

Transcript

Michelle Claville:

Welcome and thank you for joining us. As you know, for just over a year now, Quality International News has decided to highlight certain CIQG members. Today we have the privilege of highlighting American University of Ras Al Khaimah, otherwise known as AURAK. Interestingly enough, the president of that university, Dr. David Schmidt, is also a Board member for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. And so we welcome you and thank you so much for agreeing to this extended interview with regard to your institution. This university is carving out a distinctive position in global higher education landscape through its commitment to international accreditation, innovation and student outcomes. And so now we'll explore how AURAK is adapting to evolving trends while staying true to its mission and identity. Again, welcome David.

David Schmidt:

Thank you. It's a pleasure. Pleasure to be here.

Michelle Claville:

So you've spoken about the complexity of managing multiple accreditations. Can you share how AURAK is navigating potential conflicts and deciding which accreditations to prioritize even going forward in this new space that we're in?

David Schmidt:

Certainly, I think I'll start by saying that the American University of Ras Al Khaimah, or as you said it is we do refer to it as AURAK, is a rather young university. We're 15, 16 years old. We just started in 2009. And like a lot of the universities that were starting up in the Gulf region and in particular the United Arab Emirates, there was a quick competition to see how many kind of stripes or military insignia you could put on your sleeve, so to speak. And that was with accreditation. Now, as an American university through identity, we of course, had to have an American accreditator--accreditation-- and we chose SACS. Now, I shouldn't say we, but the university and my predecessor, I've only been two years now in this position and my predecessor did an amazing job in getting a lot of the heavy accreditation work done. So first and foremost, we had to be accredited by our Ministry of Education here in the United Arab Emirates or the CAA, the Commission for Academic Accreditation.

And then they went for SACS. And of course, as most of your viewers will know, SACS is quite a serious accrediting body and we've been re-accredited now twice. We've got our QEP in place and those are our two major ones. But we also have QAA, which is a British accrediting body. And of course we've sought through our board to have all of our professional degrees accredited. So all of our engineering degrees have the ABET. My first year that I came into this presidency, we got the AACSB, which is really good to have. So now that we move forward, we're looking at not just the sometimes conflict and contradictions that different standards would have, it's also very time consuming to maintain and juggle these different accreditations. And it's also very expensive or it is an expense to consider. So as we move forward, we're looking now at quality as opposed to quantity. And SACS will be one of course that we maintain. I believe very strongly that if you use the word American, you have to have an accredited regional accreditor and we of course will maintain our CAA because to function in the United Arab Emirates, we must maintain that. So we will probably be dropping not pursuing our QAA.

Michelle Claville:

Oh, thank you for that. I truly appreciate the lens with which you've discussed accreditation because I know especially since accreditation is such a popular topic currently, your perspective I suspect will help many of us determine what's next with regard to accreditation and how maybe we ought to be thinking about it. I want to talk about something that you said in the written interview, and that's with regard to employability. It's a clear key measure of success for your institution. And I'm curious, how are you adapting your programs and tracking outcomes to meet this demand?

David Schmidt:

Well, and this is one of those fascinating kind of, if I may use the term KPIs, because that's how it's been presented to us in particular with our ministry and our national federal accreditation. They've introduced some new KPIs in ways by which we are measured and even ranked. And that has had an impact on some of our major ranking bodies that we are subject to. That is the QS and the Times Higher Education. Those are very large over here in the Gulf region and the GCC region. So employability now is, if I may say the kind of the flavor of the month. It has always been something which the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education has tracked, but it's been very difficult to do because once students leave and they're alum, some are good at responding, some are not. It depends on how you maintain contact with them.

As a young university, we haven't done, there's other things that we've been pursuing for the last 15 years and remaining maintaining contact with our alumni has kind of been put on the back burner. Now we've had to really ramp that up. So I've hired a new vice president that oversees career services, alumni services, institutional advancement, and one of the things that he's in charge of is our employability, making sure that with our graduates, that we maintain contact with them, that we articulate how important it is for them to report back if they find a job, where they're working, what kind of employment they have. And for us, of course, as their alma mater, to keep contact with them. So it's part of the maturation, so to speak for the university, and we really don't mind being held to that because I'll give you a quick little story.

My head of recruitment, I asked him the other day, I said, if, and we've been recently blessed with a really wonderful QS ranking. Last year we entered the top 500 of universities, so we jumped from about 650 to 485. He used that in the recruitment and I said to him though, would you rather use that or when you're talking to students and parents, is it more important to have a high employability? And without a hesitation, he said high employability. So we need that for the competitive market here in the United Arab Emirates and even internationally. We need that.

Michelle Claville:

Thank you. I'm curious about the international pathways because you've just talked about the employability and I know that you have a two plus two and a three plus two partnership, which to be honest, I find quite impressive. Tell me a little bit more about the lessons that you've learned in managing these international collaboration. I don't know how that may impact things like employability, but I'm curious to hear more about that.

David Schmidt:

That's a great question. As I think I had mentioned, it's extremely competitive here in United Arab Emirates for higher education. I mean, with the growth of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, a lot of universities are coming in and staking their claim, and we've been around at least for 15 years. The university I was president at before I came to AURAK was the American University of Dubai, and they had a high employability because they'd been around for 25 years as opposed to 15 years. There I introduced the two plus two and the two plus three programs, I brought them here and they've just started off the ground. They're a wonderful pathway in particular for parents who are worried for a myriad of reasons about sending their sons and in particular their daughters to the United States when they're first-year students. And for those of us who have children, we know that a 17-year-old, 18-year-old going directly from the safety of the United Arab Emirates, Ras Al Khaimah or Dubai to Washington, DC or Boston.

It can be a bit of a culture shock. So we looked at establishing these two plus two and two plus three programs for a option, and it made us a bit more competitive. Now, my focus was as an American university, one that's already accredited by SACS to look at American universities where we would do the articulation. So to answer your question, what is the most difficult? It was by far managing the articulation of the courses so that when we would've marketed it, we could say to a parent or to a young student, is your first two years you will take this? Let's say you're doing business administration with a concentration in finance, and when you go to our partner school, you will just have to take this and after two years you will get your degree or after sometimes one year, and then one year as a master's. The general education requirements sometimes for certain state schools, so for instance, if we were sending them to a certain program that would have a requirement to take the history of Tennessee, if the university was in Tennessee, that was also an issue that we had to deal with, but that was left to the provost, the deans and the chairs and the brilliant faculty that we share on both sides of the world.

Michelle Claville:

Awesome. Currently, CHEA has had a number of webinars and discussions around AI. Everybody's talking about AI and what that might look like in quality assurance and even best practices at higher ed and maintaining quality and those kinds of discussions. But I noticed at your institution you've launched an AI major and minor, and so I'm curious about your approach to integrating AI into the student experience. How has that been received and whatever else you think our audience ought to know about this journey?

David Schmidt:

That's a great question. And I will say this in many ways. We were very fortunate, we were the first university in the United Arab Emirates to introduce AI as a major, and it has been a shot in the arm for our enrollment to say the least. We've gone from just, I think two years ago an enrollment of 1100 to this year we're almost about 1500. Now, we can't accept all AI students, but it has put us as kind of on the edge, cutting edge, a forward-thinking university. And of course when we first introduced it, and the United Arab Emirates is really leading the pack when it comes to AI. There's no doubt the leaders, the industries are really embracing AI. But what we've looked to do now since it is so kind of across the board is to offer it. And do you remember years ago, especially in the United States, when we saw that students couldn't read or write as well as we wanted them to do at the university, and we did reading and writing across the curriculum.

So our approach was to introduce AI across the curriculum, not just as a minor, but also as a concentration, as a certificate. And to say, look, this is something to have in your wheelhouse when you graduate to make yourself more employable, is to say that I have a minor, I'm a business major, but I

have a minor in AI that I know how to use AI as a tool. And it's going to be across the spectrum. It is not just for our school of engineering students. Even our partner university here Ras Al Khaimah, the med school is just embracing AI for a cost savings. I mean, for the first two years, students are utilizing AI to have an introduction to surgery or to medical diagnosis and things like that. So we want all of our students to understand AI as a tool, and it's had a huge impact on our graduating class and our seniors who have to do interns, internships. So what we said is, well, why don't we just start first and foremost with the university, my office, the office of the president, we had interns come into our office and spend a semester saying, how can you as the president of the university, your staff, your administrators and your other offices utilize AI to make you more efficient? And efficiency saves money. It saves time and it makes you a leaner, meaner and a better university. And so we've kind of spread it across the board. And to date, knock on wood, we've been quite successful. So

Michelle Claville:

I like that because I can only imagine how the students must have felt being able to contribute to the efficiency of the president's office by utilizing a new toy, if you will, a toy that some people are afraid of and a toy that they've probably utilized in their own private space. So I think that's fascinating. I'm going to use...

David Schmidt:

Also, I should say this, Michelle, I'm a bit of a luddite and I will say that I have learned a tremendous amount of AI. I no longer fear it, not that I did, but I certainly am really quite enamored with it, and I see it as an amazing tool that will help us. It really will.

Michelle Claville:

I can see that. I can see that a lot. I'm going to use that to dovetail into a broader question about quality assurance and the outlook. Considering AI, considering the different things that we've already mentioned in this conversation and things that we haven't, what areas of quality assurance do you think needs the most attention as higher education evolves? And it's interesting, I have to add this addendum or this little phrase in this season because there's so much happening. And so the things that we thought would happen have changed. And so with this, the best word I can think of is dynamism that we are experiencing right now. In your opinion, what should we be doing with regard to quality assurance and paying attention to?

David Schmidt:

That's a really great question, and I'll try to answer it a little bit from the international perspective, obviously.

Michelle Claville:

Sure.

David Schmidt:

Because I do think that in particular, when I look at things that are going on in my home country now in the United States, perhaps for the first time in a long time, if the first time ever people are starting to hear about accrediting bodies and maybe they're learning about accrediting bodies. I know that when I came here and took my first presidency, we would really market the fact that the university was US accredited. And the same when I came here to AURAK. But I would oftentimes then step outside of myself and say, but do parents and 17, 18-year-old students really know what that means? And

oftentimes the answer was, no, they don't. And perhaps that's why my head of enrollment said, look, employability is everything. I think for us folks that are in the field, administrators, faculty, staff, one area, and I'm not trying to avoid answering the question, but one area is not for the institutions, but in my perspective, especially internationally, is rather for the accrediting bodies and for the ministries, is I think especially as we mature, and this is one of the places where I think CHEA has provided amazing global and international leadership, is there has to be this more of a macro approach.

There is globally now with a lot of countries that are looking at bringing up their quality assurance, there's more of a micro approach--that they will go in, they will set these really stringent standards across the board and they say to the institutions, you have to follow all of these. Well, then what you get is you get a bunch of universities that are all the same, and that's not a good thing. So there has to be this level of trust between the governing bodies, the accrediting bodies, and the institutions. And I think part of that comes with maturation. I think we're still struggling with that in the United States, but as a president or as an administrator, I do love accrediting bodies because they provide peer review. And that is how we become better as a university. We allow others to come into our campuses to open up our books and say, this is what we're doing. Don't tell me what I'm doing wrong. Tell me what I can do better and how I can do it better. And I think that's the major approach that most accrediting bodies that are looking to become better are kind of growing towards, maturing towards and want to achieve. But I do still see there's a lot of work to be done internationally that way.

Michelle Claville:

This has been absolutely awesome. I am so honored to have had the opportunity to speak with you for just a little while, and I always enjoy speaking with you, David. before I close out, is there anything else that you want to just share and say before we actually close this portion out?

David Schmidt:

No, it is been a pleasure. And like you said, it's always wonderful to see you. I'll see you at the next Board meeting. I do think that CHEA's role now that we are expanding beyond our borders is more than ever going to really set the pace and just so very important. It really is for higher education, global higher education.

Michelle Claville:

Thank you. I truly thank you for sharing your insights and experiences with us today. And it's clear that AURAK is not only meeting the demands of a rapidly changing global education environment, but also shaping the future of quality and access in higher learning. We look forward to seeing how your efforts continue to evolve and inspire. And we also thank our Quality International Newsletter audience for tuning in. Keep sending those submissions to QI News. We want to hear what's happening in your part of the world. Thank you.