International Quality Review Mid-Cycle Quality Review of Higher Colleges of Technology

February 2023

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About this mid-cycle review

This is a report of a Mid-Cycle Quality Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Higher Colleges of Technology. The mid-cycle review is desk-based and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Mark Davies
- Tess Winther.

The International Quality Review (IQR) in January 2020 resulted in a published report. The QAA review team concluded that the institution met all 10 standards set out in Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The team identified three features of good practice and made five recommendations.

This mid-cycle review evaluates progress against the key actions since the IQR and considers any significant changes that may impact on the ability of Higher Colleges of Technology to continue to meet the ESG standards.

Outcome of the mid-cycle review

1   From the evidence provided the review team concludes that Higher Colleges of Technology is making **satisfactory progress** since the January 2020 International Quality Review and that the period of validity of the IQR be extended to January 2025.

Summary of IQR outcomes

Overview of the institution

2   The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) is a federally-funded institution established in 1988. It has 16 campuses spread across five Emirates of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which include Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Dubai, Fujairah, Madinat Zayed, Ras Al Khaimah, Ruwais and Sharjah. Each location has separate men's and women's colleges, totalling over 23,000 students and 2,000 staff spread across the campuses.

3   HCT offers 71 programmes with approximately 100 specialisations, which are aligned with the National Qualifications Framework of the Emirates (NQFE) and are accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA). HCT maintains CAA institutional and programme licensure. In 2020, HCT was granted renewal of licensure for a five-year period - 2021-26. In addition, a number of programmes maintain accreditation by international professional bodies. HCT, therefore, undergoes various review processes to maintain both its national and international accreditation.

4   HCT's primary focus is to deliver applied education in line with its mission to 'provide applied higher education to equip generations with knowledge, skills and competencies that meet international standards and the future needs of the UAE industry and society'. The institution recently launched Strategic Plan HCT 4.0 (2019-2024), which has an emphasis on three areas - Graduating Companies, No Emirati Left Behind and Technical Leaders. HCT's focus - 'Employability and Beyond' - seeks to move the institution from beyond employment for students by also providing opportunities beyond graduation, such as support for new start-ups, foster applied research in collaboration with industry and to offer programmes to mid-career professionals.

5   HCT has five strategic goals:

- empowering students with 21st century skills in a vibrant campus environment engaged with their local communities

- continuous improvement of academic programmes, faculty and scholarship activities to meet high-quality standards and industry requirements

- engagement of strategic partnerships to foster strong connections with industry, higher education institutions, alumni and high schools

- provision of quality and efficient administrative services with effective governance embedding an innovation culture in the institutional environment.

6   HCT has undergone a major institutional review of the organisational structure, governance and operating framework. This has resulted in a more business-orientated governance structure, governed by a Board of Trustees that is led by the Chancellor, with the day-to-day operations led by the President and CEO. The academic and administrative functions fall under the aegis of five Vice-Presidents who support 'the productization approach to HCT's programs and services'. This is underpinned by policies and procedures that support the quality assurance practices at HCT.

7   A critical challenge HCT notes in its self-evaluation is the pace of change in the country and the institution's position in implementing the national agenda, which requires it to be able to adapt what it does to meet national priorities. Given HCT's geographical spread, it further adds to the challenges to meet the specific demands of each Emirate.

8   In reaching conclusions about the extent to which HCT meets the 10 ESG standards, the review team followed the handbook for International Quality Review (April 2019). The review process is evidence-based, and the review team was provided with a self-evaluation and supporting evidence by HCT. During the five-day visit, which took place from 26 to 30 January 2020, a total of 22 meetings were held comprising the President, his senior management team, quality assurance teams, committee and academic leads involved in the management of programmes, teaching faculty, support services staff, students, employers and alumni. The review team visited five campuses: Dubai Men's College, Abu Dhabi Women's College, Al Ain Women's College, Ras Al Khaimah Men's College, and Sharjah Men's College. The first two days were spent at the base campus in Dubai, with the review team splitting up to visit two campuses each on days three and four, returning together as a team in Dubai for the final day. The team toured the key teaching and learning facilities at each campus and met with students, faculty and staff at each campus. In addition, the team was given a quick 'walk-through' of MyHCT, an online portal used by students, faculty and staff.

Good practice identified by the 2020 International Quality Review

9   The QAA review team identified the following features of good practice at HCT.

- The comprehensive student support available throughout the student journey that aligns strongly with the HCT ethos (ESG Standard 1.6).

- The effectiveness of HCT's engagement of employers and other industry partners in the creation and development of its academic programmes (ESG Standard 1.9; ESG Standard 1.2).

- The extent to which HCT's academic programmes are externally accredited by international bodies is commendable and brings another significant layer of external quality review to bear (ESG Standard 1.10).

Recommendations of the 2020 International Quality Review

10   The QAA review team made the following recommendations to HCT.

- HCT should consistently implement a robust scheme for the moderation of students' work that includes scrutiny of a significant proportion of the assessments that contribute to students' final GPA (ESG Standard 1.3).

- HCT should develop and implement a system to ensure that it analyses and learns from complaints by students with the aim of reducing the number of future complaints (ESG Standard 1.3).

- HCT should ensure that the consideration of students presenting with mitigating circumstances is undertaken using a single consistent process, thereby facilitating the equitable treatment of students (ESG Standard 1.3).

- HCT should implement a faculty observation scheme that is deployed consistently across the institution allowing for frequent enough observations such that staff who wish to be recognised as Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) have sufficient timely opportunity to have their practice observed (ESG Standard 1.5).

- HCT should, when a new system (or update) is implemented, keep faculty and staff informed about the reason for the change, and undertake an evaluation concerning the effectiveness of the changes after an appropriate period, ensuring that the evaluation takes account of end-user feedback (ESG Standard 1.7).

Changes since the last IQR review visit

11   The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) constitute a federal institution for higher education established under Federal Law no. 2 of 1988 and later reorganised under Federal Law no. 17 of 1998. The HCT operates as a system of 16 campuses for male and female students in five of the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates - Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah. The headquarters are located in the city of Abu Dhabi.

12   The HCT is governed by a Board of Trustees, which is chaired by the Chancellor. In June 2022, H.E. Dr Abdulrahman Abdulmannan Al Awar, Minister of Human Resources and Emiratisation, was appointed as the new Chancellor of HCT. In his role as Chairman of the Board, the Chancellor is the legal representative of the HCT system and is responsible for carrying out the decisions of the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees also comprises other qualified and experienced members from various sectors in the UAE appointed by the Cabinet of the Government.

13   The HCT President and CEO is responsible for the management of HCT and the implementation of its regulations and resolutions. In addition, he is responsible for developing a culture of innovation as well as enhancing HCT's organisational performance. In September 2022, Dr Abdulatif Alshamsi - HCT President and CEO was replaced by Dr Faisal Alayyan.

Findings from the mid-cycle review analysis

14   As part of the review, HCT prepared a Mid-Cycle Review Report, which contained updated information in summary form relating to each of the ESG standards and an action plan showing progress against the outcomes of the IQR report published in 2020. The report

consolidates HCT's position on each of the three features of good practice and progress in addressing the five recommendations.

15   As a significant preface to the analysis of HCT's progress since the 2020 IQR report, it should be noted that impacting on all HCT's academic operations is a revised Quality Manual, implemented in 2020. This Manual sets out the principles on which HCT's quality framework is founded, linking to HCT's strategic goals and its performance management framework. The Manual espouses a 'can, do, check, act' culture stemming from sound institutional data, particularly those gathered from stakeholders, that allow the various corporate functions to operate effectively. The Manual explains the steps to be followed in various processes - for example, institutional and programme accreditation, programme development, monitoring and review. The revised Quality Manual sets out material in a comprehensive and clear way. As such, it has the potential to positively influence the effectiveness of HCT's operations, including the manner in which HCT has responded to the recommendations from the 2020 IQR report, as described below.

16   In early 2020, in response to the pandemic, HCT pivoted to delivery through online modes of learning, where possible, with staff working from home and students learning from home. Assessments were modified accordingly. This pivoting was formalised in the form of a directive in August 2020. It concerned a hybrid academic model that set out the form that delivery would take and responsibilities of various stakeholders, all couched in the need to ensure the safety of students and staff. With the approval of the national Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) and HCT's recognition of the benefits of hybrid delivery, HCT has established a hybrid model as the standard model of delivery. Appropriate guidance has been issued to teaching staff to facilitate this. The e-learning model sets a maximum of 25% of delivery time.

17   In addressing the recommendation concerning the moderation of students' work, HCT is in the process of revising its moderation procedures to include more assessed work. The Assessment Procedure document and the Student Academic Assessment Manual indicate that the Academic Program Chair devises a moderation plan for the programme and shares it with system-wide Course Team Leaders who are responsible for moderation operation and assign moderators. Moderation applies to all 'major assessments', which are defined as contributing at least 10% of the overall course mark and is recommended for non-major assessments. All major assessment tools in each programme are selected for post-assessment moderation at least once each semester. The assigned moderator selects one sample from each grade (A, B, C, D and F) for moderation including at least one pass/fail boundary grade (58-59.49%) where possible, or at least five samples per assessment where the grade distribution does not include all grades. Some assessments are exempt from moderation: those which are double-marked; those that do not require interpretive marking - such as multiple choice questions; and those marked externally - for example, placement reports. To enhance communication, a list of frequently asked questions has been shared with teaching staff. HCT provided examples of post-grading moderation forms that clearly showed moderation taking place to the above procedure. The revised moderation procedures are awaiting final approval at institution level. In conclusion, HCT is modifying its moderation procedures such that a significant proportion of the assessments that contribute to a student's final grade point average are moderated. The system recognises that it would be impractical to moderate all assessment tasks but ensures that all major assessments are selected for moderation each semester. This modification is likely to have the effect of reducing greatly the variability in academic standards noted in the 2020 report. Accordingly, this recommendation is in the process of being fully addressed.

18   In response to the recommendation to analyse student complaint data, HCT has adopted a systematic process to review and act on complaints. HCT does not routinely separate out complaints from other forms of feedback and collects all such feedback via the

MyHCT portal. Analysts from the relevant campus student life department interrogate MyHCT and receive clear guidance on allocation of responsibility for dealing with individual items of feedback. Individual items are compiled in the form of a spreadsheet that allows for disaggregation by campus and HCT function. The spreadsheet is reviewed by the Student Success and Engagement Department, which prepares a 'Brainstorming Outcome Plan' that categorises feedback into topics such as 'scheduling and assessments', 'academic advising and attendance', 'E-Services & E-textbooks', and compiles advantages, challenges, opportunities and proposed action in relation to each topic. The Student Success and Engagement Department discusses the feasibility of action with the campuses and monitors implementation.

19   Although dealing with complaints in this way does not allow them to be analysed as a discrete unit, the distinction between a complaint and a suggestion is fine and it is concluded that HCT has fulfilled this recommendation. Nonetheless, there is scope for HCT to disseminate learning points from complaints data by presenting and discussing these in a deliberative forum.

20   HCT has responded to the recommendation concerning mitigating circumstances by reviewing the existing processes and preparing a single set of institution-wide guidelines to be followed. In doing so, it has also revisited dissemination channels. The Assessment Procedure document and the Student Academic Assessment Manual indicate that students apply for mitigating circumstances via the MyHCT portal. The decision for final summative assessments is made by the relevant Campus Council drawing on clear criteria, such as illness, in the Registrar Reference Manual. For other assessments the issue is handled locally by the relevant faculty member who makes a recommendation to the relevant Program Team Leader for decision. Appeals are possible. Nonetheless, extensions of time to complete coursework (up to five days) can be granted by individual faculty members acting in isolation. There is a balance to be struck between maintaining objectivity in decision-making and in ensuring matters are resolved swiftly and without undue stress placed on the student. Accordingly, allowing faculty members to take individual decisions on extensions is prudent.

21   However, the system in place was not the subject of the recommendation, rather the recommendation was intended to eliminate the various informal channels that students used to successfully seek mitigation. The scale of this issue is unknown. Although neither the student handbook nor the Student Code of Conduct - Methaq - stipulate how students should request the approval of mitigating circumstances, an email is sent from the Registry to all students prior to their final summative assessments indicating the process to be followed. However, this communication does not explicitly state that other informal mechanisms must not be used and applies to one type of assessment only. There is clearly more work to be done in communicating HCT's sound and proper processes to students. Faculty members should know not to allow informal procedures since the Assessment Procedure document and the Student Academic Assessment Manual specify the formal procedures.

22   In relation to the recommendation concerning a faculty observation scheme, HCT has introduced a single scheme that is deployed across the institution and involves an announced and an unannounced observation. Faculty members being observed, and observers, must complete a session to understand the nature and purpose of observations and their respective roles. The procedure to be followed is clearly set out in the Peer Classroom Observation Procedures document. A scoring rubric is provided which guides observers to make consistent scoring decisions. HCT provided examples of the completed observation forms that showed compliance with the scheme. However, the scheme is not deployed routinely, rather it occurs 'for faculty members' probation, promotion, contract renewals, and others as deemed necessary'. It does not, therefore, yet occur frequently

enough such that staff who wish to be recognised as FHEA have sufficient timely opportunity to have their practice observed and thus authenticated.

23   In addressing the recommendation to keep faculty and staff informed of system changes, HCT developed and implemented in 2020 a Project and Change Management Policy. This policy is designed to ensure the effective management of education technology projects and risks through defined processes that measure and evaluate project progress. All projects must have a business user acceptance phase and a formal post-implementation evaluation to assess the overall success of the project and identify problem areas. The policy also specifies that action should be taken to increase awareness and understanding of the introduced change across HCT, and to ensure that all changes are managed in a way that minimises negative impact to services and stakeholders. This policy directly addresses the recommendation in the 2020 report. HCT provided one example each of documents supporting the user acceptance phase, the post-implementation evaluation, and communication activity in relation to the redesign of HCT's website. These documents showed compliance with policy and the promotion of user engagement. Therefore, HCT has fulfilled this recommendation.

24   Overall, there is evidence that HCT has taken the recommendations in the 2020 report seriously and has made satisfactory progress since the report was published.

25   The 2020 IQR report identified three features of good practice and the University has consolidated its position on these, as follows.

26   Student support services remain comprehensive. As the pandemic drove a hybrid model of learning, student support systems followed suit to include e-academic and e-career advising, e-tutoring, e-counselling, and e-sports. Guidance in facilitating e-sessions was provided to staff. HCT has also taken steps to self-evaluate its performance in student support by applying the recently-established internal audit process to the Student Engagement and Success Department and specifying appropriate bespoke criteria against which its performance will be judged.

27   Engagement with employers and other industry partners has continued. HCT has updated its 'Industry Advisory Councils, Establishing and Managing Procedure', making amendments to the purpose and description of the procedure as well as the related roles and responsibilities. The revised Procedure is detailed and provides a firm basis from which to operate, manage and extract maximum use from Industry Advisory Councils (IACs). In accordance with the Procedure, the IAC of every academic faculty meets at least twice per year. The Council provides input on various issues related to the programme(s) including, but not limited to, the current skills set required in the industry, and input and feedback on new, or changes to existing, programme(s). Samples of Council minutes from across HCT's academic provision showed strong and productive input from senior members of staff from industrial partners on the current needs of industry, what HCT could do to address these, and the maintenance of research links using students.

28   HCT has continued its vigorous commitment to the external accreditation of its programmes. An application has been submitted to the CAA for the renewal of accreditation for 10 programmes in the Faculty of Engineering Technology and Science; and two programmes in the Faculty of Computer and Information Science were reaccredited by the CAA in 2022. The Canadian Information Processing Society's Information Systems and Technology Accreditation Council extended its accreditation period of five bachelors and five higher diploma programmes to the end of 2022. The Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology renewed accreditation in 2021 for five programmes in the Faculty of Engineering Technology and Science. In 2022, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business accepted HCT's progress report such that the Faculty of Business can

proceed to full accreditation. HCT has passed the initial stages for accreditation of its education programmes by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation. All 17 bachelor's programmes at HCT that are eligible for international accreditation are accredited.

Development of quality assurance and enhancement procedures

29   In its Mid-cycle Review Report, HCT noted its unique position in the UAE higher education landscape, with multiple national and international regulators at different levels. HCT claims that these regulators push HCT to implement robust and modern quality assurance systems that are ever evolving with current notions of good practice. In making these statements HCT is affirming that the development of its procedures comes from reacting to external factors and there is little emphasis on intrinsic development. There is opportunity for HCT to take stock of its position, and perhaps better exploitation of internal ideas that fit HCT's unique position will allow HCT to better shape and spearhead its own development.