

## Towards Assuring Quality Higher Education in Kuwait's Expanding Market

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For the last third of the twentieth century Kuwait had only one to two institutions of Higher Education, and both were state operated. Kuwait, as a modern nation state only became independent from the British protectorate in 1961. Kuwait University was established shortly after in 1966, as the first university. Kuwait University is a co-educational institution of five campuses with over 10,000 students. The other, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, established in 1982, is a vocational and technical training institution designed to develop a national labor force for the nation.

In 2000, *Law no. 34 of 2000* for the establishment of private universities was issued and starting in 2003 licenses were issued to a number of private post-secondary colleges and universities approved by the Kuwait Ministry of Higher Education (for further information, see [Kuwait Ministry of Higher Education](#)). As of 2015 there were 17 licensed private institutions in Kuwait of which up to eight are accredited institutions by the Ministry of Higher Education including several institutions that had been in existence for a decade or more. This expansion of postsecondary education was in direct response to the expanding population, and in particular projected population growth of young persons through the year 2020 as the nation was poised for unprecedented growth.

As a result of an expanding and competitive markets Kuwait saw from 2004 to 2014 tremendous expansion in all higher education sectors. Not only did expansion occur in the number of institutions but also in additional associated government programs in support of nationals pursuing postsecondary education (i.e. scholarship, and financial allowance programs). To support and help guide the development of institutions and to assure quality in educational offerings the Ministry developed the *Private Universities Council (PUC)* to oversee all aspects of private universities including construction, institutional accreditation, academic programs, and application of local laws and standards including gender segregation. Per law no. 34 of 2000 private universities must observe Islamic values and traditions in relation to students' dress and activities, and operate buildings to ensure gender segregation. Regionally, gender segregation is common, but the application can vary greatly from separate campuses or buildings, to divided spaces and class sections as feasible. In recent years, the development of the *National Bureau for Academic Accreditation and Education Quality Assurance (NBAQ)*; for further information, see [Kuwait NBAQ](#) was established to better align the oversight of all institutions of higher learning in this Gulf state and raise the quality of institutions of higher education by developing cultures of self-assessment, and systems of continuous measure towards institutional effectiveness. Universities have and continue to pursue program accreditation (mostly US based) with subject specific bodies as elsewhere in the world, but this new body likely would usher in a new approach to standards and quality assurance both in structure and requirements in Kuwait.

The guidelines and requirements for a new quality assurance approach will impact all levels of postsecondary institutions. Given increases in outcomes based reviews and accountability Student Affairs/Services programs and personnel may be affected on multiple fronts in Kuwait. Challenges already exist for practitioners given the lack of overall understanding and value of the services and programs provided beyond academic instruction, and the lack of awareness of the profession as a whole. Student Services professionals must serve as advocates educating students and parents alike on how experiential learning and services can enhance the educational experience. Laws and governance oversights impact policies and practices (i.e. segregation), and cultural factors make it challenging for some programs/services to be successful as they are either not understood or valued.

Given the existing local and regional challenges presented by cultural factors, higher education professionals will likely be further tasked to meet additional requirements beyond the steps already in place for self-study or self-assessment. The restructuring of accreditation/quality assurance systems and structures will have a significant impact on student affairs professionals in Kuwait. Most likely new systems will require further monitoring and evaluating by a new set of standards. Assessment practices and processes for evaluation towards data-driven decision making are valued worldwide and would aid in development, but as elsewhere the structure and means for implementation need to be carefully aligned.

Given the expanding market and local challenges which already exist for practitioners such a shift in governance and requirements may not support the further establishment of student services by overwhelming campuses. It may also, however, provide mandates for advancement in research, data sharing, and other areas which are greatly needed regionally to establish a greater understanding of Gulf students. Such an infrastructure could also enhance government reporting and data sharing practices similar to those in the United States through the *National Center for Education Statistic* which collects, collates, analyzes, and reports statistics on the condition of American education. If properly designed, supported, and implemented a new system under the NBAQ could greatly support the overall development of universities by establishing systems which require cultures of evidence, assessment, and continual review at all levels of the institutions. However, if underdeveloped systems, unilateral perspectives, and poor implementation strategies are employed institutions may be consumed, as is too often the case in such scenarios. The success of this new governing body and their associated standards will rest in the collaborative processes with existing institutions and the subsequent planning leading towards effective implementation.