

برنامج الأمم المتحدة الإنمائي
United Nations Development Programme
Sustainable Human Development

UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (UNDP/RBAS)
Project RAB 01/002: 'Enhancement of Quality Assurance and Institutional Planning in Arab Universities'



The UNDP Higher Education Project

Launched in 2002, the Higher Education Project aims to introduce, in partnership with a core group of leading public and private Arab universities, three internationally-based instruments of quality assurance:

- (i) Internal and External evaluation of academic programmes;
- (ii) Evaluation of student performance through administration of international tests;
- (iii) Development of a statistical database for participating universities.

The regional project has now embarked upon its fourth regional cycle of internal and external reviews of academic programs in Arab universities. Following the cycle of review of programmes in the field of Computer Science in 15 universities (2002-2003), Business Administration in 16 universities (2003-2004) and Education programmes in 23 universities (2005-2006), the Project's fourth cycle of academic reviews has been launched earlier this month for the review of Engineering programmes in 19 universities. It is estimated that almost 50% of all Arab undergraduates are enrolled in these four fields of study.

Primary emphasis is on capacity building where the project provides training and advisory support to academic representatives of each participating university who are trained to lead the process of self-evaluation and the preparation of self-evaluation documents in their own departments. A fraction of these representatives (about two-thirds) are selected to participate in external reviews in countries other than their own, alongside registered reviewers from the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK. Altogether, more than 110 representative academics have received the full training and have participated in the self-evaluation process (out of whom 71 also acted as external reviewers). This is perhaps the first cohort of fully trained reviewers in the region. Feedback received by the Project indicates that most of these trained reviewers are now playing leading roles in the development of quality assurance systems in their countries. The size of this cohort is expected to exceed 100 with the completion of the ongoing cycle of Engineering reviews.

In addition to capacity building and introducing of methods of internal and external evaluation of programmes, the cycle of review also generates agendas for improvement and reform for each participating programme, which is documented in the final review report and delivered to each university upon completion of the cycle. In addition, a regional overview report is also produced and distributed publicly. This report identifies patterns of weakness and strength that emerge across the region in

the subject under review, and recommends areas of strategic consultation and collaboration at the regional level.

With regards to testing of students, the Major Field Test (MFT) of the Educational Testing Services (ETS - USA) has been adopted to test the performance of the senior (graduating) students of the reviewed programmes. More than 1800 senior students of the reviewed programmes Computer Science and Business Administration were tested in English, Arabic and French, depending on the language of teaching of each programme. The MFT test in Education was significantly modified to replace culturally biased questions, and produced in Arabic through a joint technical collaborative effort between the Project with ETS. By the end of this month (June 2007), the test will have been administered to about 1500 senior students of Education in the participating universities. Other universities in the region are showing interest in using the test as a means of assessing the performance of their students and the currency of their curricula.

In parallel to the review and testing components, the Project has built, in partnership with 15 of the participating universities (of about half a million students), a pilot statistical database that has been compiled in accordance with internationally based methodologies and common data definitions and specifications. The aim of this initiative has been to develop a model for the collection and dissemination of management information that can be adopted by universities in the Arab world. The compiled data covers programmes, staff and students demographics and finances. A regional report is ready for publication and public distribution by the end of the year.

On the whole, the Project's experience so far has demonstrated the feasibility and a growing demand for the continuation of its services. It is now actively engaged in exploring the possibility of consolidating and expanding its services through the establishment of an independent regional quality assurance institute.