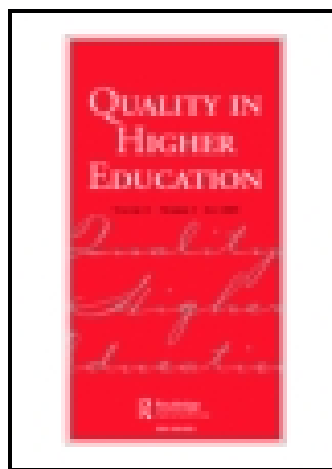


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Conclusion

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Conclusion

The range of contributions to this special issue indicates the scale and pace of change in higher education across the Gulf States. A great deal has been achieved in a short space of time and much work is currently in progress. Although the papers reveal some differences in approach and emphasis, all highlight the importance that is attached to the quality of higher education provision. They identify the need to ensure that students are offered high-quality educational experiences and achieve awards that reflect international standards. The contributions also illustrate the value of a collective regional approach to quality assurance based on the comparability of experience and a shared understanding of academic standards.

There is a very clear message in the various articles about the significance of higher education development in the individual countries. Faced with the challenges of rapid social change and of an increasingly-competitive global economy, state governments recognise the requirement to invest in the intellectual capacity and professional abilities of the next generation through enhanced educational opportunities. The development of a sustainable economic framework is dependent on the diversification of activity and on the growth of the 'knowledge economy'. This, in turn, depends on the professional training and higher-level skills of a graduate population that can support new areas of development in the economy.

In addition, there is an immediate and growing requirement to accommodate the increasing number of students progressing from secondary education. In many countries it has not been possible to expand state-funded higher education at a pace sufficient to keep up with demand and many countries have looked to the private sector to make good the shortfall. Through collaboration with universities in other countries, private providers have been able to offer programmes in areas relevant to new economic activities and bring in external expertise. They also offer higher education opportunities to ex-patriot and migrant populations not normally provided opportunities within the publically-funded sector.

However, while there are clear benefits from supporting the expansion of a more diverse and dynamic higher education sector there is also a need to ensure that the standards of provision in the private sector are comparable with the established universities. In these circumstances, it is not hard to see why so much emphasis is being placed on the development of effective quality assurance arrangements. They are necessary to secure the credibility and value of higher education qualifications and to reassure employers and others that graduates have acquired the appropriate standards. They also provide a basis for benchmarking standards against international provision and confirm the status of institutions and higher education programmes.

The principal mechanisms being adopted by the newly-established quality assurance agencies include programme accreditation, the licensing of new institutions and the codification of standards for institutional management. The systems that are being implemented address the explicit priorities of the individual countries as well as the more general expectation that higher education in the Gulf States can compete in a global context with other providers. Governments are keen to promote 'world class' universities, with a high reputation for

research and teaching, as well as meeting the wider expectations of a well-educated and capable workforce. They also wish to retain the talents and experience of their own students rather than have them go abroad to study.

It is clear from the contributions that the individual countries have common objectives and a shared understanding of the importance of academic standards. This provides a firm basis for the further development of regional cooperation in quality assurance systems and for the promotion of good practice in higher education provision. The structures are already in place to support this through the recently-established Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) and through the continuing support from the British Council and other organisations.

The logic of cooperation is compelling. The smaller countries, such as Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman, have limited opportunity for the development of effective peer-review systems and need the expertise offered by other countries to help establish common standards and good practice. All countries benefit from the regular exchange of ideas and experience between higher education providers and through the debate and discussion about academic standards. The Gulf region represents a shared market and a common framework for economic development within which skilled professionals need to be able to move freely and where qualifications are mutually recognised and respected. A comprehensive strategy for higher education will help to underpin these developments and will also help to promote the reputation of the Gulf States as a region for high-quality higher education and increase its international competitiveness. The challenge is to make this happen through mutual consent and collective responsibility. The British Council's *Excellence in Higher Education* programme has provided one opportunity to support this development and will hopefully continue to provide a focus for future activities.

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5 January 2009

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