

# Relevance and Rigour in Management Education – Gulf Universities and Information on Standards

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**Abstract:** International accreditation is becoming an important priority for many universities. In Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, internationalisation is increasingly becoming an issue of concern, with international accreditation considered a strategic objective that is expected to help higher education institutions (HEIs) cope with increasing competition from both public and private counterparts. Within the context of business schools, accreditation is also expected to drive impact on the wider Gulf economies, particularly in the post-oil era. HEIs are faced with a question as to whether they should adopt international standards outright, as proposed by accreditation bodies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), or whether they should focus on the adoption of an education management approach based on their own views as to the requirements of their respective countries. This article uses a case study of the Kingdom of Bahrain to explore possible ways forward. This paper utilises a combination of academic literature, published practices of AACSB accredited business schools, in addition to research into standards information. It also draws on the authors' experiences of interaction with HEI leaders who are considered key decision makers that lead the development of their respective school missions, strategies, operational planning and implementation. The article argues that GCC HEIs should reconsider their approach to decision-making on management education, taking into account research that suggests that mere compliance with international standards such as those proposed by AACSB may not adequately support GCC economies to develop in ways desired by their governments. It also suggests that centralised decision-making in higher education, favoured by GCC governments, may not be optimal with regard to the intended impact. Lastly, the paper offers suggestions for aligning national QA systems and other related regulatory requirements, with international accreditation standards, towards establishing unified and rigorous frameworks that streamline higher education development.

**Keywords:** Higher Education Institutions (HEI), Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), Quality Assurance (QA), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Relevance, Rigour.

## 1 Introduction

The establishment of private higher education institutions (HEIs) in GCC countries is considered a recent phenomenon, with the majority of such HEIs established in the early 2000s. Most GCC countries opted for the model of local or homegrown higher education institutions, with the exception of Qatar which hosts a number of international branch institutions. Given the age and maturity level of local HEIs, a majority are found to exhibit a low focus on internationalisation. In the case of Bahrain, the first private university was established in 2001. Despite the small population of the country (1.504 million in 2021), there are 43 academic programmes offered by 12 schools in the business and finance field [10]. Two of the 12 schools are considered constituents of public HEIs that are subsidised. As such, the tuition fees charged stands in stark contrast to that of their private counterparts, whereby such fees are found to be relatively low, thus highly competitive. To maintain high academic standards, Bahrain established the Bahrain Education and Training Quality Authority (BQA) in 2008 as an independent entity with a mandate to conduct institutional and programme quality reviews. The BQA developed a transparent framework to evaluate HEIs against quality assurance standards, as minimum quality targets. All academic programmes are subject to BQA programme reviews. The judgment of the BQA influences decisions by the Higher Education Council, which is the licencing and

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regulatory body that monitors university intake as well as legal compliance.

All HEIs in Bahrain, private and public, ensure their sustainability and reputation by maintaining high academic standards and obtaining validation by the BQA [10]. Since 2008, these HEIs, including those that were falling behind, started to exhibit a level of maturity vis-à-vis quality measures, particularly in the fields of business and finance. Universities judged as outstanding began to consider the way forward in relation to their own internationalisation. These universities took concrete steps towards international accreditation and rankings. Three Bahraini universities have focused on international ranking, e.g. the QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) Arab Region Ranking. Of these three, one is a public university, and the other two private. Achieving a good ranking affects accreditation in areas such as internationalisation, research, and intellectual contribution, as well as teaching and learning strategies. Private schools in business and finance are found to have started considering international accreditation, particularly that offered by bodies such as AACSB, as a form of international validation of good quality, and a driver for branding.

When looking at the broader GCC, few universities are found to have seriously considered AACSB accreditation and international ranking. This is due to lack of compliance with various areas, particularly research and intellectual contributions [14]. Table 1 provides a synopsis of GCC AACSB accredited universities.

**Table 1:** Details of AACSB accredited universities in GCC region

GCC country	AACSB Accredited College/HEI	Number of AACSB Accredited Colleges	Number of Universities in Country	% of Universities Accredited
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	American University in Emirates	10	79	12.65%
	Al Ain University			
	Ajman University			
	Abu Dhabi University			
	American University in Dubai			
	American University of Sharjah			
	United Arab Emirates University			
	University of Dubai			
	University of Sharjah			
Zayed University				
Kuwait	American University of Kuwait	4	17	23.5%
	Gulf University for Science & Technology			
	Kuwait University			
	American University of the Middle East			
Saudi Arabia (KSA)	College of Business & Economics, Qassim University	5	62	9.61%
	Prince Sultan University			
	King Abdulaziz University			
	King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals			
	King Saud University			
Qatar	Qatar University	1	7	14.2%
Bahrain	University of Bahrain	1	12	8.3%
Oman	N/A	N/A	27	0%

**Source: Authors**

Table 1 shows that few HEIs have achieved AACSB accreditation. This may be due to a lack of strategic decision making by HEI leaders, especially with regard to internationalisation. Previous studies have highlighted that GCC HEIs rely on centralised strategic decision-making [4], [6], [36]. The prevalence of centralised decision-making structures, and the consequent lack of autonomy, are other examples of culprits for the low number of accredited institutions. Some researchers argue that centralised strategic decision-making in Arab countries could be related to the prevalence of transactional, rather than transformational, leadership styles in Islamic countries [2]. Transformational leadership is defined as leadership that “inspires, intellectually stimulates, and is individually considerate of [followers]” [9]. It unites people under a vision that transforms them in a profound manner towards achieving a common goal beyond individual self-interests. This stands in contrast to transactional leadership which is characterised by a ‘give-and-take’ approach, with followers offering their compliance in exchange for a reward that is aligned with their own self-interests [17], [33].

This paper sheds light on some of the most common challenges faced by business schools undergoing the AACSB accreditation process. It identifies some important issues that need to be tackled in a proactive and effective manner, outlining several specific and practical recommendations.

## 2 Materials and Research Methodology

This paper used desktop research, and analysis of web-published public domain information. The full set of 21 GCC AACSB accredited business schools' webpages was analysed through a forced search on Google, as well as by browsing each school's webpage. The forced search technique was used to examine each school's mission statement and to access information on strategic plans, research, and impact. Given the currently prevailing GCC-wide organisational culture, published strategies, performance metrics, and much of an HEI's data are considered confidential. Hence, data sharing, and formal access are a challenge.

The following sections are based on academic literature, published practices of business schools accredited by the AACSB and research into standards information. This paper integrates the authors' experience of interaction with senior HEI decision-makers on issues pertaining to missions, strategies, operational planning and implementation. The information focuses on GCC HEIs in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman. This paper also takes into account published criteria and rankings, as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), relating to higher education.

## 3 Challenges relating to AACSB accreditation

Business schools that want to be accredited by AACSB must comply with certain standards. This section discusses the main challenges faced by GCC-based schools of business, taking into account contextual particularities and related environmental/cultural factors.

### School vision and mission alignment to AACSB

Research into HEI strategic planning and decision making has identified problems such as lack of use of information technology and appropriate data in decision-making, as well as irrationality [6],[22],[36]. In GCC countries, higher education decisions are found to be predominantly centralised as opposed to decentralised (Aldhaen, 2017; Ginsburg et al, 2010). Most HEI leaders tend to involve staff only at decision implementation stage [15]. Deans of schools lack the autonomy and authority for strategic decision-making and are only granted authority to operationalise given strategies [15]. The external environment influences decisions on a school's vision and mission. For example, in Bahrain, private HEIs must adhere to regulatory requirements that affect strategic decisions, mission planning and priorities [5], [21]. All HEIs are expected to operate within the national framework of strategies and policies, such as the Kingdom of Bahrain's National Research Strategy 2014-2024, with a pre-set percentage of HEI revenue legally required to be spent on research in each financial year. In Oman, the national System of Quality Assurance in Higher Education maintains a classification system in which HEIs are classified as either University, University College, or College of Higher Education, based on level and range of programmes offered, scale in terms of the number of learners, and most importantly scholarship and research-related expectations. Thus, a school's mission, whether a school is teaching-oriented, or research driven, is a *fait accompli*, decided by the regulatory framework in place.

The centralisation of decision-making in education, at all levels, is common in most of the Arab world. Some researchers argue that this is associated with adherence to Islam's tenets [2]. The predominance of centralised decision-making structures can also be attributed to the large power distance exhibited in Arab cultures, according to the Geert Hofstede framework. Large power distance leads to highly unequal power distribution, hence centralisation [11]. A particular casualty of this centralisation is transformational leadership. This has been shown to be largely absent in schools and colleges, which are dominated by transactional leadership. This is despite transformational leadership being considered essential to transforming educational institutions, because of its impact on how educators teach and research [8]. However, in the last few years, much valuable work has been undertaken in Muslim states, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, showing how transformational leadership is not inconsistent with the tenets of Islam and how the approach to education can be transformed in the directions required to meet international standards such as those of the AACSB [2]. Research in other areas of strategic decision-making shows that Islamic leaders rely on Shura (mutual consultation, based on social connections), leading to a form of leadership that is collective and spiritually enlightened. It has been argued that this approach would be most effective for HEIs undergoing transformation [7].

AACSB requires a detailed mission statement, focused on alignment with AACSB standards and the assurance of driving the vision and mission in line with "engagement, innovation and impact." Revising a school's vision and

mission can pose a serious challenge. The apparent lack of autonomy, coupled with external requirements, within a context characterised by a prevalence of centralised decision-making structures, complicates efforts towards developing a sound vision and mission that exhibits both fitness-of-purpose and fitness-for-purpose.

The foregoing discussions evoke the question of how can GCC universities emulate the teaching, research and impact achievements of Western universities, where the transformational role of leadership in achieving success is widely accepted. In other words, is this feasible for GCC universities, without breaking away from the centralisation discussed in this paper. The journey from a centralised, rigid and orthodox approach to a decentralised, creative and heterodox approach is a long one, so applying standards that are derived from, and apply to, universities with the latter approach to universities with the former approach may be inappropriate.

These doubts are particularly serious, given the fact that the Western model of the business school is facing serious issues relating to quality of teaching and impact of research [18]. In the UK, these issues have led to the establishment of the Teaching and Research Excellence Frameworks. Issues of teaching quality came to the fore more strongly during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as related to online teaching and assessment. The 2020 revision of AACSB standards, and the introduction of a new standard related to “Teaching Effectiveness and Impact” clearly highlight the need for HEIs to have a transformational and focused strategy with clear impact measures for teaching, learning and research.

### Measuring research impact

Research outcomes are still a problem in the Arab region. Despite HEIs’ best efforts, studies show that research output is still low and poor in quality [3]. Governing bodies have increased budgets and incentives for research. This is expected to improve the number, but not the quality, of publications. Academicians’ attitudes towards knowledge sharing remains a challenge, wherein the lack of a research culture that considers HEI expectations after publication [13], [14], is evidenced by previous studies which reported that only 64.4% of faculty shared their research with other scholars. This demonstrates an inadequate appreciation for importance of scholarly impact and citations, *inter alia*.

In the GCC, there is a move for academic research to support knowledge-based economies, to reduce reliance on oil. Despite GCC countries’ efforts, academic publications are few compared with other countries with a comparable population. There have been calls to establish or re-visit research strategies to improve research performance and impact [24]. Research impact is important in the AACSB ranking process, but demonstrating impact as measured by academics is problematic, especially when considering citations and use by other academics, where GCC countries perform poorly compared to developed countries [24].

Measuring impact is not easy, and poses an important challenge in management, leading to assessments of impact based on formalised routines that exclude ways in which management academics influence practitioners [23]. Impact depends partly on relevance, thus, the absence of clear strategies for achieving and documenting relevance in management research is a global problem [37], [39]. The problems with citations as evidence of impact are well documented [12]. However, there is evidence that adherence to AACSB standards improves publication at HEIs. A case study of Taiwanese business schools reported that AACSB significantly contributed to improving the number of publications, but not citations, as measured by the H index [26].

We suggest that GCC deans should drive the development of a more collaborative research culture (with colleagues and organisations in the region and outside) to improve the visibility of GCC research and researchers alike. This, in turn, will help improve impact as measured by accreditation bodies such as AACSB. However, the lack of autonomy in strategic decision making dissuades deans from changing strategies, leading to possible failure, mediocre or poor achievement in international accreditation - a good example of a problem of over-centralisation. Mere compliance with international accreditation standards will not serve GCC HEIs in the long run. Deans should consider more ambitious missions and strategies that make use of such accreditation standards, as in the case of AACSB, yet go beyond mere compliance, towards developing true knowledge-based economies.

### Shift in intellectual contributions

Maintaining an optimal and appropriate distribution of faculty types is a challenge in Arab business schools, with a very high proportion of scholarly academics and a very low proportion of practice academics. This is due to faculty selection and appointment criteria, which are influenced by regulatory constraints related to the numbers of PhD holders and teaching experience. The recognition of prior learning/experience is lacking. In countries with mature higher education systems, practice academics may have a non-terminal postgraduate degree, a strong contribution to relevant teaching and research, and evidence of thought leadership work in industry (e.g., contribution to professional associations).

AACSB (2008) recommended how business schools could improve their position by considering different types of intellectual contribution.

Most Arab region business schools measure the impact of research by numbers of publications. This is also used by other ranking bodies. However, research impact can be measured in many other ways, such as review of articles for academic journals, membership of editorial boards, thought leadership, influencing professional associations and use of research in industry and government projects, as in the case of the UK Research Excellence Framework. Researchers argued that HEIs should shift how they measure their research and use a much more sophisticated way to assess the quantity, quality, and societal/business impact of research [30].

Studies highlight the need for a methodology that measures whether research serves community and societal needs or improves on the quality of teaching. Important stakeholders should be included in assessments and implementable recommendations identified [29]. Although many business school mission statements claim to emphasise the contribution of research to teaching practice, the AACSB report cited above identifies that in many schools learning and pedagogical research focused on the relevance, quality, and effectiveness of teaching, is a poor relation of discipline-based scholarship. There is a need to consider educational scholarship that helps researchers to apply findings to teaching and community engagement [28]. In the Arab region, papers contributing to practice or pedagogy are scant. This could be due to poor understanding of the type of research needed or weak weighting of such research in academic promotion criteria.

Although the AACSB report identified the typical categories of research to support pedagogy and practice (Table 2), business schools still consider quantity over quality when it comes to contributions, relying on journal rankings/classifications as proxy for quality [29], [30].

**Table 2:** Types of research.

<b>Discipline-based Scholarship</b>	<b>Contributions to Practice</b>	<b>Learning and Pedagogical Research</b>
Articles in peer-reviewed discipline-based journals	Articles in professional or trade journals or magazines	Articles or cases with instructional materials in refereed learning-oriented journals
Research monographs	Publicly available technical reports for organizational projects	Teaching manuals
Scholarly books	Professional or trade books	Textbooks
Chapters in scholarly books	Chapters in professional or trade books	Chapters in textbooks or other learning-oriented materials
Articles published in proceedings of scholarly meetings	Significant contributions to trade journals or magazines authored by others	Instructional software
Papers presented at scholarly meetings	Significant presentations at trade meetings	Materials describing the design and implementation of curricula or courses
Papers presented at research seminars	Reviews of professional or trade books	Papers presented at learning-oriented meetings
Reviews of scholarly books	Reviews of popular books	Reviews of learning-oriented books

**Reference:** AACSB (2008) p14

We suggest that deans of business schools should re-consider their faculty evaluation and promotional mechanisms to assess faculty’s ability to produce and contribute to all the types of output illustrated in Table 2.

**Assurance of learning process and curricula updates**

A key pillar of AACSB is the assurance of learning standards, requiring business schools to have a properly formalised process for assessing the attainment of learning outcomes, and the competencies gained, cross-referenced to the main programme goals. AACSB regularly updates their standards, with updates affected to the 2013 standards which resulted in streamlined and upgraded standards in 2020. The new standards ensure more efficient reporting, with additional expectations focusing on the impact on teaching and society. The concept of assurance of learning is not yet fully understood in much of the Arab region, GCC included. The establishment of quality assurance authorities has enabled GCC HEIs to develop mechanisms and frameworks to assess learning outcomes. However, assurance of learning is still a challenge for business schools in the Arab region [26], due to issues with outcome validation mechanisms, selection of assessment methods, lack of integration of business-related skills such as leadership and entrepreneurship, and weak



industry involvement [21].

Many business schools rely on internal information such as student assessment results to assess assurance of learning and do not consider external stakeholders' input, which can be a powerful (qualitative or quantitative) tool to assess, triangulate, and validate assurance of learning [35], [16]. Studies show the importance of industry partnership to ensure that students acquire practical skills in line with market demand [25], [35]. GCC HEIs are beginning to consider partnership with industry, but academic programmes offered are traditional, with a low proportion of practical learning. Lack of practice academics has been identified as a serious problem in this regard [21], as is the lack of faculty motivation and creativity to link teaching with professional development and practice [19], [31].

GCC business schools face a dilemma in relation to including professional accreditation e.g. in project management, marketing, market research, accounting, finance, human resources. This is common in many developed world business schools, which also benefit from the strong focus in professional associations on learning outcomes and applying them in practice. However, in GCC business schools, this may not align with a particular school's mission, which tends to focus on academic rather than professional learning outcomes and assessment. The need to assure delivery of professional content and the need for staff certification by professional associations was highlighted by authors [27]. This would be problematic in GCC HEIs, due to appointment criteria specifying only academic qualification and experience as requirements. We argue that business schools in the Arab region should benchmark their experience with AACSB accredited peer institutions that have well-established learning assurance procedures that include professional learning and choose partnerships with such institutions where possible [24]. For this to happen, selection of partnerships must involve staff able to assess the applied contributions discussed above, rather than just senior management, as is common in GCC countries. The framing of the mission of the university should take this approach into account.

## Conclusions

International accreditation e.g., AACSB, is increasingly becoming a focus for GCC HEIs, which are competing to be internationally accredited, in support of their branding and internationalisation strategies. This paper demonstrates challenges related to decision-making for GCC universities, ranging from deciding what information they should use to determine their policy, to issues relating to culture, quality assurance standards and external factors such as regulatory requirements. The recommendations in this paper are based on the analysis of 21 AACSB accredited business schools in the GCC, with consideration of the most common challenges faced by business schools undergoing the accreditation process. The recommendations should pave the way for aspiring business schools to approach international accreditation with a more pragmatic, systematic, and coherent strategy.

Equipped with a proper understanding of the principle-based approach of AACSB and coupled with informed consideration of the context of each school, strategies can be developed to align the accreditation expectations with school interests and national priorities. This in turn will empower business schools to play a major role in the transformation of their local communities, through support to the general development of the schools' respective economies. Business schools can realise and actualise their natural and expected roles as agents of change and as beacons of light through thought leadership, entrepreneurship and innovation, depending on their particular missions, which should be carefully designed to achieve specific and measurable scholarly output and societal impact. International accreditation in general, and AACSB accreditation in particular, are expected to improve the competitiveness of GCC business schools through the refinement and articulation of differentiated, relevant, and realistic value propositions and missions. This will enable these business schools to attract more international students, improving their regional economies in terms of high value export services that are critical for, and conducive to, the development of a knowledge economy – in line with the aspiration of GCC countries for the post-oil era.

To support GCC HEIs in attaining AACSB accreditation, deans of business schools should be given full autonomy of decision-making in areas such as standards' setting, balancing academic, professional and pedagogic objectives, as well as partnering with other universities, professional associations, and other bodies. However, some GCC universities are still focused on minimum publications targets and are tying promotion and contract renewal to this. This may be considered necessary to build a research culture, but it is not enough. A clear strategy is needed to ensure a sustainable research impact that covers academic, professional and pedagogic needs. Accordingly, faculty evaluation and promotion criteria should include other contributions outside publications, as identified in Table 2. Deans should strive to maintain a strong focus on dissemination of outcomes, not just of published research papers, but industrial partnerships as well, to allow faculty to achieve practice academic standards, as well as recruiting more practitioner academics, to help students achieve practice learning outcomes. Overall, GCC university leaders should ensure relevance and rigour in management education, by adopting clear strategies which are formulated and led by deans

rather than just top university management. Future research can consider scholarly impact through formal benchmarking and interviews with GCC Deans, to gain more in-depth knowledge of their schools' research and societal impact strategies. GCC universities publish little information on these areas, in contrast to Western universities.

Lastly, for policy makers and regulators, quality assurance standards and related regulations should be streamlined to develop a unified framework that supports internationalisation and avoids accreditation fatigue. Mutual recognition agreements should be pursued with AACSB and other similar accreditation bodies, especially those that are highly regarded and widely recognised as the gold-standard in their respective fields. The experience of the United Arab Emirates in using evaluators from AACSB for quality review processes assures aligning certain expectations from institutions and offers a powerful example worthy of attention. However, decision makers should treat this matter with care and careful consideration of local realities. Any unified accreditation framework should account for mission-related differences of HEIs, and in doing so use threshold standards from both AACSB and QA/regulatory requirements, in order not to overwhelm said HEIs, while simultaneously supporting the improvement of mission-driven performance. This is important so as to maintain a balanced approach that serves all HEIs, whether they are already internationally accredited, in the process of accreditation, or not (yet) in the process of international accreditation.

### ***Conflicts of Interest Statement***

*The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.*

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