

**Local needs, external requirements:
Balancing the needs of a country's
educational system with the requirements
of international recognition**

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Introduction

The further development of any country and its economy rests on the quality of the educational system to provide quality instruction that fosters an environment of continual growth and development for its citizens. With the increased focus on capacity building in the global economy, all Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) struggling with this concept in terms of goals versus reality. Although resources (wealth and human capital) are sustainability issues for any country, there are a few, such as those in the Arabian Gulf, who possess the wealth but still lack indigenous human capital for a sustainable educational system which does not solely depend upon outsourced or expatriate work forces (Luke 1983, Nadiri 1994, Ali 2001).

While the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with the 4th largest oil reserves in the world, certainly does possess the wealth to provide education to its citizens, it has lacked in human capacity in terms of Emiratis entering educational fields. While the UAE has an indigenous population of less than 1 million, it has an expatriate work force over 3 million. In 2002 some 63% of the teaching workforce was expatriate – of male teacher teachers, some 92% were non-Emirati (UAE Ministry of Education and Youth 2002). Even though a decision to develop an indigenous educational system has been undertaken, a more cognizant understanding of the region must also be realized which makes it imperative that any legitimate institution must seek external validation to its quality. While Romani (2009) describes the ambitious intentions of governments in the GCC region to establish “world-class” universities, he notes the generally “meager” achievements of government-sponsored universities set up in the 1960’s on onwards to address the ever-growing lack of quality and standards, and, latterly, the likewise meager efforts of private institutions permitted to flourish with minimal impact.

With a concerted effort, in the late 1990’s UAE educational authorities took notice of this disparate situation and began proactive efforts to help address the situation by establishing indigenous teacher training programs. One such effort was the establishment of the Higher Colleges of Technology’s (HCT) Teacher Education program, which came at a time of growing criticisms of the UAE education system, and an increasing awareness that traditional educational approaches were not meeting the needs and aspirations of contemporary UAE society. A 1999 Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research report concluded that UAE schools used “inappropriate methods of teaching and learning” and “inflexible curricula and programs” (Mograby, 1999). Recognizing this, the UAE Ministry of Education and Youth (MoEY), mandated in its Year 2000 “Vision 2020 Plan” that “radical change in teaching/learning concepts, practices, means and styles will be effected”, with the focus shifting from “teaching to learning, from the teacher to the learner, from memorization to creativity, reflection, imagination and innovation” (MoEY, 2000).

The Vision 2020 Plan called for more effective teaching, appropriate methodologies and rigorous evaluation processes (MoEY, 2000). As Gallagher and Bashir-Ali (2007) describe, HCT’s response was emphatic: working in collaboration with the Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and strongly influenced by a neo-Vygotskian socio-cultural theory of learning and teaching emphasizing practicum and reflection, the program represents “the HCT’s contribution to the revitalization, from the bottom up, of the teaching and learning of English in state schools through an applied approach to pre-service teacher education” (p.7).

Developed from the ground up to meet local needs and requirements, the HCT’s Bachelor of Education program aims to “provide teachers who are able to transcend traditional notions of teaching as the routine and mechanistic application of received wisdom”, instead seeking “to develop teachers who are able to engage with teaching as a creative, innovative, imaginative and reflective professional practice” (Clarke, 2006). Significantly, the HCT B.Ed is not simply a transplanted or adapted degree from Australia; the University of Melbourne relationship has been employed to benchmark the indigenous HCT B.Ed to international best practice, serving as a driver for program quality and consistency across the 6 campus locations it is offered.

Every two years since the program's inception, the University of Melbourne has conducted a formal benchmarking review of the Teacher Education unit, its campuses, and operations, with the most recent benchmarking visit taking place in March 2008 (Costigan, 2008). This was followed by Melbourne's written report of the visit (April 2008), which will be used as a foundation for strategic planning for the next two year period, formulating action plans based upon any areas of concern.

The April 2008 report concluded, "The overwhelming impression that the reviewers had was of a program that was running very smoothly, with most of the problems that had been noted in earlier reports, ironed out. As before, we were impressed by the quality and commitment of the staff teaching on the program, and equally impressed with the quality of the students. It was evident that the DAT has given careful consideration to the key recommendations outlined in the 2005 report and had acted upon these with impressive professionalism." While the quality and commitment of the faculty and students is a common theme throughout all reports received from Melbourne, the 2008 report made a number of recommendations in the areas of program review, program feedback, employment placement, program modifications, assessment, teaching practices, action research, faculty, faculty recruitment, faculty workload, faculty professional development, and institutional support for the program. These recommendations will be considered over the next two year period, culminating in the next formal benchmarking review (scheduled for December 2010).

With the University of Melbourne relationship comes the drive for continued improvement based upon best practices through directed professional development for faculty and administration. However, as UAE society continues its embrace of modernization and pursuit of globalization, a need has surfaced for the program to become internationally recognized at a level beyond benchmarking. In his opening speech of the Higher Colleges of Technology's 2005 Annual Conference, the Chancellor and UAE Minister of Higher Education, HE Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak Al Nahayan stated, "every change we make, whether immediate or long-range, must move us to a higher level of relevance and quality. That is why international accreditation is a standard against which we must measure ourselves. Through continuous assessment of our programs, we will assure that they remain dynamic and relevant."

Consequently, in the HCT's current strategic plan the goal of obtaining international accreditation for all programs has been made a key initiative – "HCT will commit to an ongoing process of continual quality improvement in all its functions which will be measured and monitored by best practice international accreditation processes" (HCT Strategic Plan 2008-2010).

The decision to seek a North American accrediting agency for the HCT's Teacher Education program fits well with the strategic planning for HCT. The institution is seeking institutional-level accreditation, adjusting all program offerings, and modeling itself as a system of campuses structured similar to the multi-campus model for US institutions. Hence, for the program to support this strategic initiative, accreditation was sought from one of the two US teacher education accrediting agencies. Currently TEAC and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) are the only two teacher education accrediting agencies recognized by the Council of Higher Education Accrediting (CHEA) which is the agency that serves as oversight for all program and institutional accrediting agencies in the United States.

After a process of deliberation, the HCT Teacher Education program decided upon the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) as the most appropriate agency to pursue accreditation with.

The decision to seek TEAC recognition versus NCATE serves as the model on the processes we established to facilitate this venture and yet ensuring the program continues to be meet the needs of the local context. Many times international institutions must sacrifice or modify their

existing programs to accommodate the traditional requirements of the agency. However, by thoroughly reviewing and investigating these agencies, a program can determine which one will serve its needs and provide for a meaningful and successful partnership in the quest for accreditation and recognition.

As with any relationship, harmful consequences can occur if parties or partners do not fully understand, appreciate or respect the unique contextual characteristics that exist between the entities. With this understanding in mind, the HCT teacher education program spent a year-long process reviewing and determining which agency would best serve its needs for seeking US program accreditation. All accrediting agencies have common but distinctly different requirements which must be investigated and understood prior to entering into any arrangements between the agency and the institution seeking accreditation.

The process begins first with the self-reflection or analysis by the Unit. By reviewing the Program in terms of curriculum, assessment, clinical practice, faculty, and operational indicators, we were able to develop a metric by which the decision on which agency the program would utilize could be determined. Only by looking internally, with open and transparent honesty can a program expect to look externally to be recognized and utilize the accreditation process as a vehicle for program improvement and growth. Since HCT has an already-established relationship with an external institution - the University of Melbourne – the program began the self analysis by first reviewing what others had stated about the program and what actions, if any, would be needed to address comments, recommendations, and issues.

To assist in this process, the HCT program has undergone a formal review of the market and economic drivers to determine future directions for the Unit's offerings. Originally designed as a Teaching English to Young Learners, the program has evolved over the past few years, to become a program designed for English Language Teaching in Schools, which encompasses secondary schools in addition to primary settings. As with many operations in the UAE, additional needs are already surfacing where the program must evolve further in the near future, the most important being a response to the increasing use of English as a medium of instruction.

This trend is expected to grow, compelling the program to rapidly develop programs and human resources to address future needs, yet not sacrifice the quality of the current programs. Mentor teachers working with the have highlighted the increasing use of English across disciplines including mathematics, sciences, social sciences, and the arts as a critical issue for the teaching profession (Currie and Al Sharif, 2005). The federal Ministry of Education's Madares Al Ghad "Schools of Tomorrow" project has stated that school graduates of the Al Ghad program are to be "fully bilingual, knowledgeable about their rich culture and heritage, educated in an active learning environment, skilled in the use of information technology, soundly grounded in Mathematics and Science and prepared for higher education, successful careers, healthy lives and parenthood, all within a global context" (www.alghadschools.org). Mindful of emphasizing the importance of Arabic language and heritage in Emirati society, the Abu Dhabi Education Council (www.adec.ac.ae) has recently launched a perhaps even more ambitious reform project with the aim of creating "bi-literate" students, able to understand, speak, read and write in both English and Arabic (mathematics and science is to be taught in the English language, while Arabic language, history, and Islamic studies will be taught by native Arabic speakers (Emirates News Agency, 2010)).

This most current situation will force the program to address future faculty needs in ways not originally foreseen when the HCT Education Division was developed some 10 years ago. The current faculty and the expected change in faculty needs was a major determining factor in the program deciding to seek accreditation with TEAC.

Finally, an external expert was consulted to evaluate and analyze the program with the intention of making a recommendation as to which US accrediting body would best fit its requirements.

The consultant selected, Dean of an NCATE accredited teacher education program in the United States, has extensive experience in teacher education in the United Arab Emirates. His very strong understanding of the local context and requirements needed to obtain accreditation helped confirm our own findings and conclusions.

After each stage of the review process, areas to be addressed to obtain international accreditation were concluded and confirmed. The identified gaps were: faculty qualifications (terminal degree holding), diversity of students and candidates, and faculty research at HCT. With these areas for improvement in mind, an agency was able to be selected that would provide the best overall assistance and guidance to address these areas of improvement.

The decision for any program to seek accreditation is an important and necessary decision for the program to be recognized in a broader perspective and in the international arena of global higher education. The accreditation process is designed to require an institution to look openly and honestly at its operations and practices in terms of quality and improvement of such operations and practices. However, through this self-analysis all programs should determine opportunities for improvement and growth. By conducting careful analysis, the program will be able to determine which Quality Improvement Agency, i.e. accrediting agency, will provide the most transparent and open dialogue for improvement.

After a year-long analysis, HCT's Teacher Education program was able to look at its operations personally, through the eyes of an external agency familiar with the program, and those of an external expert in the field. This triangular process parallels the process that accrediting agencies employ to determine the health or effectiveness of the program to meet its mission. First, you review the documents, materials, and evidentiary reports of the program. Secondly, a team will verify the documents, materials, and evidence provided by the program. And finally, the accrediting review team will interview a broad range of constituents, candidates, faculty, staff, and public to determine their perspectives on the documents, materials, and evidence provided to demonstrate the quality of the program. This triangular effect yields the strongest analysis to the quality of the program and its effectiveness in meeting its unique and important mission.

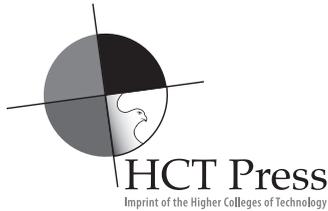
HCT became the first non-US institution to be granted candidate status with TEAC in June 2009, and is actively involved in TEAC's professional development processes. The Teacher Education Program will lodge its self-study to TEAC in late 2010 for an audit visit in 2011. To further support the self-study process HCT has entered into mentorship with a highly-respected Ivy-league school in the United States, which has successfully gone through the TEAC process. The role of this mentor institution is not to represent the HCT, but to provide collegial support and advice as the self-study process evolves.

As the Program continues down the pathway towards full recognition and accreditation, the partnerships with Melbourne, TEAC and the US mentor institution will provide vital support to the self study process. Through the entire experience, the HCT Education Division will continue to evolve into the international recognized teacher preparation program for the UAE.

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ABOUT THE HCT PRESS

Established in June 2006, the HCT Press is the academic publishing imprint of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), the largest institution of higher learning in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The HCT Press commissions and produces works of a scholarly nature sourced from among faculty and programs of the HCT, and in collaboration with the HCT's established partnerships in education, business and industry in the UAE, Gulf region and internationally, highlighting the HCT's important role in the cultural and intellectual development of the UAE.

The HCT Press encourages participation in publishing projects by HCT students and graduates and other UAE Nationals (academics, cultural and political figures, policy-makers).

The HCT Press initially intends to issue some 3-5 titles per year. English and Arabic versions are produced of works published by the imprint.

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