Examining Perceptions of Academic And Support Staff on Quality Assurance Accreditation in Higher Education in Developing Nations

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Abstract

Education accreditation is the formal evaluation process conducted by specialized institutes or agencies to assess educational programs for compliance with established quality standards. Accreditation publicly recognizes programs that meet these standards. Beyond this recognition, accreditation also engenders increased public confidence, fostering mutual acceptance of academic credentials and encouraging active participation by academic staff. The present study is dedicated to evaluating the quality assurance (QA) accreditation in higher education, with particular emphasis on Third-World and unstable nations. The study draws insights from the experience of the Faculty of Engineering, Sabratha University, which serves as a compelling case study. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the status quo, the perspectives of faculty staff using a SWOT analysis were solicited. This strategy enables the identification of the most important opportunities and threats inherent in the current scenario. The findings underscore the importance of quality assurance accreditation not only for enhancing academic profiles but also for improving all facets of higher education systems. Furthermore, it serves as a mechanism to address inconsistencies in regulations within the Ministry of Higher Education and tackle the managerial and financial challenges prevalent, particulary in developing nations' university administrations. In sum, QA accreditation emerges as a preferred avenue for organizational enhancement and overall development within the higher education sector.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent times, higher education has undergone significant transformations in terms of its functions, governance dynamics, and strategic orientations. These changes are driven by the need for alignment with the evolving demands of the labor market. Quality assurance in higher education has emerged as a universal imperative, emphasizing the cultivation of academic excellence and intellectual capacity among graduates. It goes beyond the mere attainment of diplomas, instead emphasizing continuous self-evaluation and accreditation as pillars of quality assurance (QA). Higher-education accreditation is a quality assurance procedure wherein the services and operations of higher education institutions; universities, faculties, and degree programs are reviewed to verify if applicable standards are met (Lucas, 2014); then, accreditation is granted whether standards are met. Accreditation is a crucial consideration when evaluating the caliber of academic institutions and programs in the realm of higher education. The function of certification, both institutional and programmatic, is to keep up with the comprehensive reform processes in the education, in an effort to improve the standard of educational outcomes. Academic accreditation, as it is recognized in the global academic community, is the main policy tool that aims to advance the level of education and training institutions, and ensure that the educational process is continually developed and improved. Additionally, it guarantees that minimal standard criteria are met, which assurance that a reliable accreditation system thatsatisfies the demands of stakeholders is available to students, parents, employers, and the global community. Challenges are also posed by the standards, criteria, and resources employed for accreditation. The first is the difficulty of developing quantifiable, impartial, and acceptable standards and criteria that prevent or lessen biases in quality evaluation and accreditation. This challenge is brought on by the fact that various ideas and models of quality exist, based on the objectives of various stakeholders and the organizational complexity of higher education institutions (Alzafari & Kratzer, 2019). It is difficult to develop a set of standards and criteria that may both serve as the basis for an objective evaluation of quality and be used to precisely gauge the quality of various university operations such as teaching and research development, taking into account the interests and viewpoints of many stakeholders (students, academics, managers, government, and employers), as well as diverse academic subjects. The second difficulty is striking a balance between comprehensiveness and simplicity to guarantee that an intricate institution or academic program is fully or mostly covered by the norms and criteria. Nguyen et al. (2017), for instance, asserted that accrediting standards and criteria should be integrated to cover outcomes rather than just inputs and procedures. Based on the insights of 40 high-caliber professionals from several European nations, the challenges in adopting quality were categorized by Alzafari and Kratzer (2019) into three main parts. First, problems in the organizational, educational, or quality systems, that is, the difficulty presented by the diversity of ideas and models of quality, depending on the parties involved, and the difficulty of locating appropriate measurements, to evaluate and execute quality within complex organizations using typically autonomous personnel. Challenges with implementation are the second, the challenge of creating and carrying out action plans, deciding how to allocate resources, and taking action based on the findings of quality assessment. The challenge of quality culture and leadership comes in third, the challenge of locating capable leaders who are eager to create a high-caliber culture. The literature outlines three categories of difficulties in developing a quality system in Africa: funding, the effect of accreditation, and the staff's availability and qualifications (Materu, 2007).

For the purpose of examining the changes (for better or for worse) that had changed from one cycle of assessments to another in the chosen indicators, the study (Dattey et al., 2017) used

quantitative research techniques. The findings revealed varied degrees of advancements in the chosen indicators from the earlier assessments to the latter ones. Sackey et al.'s (2014) study makes use of a tuning approach that has been used to successfully harmonize higher education in Europe, Latin America, and Russia for coordinating African undergraduate mechanical engineering programs. Researchers from 11 African universities look at the degree structures and content of mechanical engineering programs by including stakeholder groups via a survey questionnaire, establish competences, and construct a meta-profile for mechanical engineering. The objective is to jointly contribute to the reform and harmonization of higher education in mechanical engineering to increase its responsiveness to Africa's requirements for development. Findings so far show that developing comparable academic systems and reference standards throughout Africa is not only feasible but also highly promising, which could promote greater cooperation among African academic institutions while facilitating staff and student mobility.

Nelson Zavale (2021) addressed the challenges of accreditation in Mozambique and Africa. The reflection focuses on challenges associated to the process and instruments, organizational setting, resources, and policy, and accreditation impact. The challenges recommend that identifying and addressing issues preventing or aiding the adoption of these processes should be given priority along with establishing quality assurance mechanisms in Africa. The study suggests some insights on how to implement accreditation policies with less romanticism and idealism. The findings of the study indicate that, in addition to putting in place quality control measures to deal with the on-going transformation of higher education in Africa, the challenges encountered while implementing these procedures should also be addressed, especially if these methods are meant to regulate and enhance the quality and standard of higher education. Acevedo-De-los-Ríos and Rondinel-Oviedo (2021) carried out a study aiming to examine the influence, valuable, and the significance of accreditation as a measure of QA at a private higher education institution in Peru. The qualitative influence of accreditation was assessed within a survey presented to academic staff, students, and employers. A quantitative assessment was conducted by comparing academic metrics before and after the accrediting processes, such as the pass rate or weighted average per year. It came to the conclusion that international accreditation is crucial for ensuring the caliber of architecture programs. In addition, each type of accreditation measures different aspects of academic quality. The priority of accreditation is to certify the training of competent architects based on the demands of the local labour market and graduate profile. Enders and Westerheijen (2014) investigated the emergence, development, and contested nature of quality assurance (QA) in the European policy arena. They conceptualized their work on the background of the study of multi-level and multi-actor dynamics; and discussed the changing ideational framing of QA and attempts at European norm-setting and standardization. The study reported that interest in national reforms made more countries join Bologna based on the assumption of participating in a non-binding, voluntary process that would keep the hierarchical integration. Therefore, quickly, Bologna supported, however, there is a chance for European policymakers to seize control of the regulatory system by connecting the procedure to the more economically motivated vertical integration procedures. The European Commission provided grounds for the idea that QA is an issue for European education and labour markets. Eaton (2010) highlighted that accreditation of higher education is a quality-affirming process that, in many countries, includes the creation of accreditation standards, institutional self-review, institutional peer review, judgment about achieving accreditation, and award of accredited status. Accreditation plays major roles with regard to assuring threshold quality and quality improvement; serving as a reliable authority on quality to

students and society, and assisting with student mobility through recognition of qualifications and transfer of credit. Higher education is experiencing a significant expansion of access with the internationalization of colleges and universities and demands for heightened accountability to the public. Accrediting bodies are expanding in numbers, improving, and diversifying their capabilities to accommodate these changes so that these newly developing key components of higher education may be efficiently assessed for quality and quality improvement. Ibrahim (2014) highlighted that higher education institutions can only disregard educational quality assurance at the risk of stagnation because it has become a universal objective. Additionally, accreditation can promote public confidence and accountability; the reciprocity of recognition of qualifications and facilitation of academic personnel mobility is guaranteed. The unification of the professions is furthered by providing together practitioners, academic staff in a task intended to enhance professional preparation and qualified practice. Jose's (2021) study focused on administrative staff in colleges and seeks to determine strategies to enhance the role performed in the accreditation exercise. The study makes suggestions for ways to strengthen the crucial function of administrative personnel in accreditation. It concluded that an effective administrator should be knowledgeable about accreditation, how it works, and how it might progress the institution's mission and the student community. In addition, the administrative team may communicate with, encourage, and motivate the faculty and students to work at their best through their inventive and creative work. The most critical role of building coordination and understanding among the academic units can be carried out by the administrative staff.

All above, accreditation is a useful technique for ensuring quality in higher education. It is frequently the final element of the self-study with a peer review process. After analyzing an evaluation report, an accrediting authority releases a public declaration certifying the level of quality of an academic institution or program against defined requirements. Accreditation, in general, seeks to enhance or hold higher education institutions accountable. However, the studies are divided on the efficacy of accreditation. Positive effects have been shown in some literature, more so at the structural and management levels than in learning and teaching. Other studies, on the other hand, believe that accreditation has little to no effect other than to overburden institutions with more bureaucracies and extra work aimed solely at complying with or tick-boxing externally established requirements. Doubts regarding accreditation's effectiveness have encouraged experts to investigate the challenges and difficulties. A survey of these studies is necessary to determine the essential components to employ in developing a conceptual framework for tackling accreditation difficulties. The literature outlines three types of challenges in employing a quality system in Africa, namely, funding, the accreditation impact, and the qualification of staff availability. The Libyan higher education established a quality assurance system during the 2000s to cope with the country's rapid expansion of higher education. Higher-education accreditation is managed by a government organization under the Ministry of Education, namely, The National Center for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Educational and Training Institutions (NCQAA) (NCQAA_LY, 2021). As a result, despite all efforts since then, Libyan higher education is still in its early stages. A few universities have a proportionate number of students and professional academic personnel. Most universities, in particular private ones, have a small number of enrolled students and academic staff, as well as a dearth of permanent and qualified Ph.D. employees. Some older universities are developing research skills, although the vast majority are primarily concerned only with undergraduate teaching. The role of quality assurance accreditation is still very limited, perhaps due to a lack of experience and culture of practicing quality requirements, as well as a lack of seriousness in applying quality standards and obtaining accreditation. The present study aims to investigate faculty members' viewpoints about the QA accreditation in

higher education in the Third-World drawing insights from the experience of the Faculty of Engineering, Sabratha University. This study is concerned with understanding the difficulties and challenges behind the reasons for not employing quality assurance standards using the point of view of college staff, as well as contributing to disseminating quality culture and encouraging its employment. The study was carried out during the period between the time the faculty received institutional accreditation in 2020 and the end of the auditing process of programmatic accreditation in August 2022. The objective is to address the effectiveness of quality assurance accreditation in higher education and, in particular, to discuss a topic that concerns all parties involved in higher education: How does quality assurance accreditation affect the outcomes of higher education in developing countries?

METHODOLOGY

The present study focuses on evaluating QA accreditation in higher education in developing nations drawing insights from the Sabratha University - Faculty of Engineering experience. Sabratha University is one of Libyan largest public universities, which was established in 2015, and it consists of 19 colleges, some of which date back to 1992 that were affiliated with University of Zawia. In 2020, the faculty of Engineering got institutional accreditation; and the programmatic accreditation of the faculty of engineering programs was evaluated by an audit committee, assigned by the Libyan QA Centre during 14-16 August 2022 for seven programs. The programs are: Mechanical power Engineering, Communication Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Petrol Engineering, Department of Environmental Engineering and Natural Resources and Computer Engineering. The evaluation and audit process includes eight criteria including 134 indicators (NCQAA_LY, 2021), namely, planning & administrative organization (17 indicators), educational program (25 indicators), faculty and support staff (12 indicators), student affairs (14 indicators), facilities & educational support services (21 indicators), scientific research (17 indicators), community service & the environment (10 indicators), and quality assurance & continuous improvement (19 indicators). The audit report for the purpose of accreditation includes an evaluation of performance according to each of the accreditation criteria separately. Points are allocated according to the findings of the audit team, which are based on evidence, documents, and tangible evidence during the audit process, and on a scale from zero to four points. To obtain the accreditation, the program must obtain 70% of the total points for all the criteria. Obtaining less than 65% in any criterion will lead to non-accreditation. Five programs - Mechanical Power Engineering, Communication Engineering, Chemical Engineering, and Civil Engineering-were accepted to receive programmatic accreditation, while the remaining programs must wait until the standards are met.

Research Design

The components of the study are as follows: questionnaires, examining the results of the questionnaires, carrying out a SWOT analysis, followed by the final analysis and interpretation. The questionnaires are concerned specifically with all of its related elements about quality assurance and accreditation; however, they also comprise all elements of the teaching and learning process, in addition to management and financial matters, and other assistance services associated with high standards of quality. Questionnaires were figured out online using Google tools, in particular, the Forms application. The questionnaire was prepared using clear, simple, coherent, and consistent statements in accordance with quality demands and standards. Three essential groups are primarily the focus of this investigation, namely, G_1) Quality and its impact in general, G_2) Accreditation application procedures, and

G_3) QA accreditation auditing procedures. Based on at least 10 participations, each group was divided into different categories; any other responses or remarks with fewer than 10 responses were disregarded. The first group (Quality and its impact in general), is divided into three categories: C1.1) Dissatisfied with how quality was handled, C1.2) Considers how quality might be used for development and improvement, and C1.3) Persuaded by the use of quality principles. Based on the second group (Accreditation application procedures), the opinions are divided into four categories, namely, C2.1) A new experience that requires additional support, C2.2) Persuaded to receive accreditation, C2.3) Indicators are unclear or difficult to use, and C2.4) The capabilities do not meet the required standards. The third group is referred to QA accreditation auditing procedures, where the opinions are divided into three categories, namely, C3.1) Feels that even the audit committee was in the dark about some issues, C3.2) Believes that there is a significant difference between one auditor's evaluation and another's, and C3.3) The evaluation procedure went without a hitch.

Participants

The study considers the perspectives of the faculty staff using a survey of questionnaires and by taking advantage of some of the workshops held in the run-up to the accreditation application process. Fifty three (53) participants answered out of about 80, making up a response percentage of 65%, the participants that provided answers are academics, students, employers, assistant teachers, engineers and technicians, as reported in Figure 1. There were 38 men and 15 women among the participants, and there were also five foreigners, including three students and two professors. The academics included 14 PhD holders and 8 master's degree holders, while engineers were all B.Sc. holders. Employers included three BSc holders, one with a diploma, and three Secretaries.
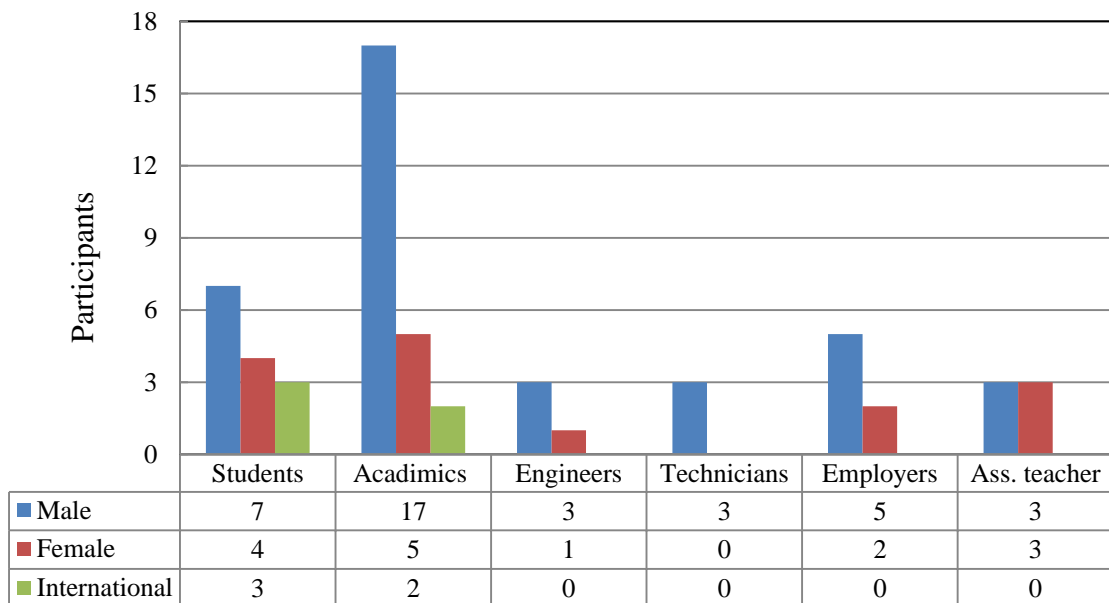

	Students	Acadimics	Engineers	Technicians	Employers	Ass. teacher
Male	7	17	3	3	5	3
Female	4	5	1	0	2	3
International	3	2	0	0	0	0

Figure 1: Participants characteristics.

Data Collection Procedure

The analysis and interpretation process of collecting data was done by creating tables and charts which helps to understand the analysis of responses using Google tools such as Sheets application. Lastly, following a thorough analysis of the perspectives of the important parties,

including the teaching staff, employers, and students; a SWOT analysis is to be used in order to understand the status quo situation in light of this novel experience, highlighting its strengths, weaknesses, and the most important opportunities and threats. Face-to-face interviews and workshop outcomes were used to supplement survey data and investigate strategic and qualitative concerns. These were integrated with the interpretation of the results along with the survey findings but are not shown separately as study findings as they were not significant differences. Figure 2 demonstrated the various viewpoints of the group one (G_1), the first category (C1.1) earned 32% of the options, while the second category (C1.2) received 40% and the third category (C1.3) received 28%.
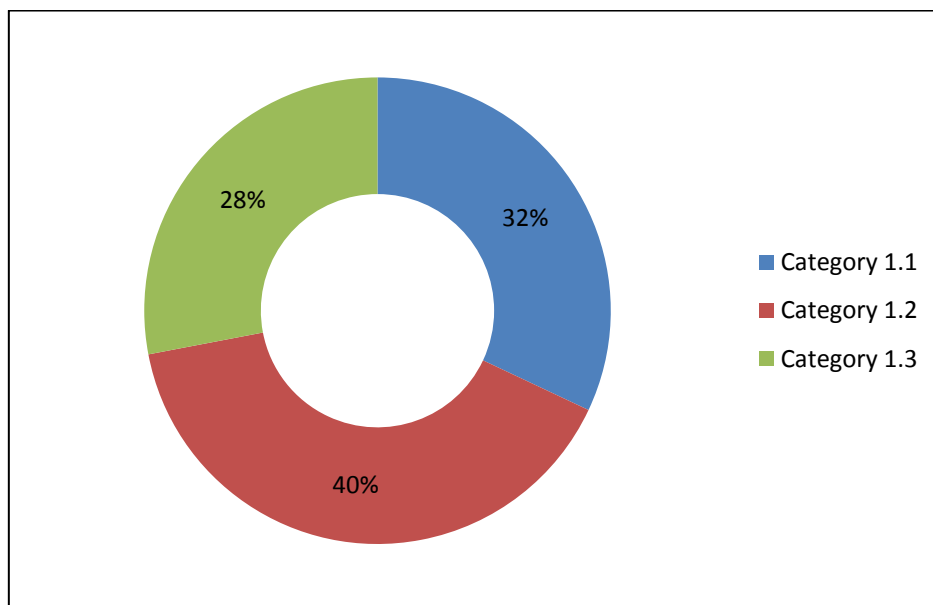

Figure 2: The perceptions of group one.

Figure 3 reported various opinions about the second group (G_2), where the first category (C2.1) earned 38% of the options, while the second category (C2.2) received 42% and the third category (C2.3) received 17, and finally fourth category (C2.4) received 21%. Figure 4 referred to the viewpoints regarding the third group (G_3), the first category (C3.1) earned 33% of the options, while the second category (C3.2) received 41% and the third category (C3.3) received 26%.
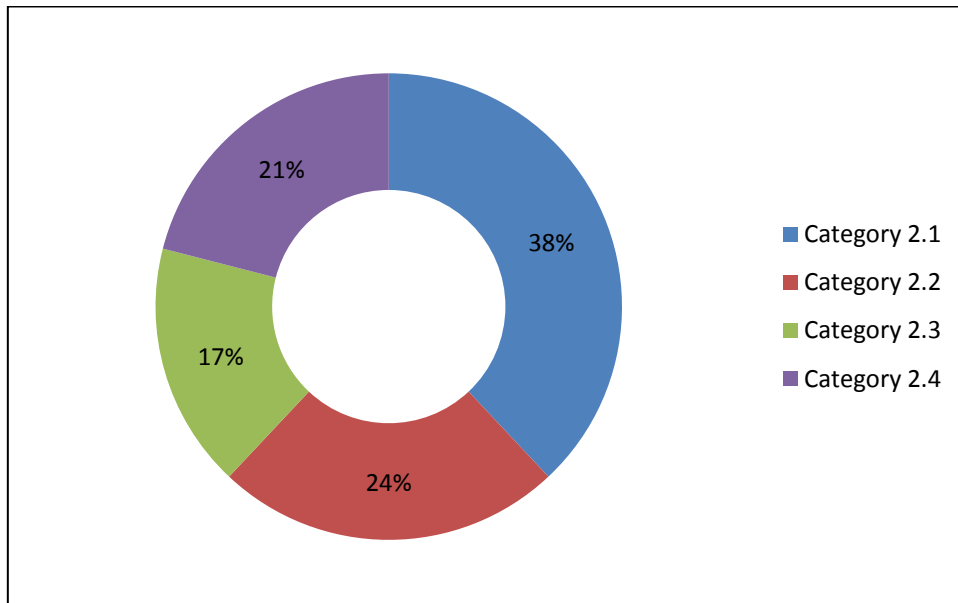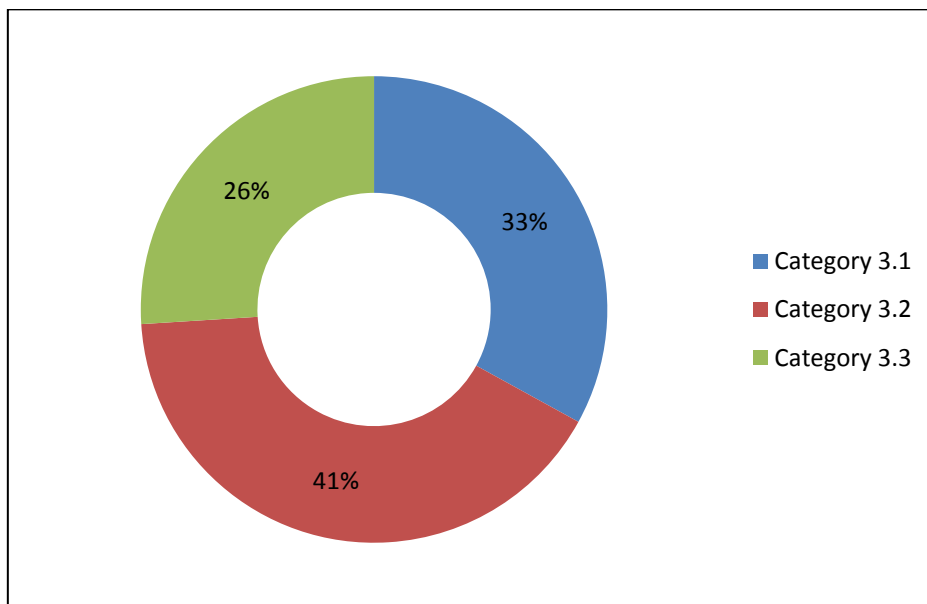
Figure 3: The perceptions of group two.

Figure 4: The perceptions of group three.

INTERPRETİNG SURVEY RESULTS

The study aimed to assess how quality assurance accreditation affects the outcomes of higher education in developing countries. Table 1 highlights the SWOT analysis results, which demonstrates strengths and weaknesses, and identifies the most important opportunities available and the threats it faces based on the recorded viewpoints. All parties anticipate that the role of accreditation, both institutional and programmatic, will be an appropriate solution to correcting rampant mismanagement in all higher education administrators' departments and their various levels. Even individuals, who were not satisfied with the use of quality standards, justify this by citing ineffective management and capabilities.

Table 1. The result of the SWOT analysis

	Helpful – Positive Factors	Harmful – Negative Factors
	STRENGTHS (S)	WEAKNESSES (W)
Internal Factors	- Quality assurance helps to improve the educational and management systems. - Accreditation leads to the improvement in the Ministry of Education's policies and the University's administrative system and the provision of capabilities that support the educational process and scientific research.	- Some participants are not happy with the way the quality. - Some participants are not pleased with the evaluation of the audit committee.
	OPPORTUNITIES (O)	THREATS (T)
External Factors	- Increase the attention and support of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. - Enhancing the effectiveness of the administrative system in universities and college.	- Political instability. - Instability of higher education policies and plans.

In general, all participants look forward to the contribution of the accreditation process to help develop and improve the educational process for all related educational and administrative elements. In addition, not all members were satisfied with the evaluation of the audit committee due to the disparity in the auditors' evaluation. Quality Assurance Accreditation can have an important impact on the outcomes of higher education in developing countries as it helps to ensure that educational institutions meet certain standards of quality. Accreditation promotes accountability and transparency in higher education institutions, which can help address issues such as corruption and fraud. It also encourages institutions to prioritize the quality of teaching, research, and facilities, leading to a more effective and relevant education system.

CONCLUSION

The study addressed the evaluation of QA accreditation in higher education in developing countries drawing insights from the Faculty of Engineering, Sabratha University experience. Most of the findings were in line with the results of the previous studies that addressed African countries. In addition, it concluded that QA accreditation is an important element in Libya and developing countries not only in organizing the administrative portfolios but also in the development and improvement of the educational process in all aspects and levels, and can play a role in solving the Higher Education policy instability. Finally, since the National Center for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Educational and Training Institutions belongs to the Ministry of Higher Education in Libya; in light of this, the majority of survey participants recommended that they should provide all the needs of their educational institutions as described by the quality standards and indicators in order to meet quality criteria and objectives. Therefore, the World-Third's higher education system can be improved through the use of QA accreditation, not only in profiles' control but also in the general structures of all sections, levels, and the numerous other activities.

Support And Agreement

"As author(s), we have no support or appreciation for the process of conducting the research."

Conflict Statement

"We declare that we, as authors of the study, have no interests/conflicts."

Publication Ethical Statement

All the rules stated in the framework of "Scientific Research in Universities and Publication Ethic Codes were followed throughout the process (planning, implementation, data collection and analysis). None of the actions stated under the title "Actions that violate scientific research and Publication Ethics " which is the second part of the codes that must be considered. During the writing process of the manuscript, the rules of scientific ethics and citation were followed, no falsifications were made to the collected data, and this study was not sent to any other academic publication environment for evaluation.

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