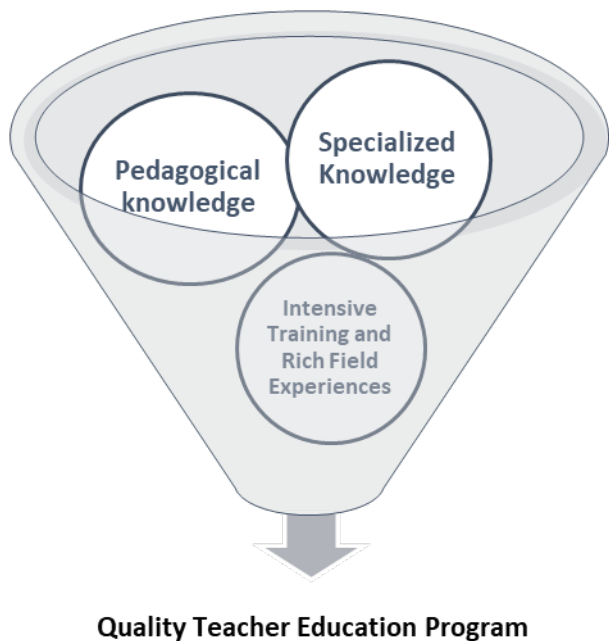


Figure 1 shows components of a quality teacher education program from an internationalization perspective

4.2 Challenges

The accreditation process was not without challenges. Rather, it was a process characterized with continuous challenges and therefore tremendous efforts and collective collaboration was important to overcome such challenges. Below we discuss a number of the challenges that are also associated with the idea of accreditation as an outcome of internationalization. (1) Creating a culture for accreditation is the first challenge that the CoE faced on the way to obtaining accreditation. Typically, the push to seek accreditation by the CoE has collided head-on with deeply rooted traditional practices and the resistant voices that viewed the Omani context as being different and that the standards are coming from a Western context which is a totally different context. The proponents of seeking accreditation of the CoE, on the other hand, believed the quality is a cosmopolitan terminology and that quality standards are independent of context. The opponents, alternatively, believed that importing standards that were developed elsewhere is faulty procedure. Those were against the internationalization perspective which is part of the globalization movement. In between there was a third party that made the compromise of seeking accreditation by adapting the standards to the Omani context and evaluating the outcomes of the process. The third party, represented by the college administration, did not want to enforce the process, but rather wanted the college faculty to join the process voluntarily. Many critics of seeking accreditation and program recognition fear that raising standards will mean more work for both faculty and students and raising the bar could simply disclose the areas of weaknesses for which intervention measures should be taken. Finding the optimal balance among international standards, national context, available resources, and ability to face the expected challenges was important to consider before the initiation of the whole process. (2) Developing several assessment instruments and collection of data is a big challenge. Regardless of the balance and or controversy about the cost and value of program recognition we realized that we need to continue to on increasing accountability relating to student learning outcomes that transcend individual course

grades (Murray, 2005). Sometimes this conversation focuses on the potential uses of summative and formative assessments, and at other times, it is more generically discussed with regard to the need to establish clear and convincing evidence of high-level effective student learning. Therefore, it was important to know that a combination of summative, formative and continuous assessment and evaluation is the perfect method to monitor the quality of the candidates and prove the quality of the program. (3) Organizational restructuring is necessary in order to respond to the workloads that is part of the faculty members' work. Accreditation is not a simple and easy process that can be managed by one person (Bardo, 2009). Conversely, it is an institutional effort that is based on collaborative work and continuous communication in both direction: bottom-up and top-down. The challenge was that the college has been interested in building the capacities for accreditation. However, we knew that bottom up processes and efforts may not be sufficient for hitting the target. Alternatively, top down decisions often cause tensions to arise because faculty would feel that things are dictated from a higher hierarchy and therefore they do not feel that they are part of the process.

4.3 Benefits

The accreditation experience was a completely beneficial experience even though there were challenges that we discussed previously. We earned a number of benefits and learned many lessons. The benefits earned are as follows: (1) As a result of the recognition of six programs and the CoE accreditation we could identify the area of strengths, weaknesses, thereby informing ways of improvement. The key assessments and the college assessment system helped us to recognize the aforementioned areas and develop a profile for our students based on collected evidence, (2) The recognition of four program by the oldest specialized professional associations was a direct message to our students, tutors and the outside community that our teacher education programs at SQU provide quality education and that our graduates can confidently pursue employment anywhere in the Arab region as well as elsewhere in the world, (3) The college obtained a proof that the four recognized programs compared to other programs that did not seek SPA recognition have many areas of excellence based on fulfilling the standards. Such fulfilment which led to the recognition is an indication that the programs follow best practices in teaching and learning processes. It is also an evidence of quality to our partners such as the Ministry of Education, the parents of students in schools, and the general public in Oman and elsewhere in the Arab region, (4) through the CoE accreditation we boosted the institutional ownership among the college faculty and students, which resulted in changing negative attitudes, increasing loyalty, and improving performance, (5) One unseen or rather unfelt benefit is that we learned and gained tremendous experience in accreditation and program recognition procedures. Such experience allows the faculty who led the accreditation work to act as advisors to other programs in SQU as well as in other universities in the Arab region.

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