

Institutionalizing Governance in Saudi Higher Education: Focus on Strategic Excellence and NCAAA Accreditation Resilience

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ABSTRACT

This opinion paper promotes establishing governance and compliance offices within Saudi universities, which could be an enabling factor that can achieve institutional accreditation resilience and operational excellence and promote grievance handling where needed. As Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 drives transformational changes across most public institutions, higher education entities are also required to align their governance practices to the standards of the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation (NCAAA). Based on more than 10 years of work in quality assurance and accreditation, the author makes a strong argument for having Offices of Governance and Compliance serve these institutions like an umbrella to help with institutional policy, accountability, and strategic alignment. Not only do these offices strengthen transparency and decision-making, but they also play a direct role in NCAAA accreditation preparedness – built on a foundation of structured internal quality assurance systems, risk management, and integrity frameworks. However, obstacles like resistance to change and limited resources remain but can be addressed through focused training and digitization. It is critical that we start to view governance as a strategy, not a tick-the-box process. Such offices are scalable models for resilient, future-fit universities ready to deliver against the demands of 21st-century education in alignment with national and global quality standards.

Keywords: Governance, Compliance, Accreditation.

INTRODUCTION

Governance is no longer a sideshow; it is the engine of change in higher education. Thankfully, as modern higher education develops, its governance has become the institutional foundation on which quality, strategy, and accountability are built. In Saudi Arabia, where transformational changes to public institutions are mandated by Vision 2030, governance is particularly critical. The transformation has been driven by domestic reasons, most importantly the alignment of governance procedures to the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation (NCAAA).

THE CASE FOR GOVERNANCE AND COMPLIANCE OFFICES

With my long experience in quality assurance and academic accreditation, I believe the time is ripe to announce the establishment of a new function in Saudi Universities, the Offices of Governance and Compliance. These offices are jurisdictional constructs that arbitrate policy compliance, create compliance, and incentivize strategic cohesion. With a clear sense of direction and purpose, universities can implement governance principles within their own institutional context to have demonstrably better outcomes in areas such as transparency, decision-making, and impact-responsive behavior.

Recent research and field applications have demonstrated that structured institutional mechanisms significantly contribute to institutional readiness for NCAAA accreditation (Alshammari, S. H., & Alhassan, A. M., 2020; Alzahrani, I., & Alharbi, M., 2023). The main activities of such offices are very much aligned with

the domains of the NCAAA: governance and administration, quality assurance, strategic planning, and stakeholder engagement. As such, institutions that have adopted this model have seen significant improvements in compliance rates, the quality of documentation, and the transparency of decision-making processes (Moran, G., 2018; Price, D., 2020; Heaton, A., 2023).

OVERCOMING IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

While governance offices are beneficial, there are also challenges to implementing them. These include both internal resistance to structural change and limited resources to support operations. To help address these challenges, institutions can create targeted training and capacity-building and digital transformation interventions. A governance office is not administrative overhead; it is investing strategically in institutional excellence.

My experience leading governance initiatives and contributing to accreditation processes across Saudi institutions has affirmed the value of this model. It provides a scalable and flexible mechanism for enhancing institutional performance in line with national quality standards. As higher education institutions globally aspire to develop adaptable and future-ready structures, Saudi Arabia offers a compelling case study of how governance can be used to leverage quality and sustainability.

It's now up to academic leaders, policymakers, and quality professionals to make governance more than a procedural chore by transforming it into a strategic imperative. Developing governance practices among universities is the institutional means that will help build resilient, accountable, and forward-thinking institutions that will be well-prepared to address the challenges and seize the opportunities of the 21st Century.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AND NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARDS

To make sure that these Offices of Governance and Compliance operate properly, they need to be based on core strategic standards of institutional evaluation established by the NCAAA. These offices serve a critical function in achieving the following priorities:

The office lends itself directly to sound institution management by defining clear governance structures, clarifying roles, and promoting policy coherence.

- Strategic Planning: The office makes sure that plans for the university are aligned with Vision 2030, continuously reviewed, and updated in accordance with national priorities.
- Quality Assurance System: The office is central to so developing and maintaining an internal quality assurance system, including audits and performance metrics.
- Risk Management: Governance offices play a role in identifying, assessing, and mitigating risks in academic and administrative areas.
- Institutional Integrity: These offices promote ethical practices, transparency, and accountability—cornerstones of NCAAA accreditation.

CONCLUSIONS

With the internalization of these standards, the Office of Governance and Compliance is not merely a procedural requirement for the College but part and parcel of the edifice of institutional change, respecting not just national goals but also aligning with international markers of institutional quality and excellence in the higher education sector.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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