

Perspective, opinion, and commentary

Accreditation of the Iraqi Medical Colleges: Urgent call for action

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Abstract:

The National Council for Accreditation of Medical Colleges (NCAMC) has been working on accrediting Iraqi medical schools. However, the NCAMC is not internationally recognized by the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME), which is necessary to meet the requirements of the ECFMG's Recognized Accreditation Policy starting in 2024. This policy states that a medical school must have recognized accreditation from an external quality assurance organization. In the future, only medical schools accredited according to this policy will meet the ECFMG's requirements.

Medical graduates who want to work, train, register, do research, volunteer, or pursue other opportunities must apply for verification of their primary medical qualification (PMQ). Verification for international medical graduates (IMGs) in the United States, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and many other countries is done through the ECFMG's online system called Electronic Portfolio of International Credentials (EPIC).

Since Iraqi medical schools do not currently meet international standards, the quality of their education is at risk, and this could affect the future of new graduates. To safeguard Iraqi medical education and the future of new doctors beyond 2024, the Ministry of Higher Education, universities, medical colleges, and the Iraqi Medical Association (IMA) should collaborate with the NCAMC to gain recognition from the WFME.

Keywords: Iraq. medical education. accreditation.

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INTRODUCTION

Medical schools need recognition from local authorities, such as the Ministry of Higher Education, to ensure they meet the standards and regulations for producing qualified doctors who can work within the legal frameworks of any country. To gain international recognition, they must also meet several international standards, including accreditation standards.

Starting in 2024, the ECFMG will implement the Recognized Accreditation Policy, which was announced in 2010. According to this policy, medical schools must have recognized accreditation from an accrediting agency that is itself recognized and reviewed by an external quality assurance organization, like the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) or National Committee on Foreign Medical Education and Accreditation (NCFMEA). Additionally, they must meet the ECFMG's Medical School Requirements. In the initial phase of implementation, the policy will report a medical school's recognized accreditation status, but it won't affect an individual's eligibility for ECFMG Certification. However, in the future, only medical schools accredited in line with the Recognized Accreditation Policy will meet the ECFMG's requirements ⁽¹⁾.

Medical graduates who want to work, train, register, research, volunteer, or pursue other opportunities must apply for verification of their primary medical qualification (PMQ). For international medical graduates (IMGs) in the United States and many other countries, this verification is done through the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) using their online system known as Electronic Portfolio of International Credentials (EPIC) ⁽²⁻³⁾.

The process of accrediting Iraqi medical colleges began in 2007. Currently, there are 33 medical colleges in Iraq, ⁽⁴⁾ but only 7 of them have received accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Medical Colleges (NCAMC) – 1 with full accreditation and 6 with conditional accreditation. However, as of October 2022, there is no internationally recognized body in Iraq to accredit medical colleges as per the required criteria. ⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾.

The quality of medical education in Iraq is at risk due to the global developments in certification and accreditation. Furthermore, future Iraqi medical graduates may face challenges in obtaining verification and certification from international bodies, especially with the implementation of the ECFMG's Recognized Accreditation Policy starting in 2024. Urgent action is needed to address these issues, as outlined in this article.

History of accreditation

Accreditation of medical schools has been in practice since the 19th century by different agencies in the United States before the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) was formed in October 1942 as the sole agency for accreditation of medical schools in North America. The ECFMG, a non-profit organization, was created in 1956 to provide certification which is the standard for evaluating the qualifications of IMGs entering the U.S. health care system ⁽⁷⁾.

Since its establishment, the ECFMG has certified more than 320,000 IMGs. It follows a review process of credentials to ensure that the graduates have the required basic medical knowledge standards to practice in the United States. This process focused mainly on the graduate's

competencies rather than the medical schools they trained at. Recently, the approach shifted focus to also include assessing the quality of the medical schools. Issues driving such approach include variation in accreditation standards globally, global migration patterns and rising number of medical schools, need to ensure assessment of quality of education and credentials of graduates ⁽⁸⁾.

The accreditation process requires institutional readiness and effective administration leading some to question the value of such approach. A number of studies have shown a positive link between accreditation, educational outcomes and examination performance (including USMLE and country's national residency exams) ⁽⁹⁾.

Global accreditation progress

Over the years, the ECFMG has used various resources to ascertain whether the IMG applicant's medical school meets the minimum criteria for ECFMG certification. Originally, ECFMG relied on the World Health Organization's (WHO) *World Directory of Medical Schools (WDMS)* for information about medical schools. In 2002, ECFMG's foundation, FAIMER, created the *International Medical Education Directory (IMED)*. IMED contained schools recognized by a Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, or other appropriate government entity of the country in which the school was located. Graduates of schools listed in WDMS and IMED were eligible for ECFMG certification ⁽¹⁰⁾.

In 2007, the WFME, in collaboration with the WHO, published its own directory of medical schools which was named the "*Avicenna Directory*". In 2014, WFME and FAIMER merged the information contained in *IMED* and *Avicenna Directory* to form the current *World Directory of Medical Schools (World Directory)*. Information about requirements for ECFMG certification (and others) are included under the 'sponsor notes' with each medical school entry ⁽¹¹⁾.

ECFMG accepts the WFME Recognition Program for the recognition of agencies that conduct medical school accreditation. This program ensures that the accreditation standards and application are conducted in a transparent and rigorous way leading to an internationally accepted standard ⁽¹²⁾. The award of recognition is for a period of 10 years ⁽¹³⁾.

For an agency to be recognized as part of the program it should fulfil certain criteria including:

- Satisfactory self-evaluation by the agency against WFME recognition criteria.
- Satisfactory site visit by WFME assessors.
- The policies, processes, procedures, and structure of the accrediting agency must be regularly updated, publicly available. This is important to operate fair and transparent accreditation process.
- Accurately maintained list on the agency's website of accredited medical schools and those under review by the agency. ^(12, 13)

Currently, there are 32 agencies recognized by the WFME covering many parts of the world. Another 17 agencies are currently applying for the recognition. Many of the recognized agencies have extended its mandate outside their countries and have accredited medical schools in other countries ⁽⁶⁾.

Accreditation in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and Iraq

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region of the WHO, of which Iraq is a member, the first step in the global project of accreditation of medical schools started in 1995 when a WHO meeting was organized in Cairo (4-6 December 1995) in partnership with WFME, UNESCO, UNICEF and member states governments. This ministerial consultation (GA contributed to the meeting) delegated WFME to construct a set of global standards for accreditation of medical schools to be utilized by medical schools operating in each of the six WHO regions (including the Eastern Mediterranean).

The first draft of the global standards was presented in Irbid, Jordan in June 2000 and followed by a number of meetings and policies which involved representatives and experts from the member states of the region including the 2003 consultation which produced a 10-point steps to follow by countries to achieve accreditation of their medical schools within 10 years ⁽¹⁴⁾. Currently recognized agencies by the WFME cover many countries in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region (Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan) and many others are in the process of recognition ⁽⁶⁾.

Iraq has been involved in the project since 2007 when the WHO Regional Office supported the committee of Deans of Medical Colleges technically and financially. The committee produced a set of standards and organized number of meetings and workshops. In 2012, a national workshop was organized in Erbil and produced a detailed National Roadmap with institutional plans of action for each medical college to achieve accreditation within the next 3 years (i.e., by 2015) ⁽¹⁵⁾. During the Erbil's meeting in 2012, the ECFMG deadline of 2023 (later moved to 2024 due to the COVID-19 pandemic) was thoroughly discussed with the deans committee, deans, and experts from almost all medical colleges who agreed and proceeded to develop the National Roadmap and the institutional plans.

The National Committee for Accreditation of Medical Colleges in Iraq succeeded in establishing the National Council for Accreditation of Medical Colleges (NCAMC) in February 2015. The council is devoted to the purpose of accreditation of medical colleges ⁽⁵⁾. The NCAMC has adopted the WFME global standards for undergraduate medical education (instead of the national set of standards) in 2018 and has made marked progress in accrediting 7 medical colleges (1 full and 6 conditional accreditation). Further 2 are in the process of accreditation as of October 2022 ⁽⁵⁾. There are 33 medical colleges operating in Iraq ⁽⁴⁾ and therefore a significant task ahead.

We note that the NCAMC is included in the Directory of Organizations that Recognize/Accredit Medical Schools (DORA) created by FAIMER. FAIMER is not an accrediting agency ⁽¹⁶⁾. The NCAMC website links to DORA ⁽⁵⁾. Inclusion of NCAMC into the list on DORA does not however imply that NCAMC has the required international recognition set by the WFME Program for Recognition of Accrediting Agencies to fulfil the Recognized Accreditation Policy ⁽¹⁾. NCAMC should be recognized by WFME to achieve the required recognition.

Table 1 shows the current status of NCAMC as the accreditation body for Iraqi medical colleges should it apply for international recognition using the WFME recognition criteria ⁽¹²⁾. Out of

the 20 WFME criteria, there has been progress made in some criteria, but the majority require further work and support to fulfil the requirements set by WFME.

The Ministry of Higher Education is yet to grant the council the required legal recognition, delegation, independent status, and finance. The council has not achieved the status required by WFME.

There are ongoing discussions with the Ministry of Higher Education to reach a solution to avoid the catastrophic situation which will face the graduates of all Iraqi medical colleges with the implementation of the Recognized Accreditation Policy and global requirements for accreditation starting from 2024 ⁽¹⁾. As long as the NCAMC is not internationally recognized, there is the risk that Iraqi medical graduates may not be able to have their credentials recognized by ECFMG and other international agencies in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Europe and the Arabian Gulf states and many parts of the world increasingly adopting such approach. Consequently, Iraqi doctors intending to study, train or work in the future in these countries may not be able to do so even if their medical college is accredited by the NCAMC.

The Government of Iraq, Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Health, deans of medical colleges, Iraqi Medical Association (IMA) and all the healthcare community in Iraq must act and use the forthcoming months to get the NCAMC recognized by WFME if they want to avoid such a catastrophic situation that will have an impact on the status and quality of medical education provided by Iraqi medical colleges, the quality of healthcare provided by

Table1: Iraqi National Council of Accreditation of Medical Colleges’ (NCAMC) readiness for recognition by the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME).

No.	WFME criteria for recognition (12)	Current status in Iraq and what actions are needed and by whom
Part A Eligibility		
1	The agency is a government or inter-governmental entity, or an independent professional body or the legislator (parliament), or an authorized independent professional body.	Done
2	Where the agency operates in more than one country.	Not applicable to Iraq
3	The accreditation decisions of the agency are made known to, and accepted by, other organizations such as professional licensing bodies, educational institutions and employers.	Ministry of Higher Education needs to issue NCAMC’s Law & Regulation
4	The agency operates within a framework that enables the establishment of agreements and the signing of contracts	Ministry of Higher Education needs to issue NCAMC’s Law & Regulation

	according to the laws of the country or countries in which the agency is seated and operates.	
Part B Accreditation standards		
5	The agency uses comprehensive standards for accreditation appropriate to basic medical education.	The NCAMC uses the recognized WFME global standards
6	The agency makes publicly available the accreditation standards.	http://ncamc-iq.org/?page=33
7	The agency has a system to determine that the standards are sufficiently rigorous and appropriate to evaluate the quality of the education and training provided at medical schools.	NCAMC's responsibility
8	The agency has a system for periodically reviewing and updating the standards.	Done; Updated in 2018 (should be done every 10 years)
Part C Accreditation process and procedures		
9	Medical school self-evaluation	Medical colleges responsibility: most already done that.
10	On site observation and evaluation	NCAMC already done many site visits and accredited 7 colleges so far.
11	Reports	NCAMC's responsibility to keep reports up-to-date and ready for inspection.
12	Individuals associated with the agency and framework	Ministry of Higher Education needs to issue NCAMC's Law, Regulation and delegations.
13	Accreditation decisions	Ministry of Higher Education to issue NCAMC's Law & Regulation to enable it to make valid decisions.
14	Activities subsequent to accreditation decisions	Ministry of Higher Education needs to issue NCAMC's Law & Regulation
15	Agency has policies and procedures to investigate and act upon complaints	Ministry of Higher Education needs to issue NCAMC's Law & Regulation
Part D Agency policies and resources		
16	Agency has policies and procedures	Ministry of Higher Education needs to issue NCAMC's Law & Regulation
17	Agency has controls to ensure that the policies and procedures applied	Ministry of Higher Education needs to issue NCAMC's Law & Regulation
18	Administrative and fiscal responsibilities	Ministry of Higher Education needs to issue NCAMC's financial Law & Regulation

19	Maintenance of records	Ministry of Higher Education needs to issue NCAMC's Law & Regulation
20	Availability and dissemination of information	Ministry of Higher Education needs to issue NCAMC's Law & Regulation

Financial support and sponsorship:

Nil.

Conflicts of interest:

There are no conflicts of interest.

CONCLUSION

With the implementation of the ECFMG's Recognized Accreditation Policy starting from 2024, medical schools need to be accredited by a recognized national body. However, NCAMC in Iraq is not recognized by WFME and therefore there is a risk that Iraqi medical schools' education standards and quality do not meet the international standards and risk the future of graduates. The Ministry of Higher Education must provide urgent support to the NCAMC by issuing the needed law, regulations and including authorization, delegation and administrative, managerial and financial regulations and support to enable it to undertake its role in accrediting medical colleges in Iraq and obtain international recognition by WFME.

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