

Stakeholder prioritization in higher education accreditation in the UAE context: a multi-criteria analysis using Analytic Hierarchy Process

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Abstract

Purpose – This study compares how students, faculty, administrators and employers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) prioritize key higher education accreditation criteria to inform more stakeholder-responsive quality assurance.

Design/methodology/approach – Using Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) pairwise comparisons, data from 240 participants across four accredited UAE Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were analyzed across five criteria; only consistent judgments (Consistency Ratio = 0.10) were retained to compute priority weights.

Findings – Faculty prioritized teaching quality (0.418), students prioritized student support services (0.381), administrators assigned their highest weight to teaching quality (0.310), followed by employability outcomes (0.247) and employers assigned equal highest weights to teaching quality and continuous improvement (0.248 each).

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited by its use of purposive sampling across four UAE institutions and a restricted set of accreditation criteria, which may constrain generalizability. Despite this, the findings offer clear practical implications by demonstrating how stakeholder-weighted priorities can guide more targeted, transparent and outcome-oriented accreditation policies and resource allocation.

Practical implications – The findings help institutions and accreditation bodies align evaluation criteria and resources with stakeholder priorities, strengthening teaching quality, student support, employability outcomes and continuous improvement within outcome-based accreditation frameworks.

Social implications – Embedding stakeholder priorities in accreditation supports more inclusive and transparent quality assurance, improving graduate readiness, public trust and the societal value of higher education.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the limited literature applying AHP to stakeholder prioritization of higher education accreditation criteria in the UAE. It provides a data-driven basis for aligning accreditation criteria with stakeholder expectations and supports the shift from compliance-based evaluation to stakeholder-informed, outcome-oriented quality assurance.

Keywords Accreditation, Higher education, Stakeholder perception, AHP, Quality assurance, Multi-criteria decision making

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

In the evolving global landscape of higher education, the pursuit of academic excellence and institutional credibility has positioned accreditation as a cornerstone of quality assurance (Kayyali, 2024a). More than a certification of compliance with predefined standards, accreditation serves as a catalyst for continuous institutional improvement and accountability (Al-Worafi, 2023). Its significance has grown substantially in recent decades, particularly as universities face increasing demands from governments, employers and society to demonstrate transparency, performance and the value of their educational offerings (Makhoul, 2019). Accreditation holds distinct value for different stakeholders: students

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associate it with enhanced learning and career opportunities, faculty link it to teaching quality and research support, administrators view it as a strategic mechanism for institutional growth and employers regard it as an indicator of graduate preparedness (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Debono *et al.*, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017; Kayyali, 2024b). These varied interpretations influence how accreditation processes are understood, implemented and leveraged within higher education, ultimately shaping the direction of quality assurance efforts.

Although a substantial body of literature explores accreditation and quality assurance practices, relatively few empirical studies have employed quantitative decision-making frameworks to analyze stakeholder-specific perceptions (Riad Shams & Belyaeva, 2019). Existing evaluations often rely on institutional self-studies or accrediting body reports, which risk overlooking the nuanced and potentially divergent perspectives of key stakeholder groups (Jaafar, Rogers-Cooper, & Lerer, 2024). There is a clear need to include these perspectives in a more structured and evidence-based manner, not only to refine accreditation models but also to enhance their legitimacy and effectiveness (Mtitu, 2025). Stakeholder theory offers a compelling lens for such an investigation, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and incorporating the interests of all parties engaged in or impacted by an organization (Parmar *et al.*, 2010). In the context of higher education, this means acknowledging the roles and expectations of students, faculty, administrators and employers. By embedding stakeholder perspectives in accreditation frameworks, institutions can develop more responsive and context-aware quality assurance strategies (Freeman, Phillips, & Sisodia, 2020). Recognizing the complexity of accreditation and its varying implications across groups, it becomes essential to explore stakeholder perceptions in a structured and comparative way. Drawing from stakeholder theory, this study posits that capturing and comparing the views of students, faculty, administrators and employers is not merely an inclusive gesture; it is a strategic imperative. In the post-pandemic era, stakeholder engagement, digital quality assurance tools and evidence-based policy design are becoming central to accreditation.

Accreditation in this study is seen as serving a dual purpose: verifying institutional compliance with established standards and fostering continuous improvement. It is not merely a one-time assessment but an ongoing process that systematically enhances teaching quality, student support services and research practices. Grounded in the concepts of transformation and continuous enhancement, this dual framing supports an analysis of how stakeholders prioritize accreditation outcomes and informs strategies that balance compliance with long-term development. This research is guided by three central questions: what accreditation outcomes are most valued by each stakeholder group, how these priorities differ among stakeholders, and what the implications of these differences are for accreditation design and implementation. This study advances the discourse on accreditation by demonstrating that its transformative potential depends on a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder perspectives. The insights aim to guide policymakers, accrediting bodies and institutional leaders in designing accreditation systems that are rigorous, transparent, inclusive and aligned with the evolving needs of higher education amid a global shift toward outcome-based reform.

This study uniquely disaggregates faculty, student, administrator and employer perspectives to reveal distinct accreditation priorities and is among the first to apply Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) specifically for ranking accreditation criteria, thereby advancing methodological rigor beyond prior research. By using stratified purposive sampling across diverse institution types and regions and comparing single- and dual-accredited institutions, it provides representation of diverse institution types and stakeholder groups within the purposively selected sample, quantifies stakeholder priority differences for policy alignment and generates a stakeholder-informed ranked list of criteria to guide targeted quality improvement.

To direct the study and address the identified research gap, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ1. Which accreditation outcomes are prioritized by different stakeholder groups (students, faculty, administrators and employers) in UAE higher education institutions?
- RQ2. How do these stakeholder priorities differ across key accreditation criteria when evaluated using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP)?
- RQ3. What are the implications of these stakeholder priority differences for designing stakeholder-informed, outcome-based accreditation and quality assurance frameworks in the UAE?

This study is guided by the following research objectives:

- RO1. Identify which accreditation outcomes are most valued by each stakeholder group (students, faculty, administrators, employers) in UAE higher education.
- RO2. Compare and rank stakeholder priorities across the five accreditation criteria using AHP-derived weights.
- RO3. Derive practical implications for designing stakeholder-informed, outcome-oriented accreditation and resource-allocation policies in the UAE context.

These objectives will be achieved by applying the AHP to stakeholder survey data collected from accredited UAE higher education institutions, using pairwise comparisons to generate priority weights.

2. Literature review

2.1 Accreditation criteria and outcomes

Accreditation frameworks combine input, process and outcome dimensions, but stakeholders emphasize outcomes differently based on their roles (Eaton & Neal, 2015; Harvey & Williams, 2010). Accordingly, five criteria were selected as recurring accreditation outcomes with direct relevance to stakeholder expectations: teaching quality, research output, student support services, employability outcomes and continuous improvement. Teaching quality is a core quality outcome linked to “fitness for purpose” and learning quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007). Research output reflects the “transformation” dimension through knowledge creation and institutional development (Salmi, 2009; Arnold, 2007). Student support services influence retention and satisfaction and represent value-oriented quality provision (Zhang, Gossett, Simpson, & Davis, 2019; Reda, 2017). Employability outcomes capture outcome-based performance through job readiness and labor-market alignment (Tomlinson, 2017; Azevedo, Apfelthaler, & Hurst, 2012). Continuous improvement operationalizes ongoing quality enhancement via feedback systems and evidence-based planning, increasingly supported by digital mechanisms (Mohamed Hashim, Tlemsani, & Matthews, 2022; Chugh, Turnbull, Cowling, Vanderburg, & Vanderburg, 2023). Prior AHP studies indicate stakeholder-specific differences in how such criteria are weighted, motivating the present study’s disaggregated stakeholder comparison in the UAE context (Ahmad & Qahmash, 2020).

2.2 Stakeholder perceptions of accreditation

Stakeholder perceptions play a crucial role in shaping how accreditation processes are implemented and valued in higher education institutions (Hinchcliff *et al.*, 2013). Faculty members often see accreditation as a mechanism to enhance teaching quality but also express concerns about increased administrative workload and reduced research time (Comm & Mathaisel, 2003). Students generally perceive accreditation as a marker of program quality and employability though many lack awareness of accreditation bodies and processes (Al Busaidi, 2020). Employers prioritize graduates from accredited institutions, associating

accreditation with workforce readiness and practical skill development (Kayyali, 2024b). Administrators tend to view accreditation as both a regulatory requirement and a tool for strategic positioning, often integrating it into institutional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and planning cycles (Mourato & Patrício, 2019). Despite generally positive views, each stakeholder group experiences accreditation differently based on their roles, responsibilities and exposure. Faculty may appreciate pedagogical training but find documentation burdensome; students may value employability signals but lack clarity on accreditation processes; employers may trust accreditation status but remain unaware of international frameworks; and administrators may rely on accreditation for institutional credibility yet feel challenged by changing standards. These variations underscore the importance of role-specific engagement and transparent communication across the accreditation lifecycle.

2.3 Accreditation in the UAE and rationale for AHP application

In recent years, academic accreditation in the UAE has shifted from an input-based model focused on metrics such as faculty qualifications and infrastructure to a more outcome-oriented framework that prioritizes student learning, employability outcomes and stakeholder satisfaction (Aldhaen & Braendle, 2025; Al Khatib, Awad, & Shamayleh, 2025). This evolution mirrors global changes in higher education quality assurance, where institutions are now expected to demonstrate tangible performance improvements. The introduction of performance-linked funding has further reinforced this emphasis, pushing universities to align accreditation efforts with measurable impacts like job readiness and research productivity (Ibrahim & Archuleta, 2025). Many institutions pursue dual accreditation by combining national recognition with international standards to enhance both regional credibility and global competitiveness (Abukari Abdulai and Ashour, 2025). However, this duality often leads to overlapping criteria and increased administrative burdens, highlighting the need for integrated quality assurance systems that minimize duplication while upholding high standards. Frequent updates to accreditation benchmarks also introduce planning challenges, calling for greater stability and predictability in evaluation cycles. To address these complexities, decision-making tools such as the AHP have been increasingly used to clarify how key stakeholders' faculty, students, administrators and employers prioritize accreditation outcomes (Basheer, Ahmed, Bahroun, & Anane, 2025). The AHP is a multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) method developed by Saaty that decomposes complex problems into a hierarchy of goals and criteria and derives priority weights through pairwise comparisons (Saaty, 2001, 2004). Judgments are converted into numerical priorities using eigenvalue-based calculations, and AHP includes a consistency check (consistency index (CI)/consistency ratio (CR)) to assess the logical coherence of comparisons and improve the reliability of results (Saaty, 2008). Due to its transparency and interpretability, AHP has been widely applied in higher education decision contexts, including quality assurance and accreditation evaluation (Badri & Abdulla, 2004; Tavana, Soltanifar, & Santos-Arteaga, 2023). AHP facilitates structured comparisons among these perspectives through pairwise evaluations, producing a ranked hierarchy of outcomes that reflects actual stakeholder preferences. While AHP has been applied in various higher education studies, most focus on institutional or managerial viewpoints and rarely disaggregate preferences across diverse stakeholder groups.

2.4 Research gap

Recent scholarship highlights a clear shift in higher education accreditation toward outcome-based and performance-linked quality assurance models that emphasize employability outcomes, stakeholder satisfaction and continuous improvement rather than compliance alone (Aldhaen & Braendle, 2025; Ibrahim & Archuleta, 2025). Within this transition, stakeholder-driven quality frameworks have gained prominence, recognizing students, faculty, employers and administrators as active contributors to accreditation value creation rather than passive recipients of standards (Basheer et al., 2025; Jaafar et al., 2024). At the methodological level,

recent applications of MCDM techniques, particularly the AHP, demonstrate their suitability for capturing heterogeneous stakeholder priorities in complex educational decision contexts (Tavana *et al.*, 2023; Hatipoğlu Şahin, Atmaca Çetinkaya, & Şahin, 2024). Studies from the Gulf region further indicate that accreditation reforms increasingly align with national development agendas, workforce readiness and performance-based evaluation, reinforcing the need for empirical, stakeholder-informed prioritization models tailored to regional higher education systems (Aldhaen & Braendle, 2025; Basheer *et al.*, 2025).

While numerous studies have applied MCDM methods to inform accreditation and quality assurance in higher education, a comprehensive multi-stakeholder application of the AHP has received limited empirical attention in the UAE (Ahmad & Qahmash, 2020). Existing research in the Gulf region has largely centered on administrative perspectives or specific institutional settings, often excluding the voices of key stakeholder groups such as students, faculty and employers (Badri & Abdulla, 2004; Hatipoğlu Şahin *et al.*, 2024). In the UAE, AHP has been applied in niche contexts, such as distance learning or engineering program evaluation, but these efforts remain limited in scope and do not reflect the full diversity of the higher education ecosystem (Alshamsi, El-Kassabi, Serhani, & Bouhaddioui, 2023). International studies have explored AHP's potential for ranking accreditation criteria across institutions, yet they typically aggregate data at the institutional level, masking the nuanced priorities of individual stakeholder groups (Goyal, Gupta, & Chauhan, 2022; Naveed *et al.*, 2022). While accreditation and quality assurance research increasingly acknowledge the importance of stakeholder engagement, much of the existing evidence, particularly in the Gulf region, either emphasizes administrative or institutional viewpoints or examines stakeholder perceptions in isolation rather than within a unified comparative framework. As a result, how key groups (students, faculty, administrators and employers) differ in their prioritization of core accreditation outcomes remains insufficiently quantified and difficult to translate into policy or resource-allocation decisions. This limitation is particularly salient in the UAE, where recent reforms are moving toward outcome-based quality assurance and stronger links to employability and performance. Therefore, there is a clear need for a structured, stakeholder-informed prioritization approach that can transparently compare stakeholder preferences and generate actionable rankings. Addressing this gap, the present study applies a multi-stakeholder prioritization framework in the UAE context using AHP to derive comparative weights for key accreditation criteria, providing evidence to support a more inclusive and outcome-oriented accreditation design.

3. Research methodology

This study is grounded in stakeholder theory and outcome-based quality assurance, which together justify comparing how key stakeholder groups assign value to core accreditation outcomes. The methodological design therefore focuses on capturing and ranking stakeholder preferences in a structured manner and translating them into decision-relevant priority weights that can inform accreditation design and institutional improvement. This study employs a quantitative-descriptive research design using the AHP to prioritize stakeholder perceptions across five accreditation-related criteria. This design is appropriate where the objective is not hypothesis testing but structured measurement, comparison and prioritization of perceptions across defined groups using numerical indicators. In the context of accreditation research, a quantitative-descriptive approach enables transparent aggregation of stakeholder judgments and supports evidence-based decision-making.

The AHP was selected for this study because it systematically translates subjective judgments into structured priority rankings using pairwise comparisons, making it ideal for analyzing varied stakeholder perceptions in higher education contexts (Saaty, 2004; Tavana *et al.*, 2023). Four UAE institutions were selected through stratified purposive sampling, representing diverse governance types, geographic regions, program scopes and accreditation statuses: a large, broadly accredited university; a mid-sized, nationally accredited institution

focused on business and humanities; a specialized technical institute recently obtaining dual accreditation; and a newer health sciences college with single accreditation. Data collection occurred in two phases: (1) structured interviews to validate the accreditation criteria and (2) an anonymous digital AHP survey. Although the sample was drawn from four institutions, its size limits the extent to which institutional nuances can be captured, suggesting that future research should use larger or probability-based samples.

3.1 Methodological rationale, sampling and pilot test

Classic AHP was selected for this study because of its clarity, ease of use and ability to capture stakeholder preferences effectively. During pilot testing, participants, including faculty and students, found the nine-point scale intuitive, while more advanced methods like Fuzzy AHP and Analytic Network Process (ANP) were viewed as overly complex and time-consuming. Classic AHP enabled respondents to concentrate on evaluating trade-offs between accreditation criteria without dealing with linguistic uncertainty or computational burden. It also offers transparent traceability through pairwise comparisons and CR checks, which helped ensure logical responses. While classic AHP assumes independence among criteria and relies on precise numerical input, its simplicity makes it ideal for this multi-stakeholder study. The five accreditation criteria used in the AHP instrument (teaching quality, research output, student support services, employability outcomes and continuous improvement) were selected based on their frequent use in accreditation literature and their relevance to stakeholder expectations and were refined through expert review to ensure contextual suitability to UAE higher education.

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was used to select four diverse HEIs, yielding 240 valid AHP survey responses for analysis using [OnlineOutput.com](https://onlineoutput.com) (onlineoutput.com, 2025). This tool applies Saaty's eigenvalue-based procedure to compute priority weights and consistency metrics ($\lambda_{\max}$, CI, CR), supporting standardized, transparent and replicable AHP computation (Saaty, 2001). The participating institutions were approached through formal institutional contacts and professional networks, with the following approval from institutional gatekeepers. Potential participants were invited via email with a brief explanation of the study purpose and an anonymous survey link. Data collection was conducted in three survey waves between September 2024 and June 2025 to accommodate institutional schedules and stakeholder availability. Each wave remained open for six weeks, during which two reminder emails were sent at two-week intervals to improve response rates. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected to ensure confidentiality.

Purposive sampling ensured that participants had direct exposure to accreditation processes and outcomes; however, this non-random approach may limit statistical generalizability beyond the sampled institutions and stakeholder groups. Only responses meeting the recommended consistency threshold ($CR \leq 0.10$) were retained for analysis (Saaty, 2001). While specialized packages (e.g. Expert Choice, Super Decisions) offer additional visualization and sensitivity-analysis features, [OnlineOutput.com](https://onlineoutput.com) provided the required standardized AHP outputs and documentation for replication (onlineoutput.com, 2025). A pilot test with 20 participants across all stakeholder groups showed strong inter-rater agreement (Kendall's $W = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$), indicating strong agreement among pilot participants (Wu & Lee Kendall, 2006). Based on pilot feedback, several pairwise-comparison items were reworded and scale instructions clarified to improve comprehension and response consistency in the final survey. The full survey instrument used for the AHP pairwise comparisons is provided in [Appendix A](#) to support transparency and replication.

To improve methodological transparency, [Table 1](#) presents the five accreditation criteria used in the AHP instrument, the example indicators applied in the survey, and the primary stakeholder group aligned with each criterion.

Table 1. Accreditation criteria, example indicators and primary stakeholder alignment

Accreditation criterion	Example indicators used in the survey/context	Primary stakeholder alignment
Teaching quality	Curriculum delivery, assessment quality, instructional practices	Faculty
Research output	Publications, grants, research impact/visibility	Faculty/ Administrators
Student support services	Advising, counseling, career guidance, learning resources	Students
Employability outcomes	Placement rates, internships, employer satisfaction	Employers
Continuous improvement	Feedback loops, KPI monitoring, evidence-based planning	Administrators

Source(s): Author's own work

4. Results

The study received 240 valid responses from four stakeholder groups across four accredited HEIs in the UAE. Table 2 summarizes the demographic distribution of the respondents.

The AHP begins by defining the goal of evaluating and ranking accreditation outcomes based on key higher education stakeholders' perceptions and identifying five criteria through literature review and expert consultation: Teaching quality (C_1), Research output (C_2), Student support services (C_3), Employability outcomes (C_4) and Continuous improvement (C_5). In the second step, each stakeholder group completed a Saaty 1–9 pairwise comparison matrix to evaluate the relative importance of these criteria, with the aggregated matrices presented in Table 3.

In Step 3, each matrix was normalized by dividing each element by the total sum of its column as listed in Table 4. The normalized matrix allows for consistent comparison, and the priority vector (i.e., the weight of each criterion) is obtained.

Step 4 involved calculating the CI and CR to verify the reliability of the pairwise comparisons. The weighted sum vector was calculated by multiplying the original matrix by the priority vector, and each element was then divided by the corresponding priority. The average of these values gives the maximum eigenvalue ($\lambda_{\max}$), from which CI is computed using the formula

$$\text{Consistency Index } CI = \frac{\lambda_{\max} - n}{n - 1}$$

$$CR = \frac{CI}{RI}$$

Table 2. Profile summary of respondents by stakeholder group

Stakeholder group	Number of respondents	Gender distribution (M/F)	Average years of experience	Education level
Students	60	32/28	N/A	Undergraduate
Faculty	60	40/20	8.6 years	Postgraduate/Doctorate
Administrators	60	38/22	12.3 years	Postgraduate/Doctorate
Employers	60	45/15	10.2 years	Postgraduate
Total	240	155/85	–	–

Source(s): Author's own work

Table 3. Pairwise comparison matrix for the student, faculty, administrator and employer groups

	Student					Faculty					Administrator					Employer				
	C ₁	C ₂	C ₃	C ₄	C ₅	C ₁	C ₂	C ₃	C ₄	C ₅	C ₁	C ₂	C ₃	C ₄	C ₅	C ₁	C ₂	C ₃	C ₄	C ₅
C ₁	1	3	0.5	2	1	1	4	3	2	4	1	3	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	1
C ₂	0.33	1	0.25	1	0.5	0.25	1	0.5	0.5	1	0.33	1	0.5	0.5	1	0.5	1	0.5	1	0.5
C ₃	2	4	1	3	2	0.33	2	1	0.33	1	0.5	2	1	0.5	1	0.5	2	1	0.5	0.5
C ₄	0.5	1	0.33	1	1	0.5	2	3	1	2	0.5	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	1	1
C ₅	1	2	0.5	1	1	0.25	1	1	0.5	1	1	1	1	0.5	1	1	2	2	1	1
Source(s): Author's own work																				

Table 4. Normalized matrices with priority weights for all four stakeholder groups

	Student						Faculty						Administrator						Employer					
	C ₁	C ₂	C ₃	C ₄	C ₅	Weight	C ₁	C ₂	C ₃	C ₄	C ₅	Weight	C ₁	C ₂	C ₃	C ₄	C ₅	Weight	C ₁	C ₂	C ₃	C ₄	C ₅	Weight
C ₁	0.207	0.273	0.194	0.25	0.182	0.221	0.429	0.4	0.353	0.462	0.444	0.418	0.3	0.333	0.308	0.444	0.167	0.31	0.25	0.25	0.267	0.222	0.25	0.248
C ₂	0.069	0.091	0.097	0.125	0.091	0.095	0.107	0.1	0.059	0.115	0.111	0.099	0.099	0.111	0.077	0.111	0.167	0.113	0.125	0.125	0.067	0.222	0.125	0.133
C ₃	0.414	0.364	0.387	0.375	0.364	0.381	0.142	0.2	0.118	0.076	0.111	0.129	0.15	0.222	0.154	0.111	0.167	0.161	0.125	0.25	0.133	0.111	0.125	0.149
C ₄	0.103	0.091	0.129	0.125	0.182	0.126	0.215	0.2	0.353	0.231	0.222	0.244	0.15	0.222	0.308	0.222	0.333	0.247	0.25	0.125	0.267	0.222	0.25	0.223
C ₅	0.207	0.182	0.194	0.125	0.182	0.178	0.107	0.1	0.118	0.115	0.111	0.11	0.3	0.111	0.154	0.111	0.167	0.169	0.25	0.25	0.267	0.222	0.25	0.248
Source(s): Author's own work																								

The Random Index (RI) for a 5-criterion matrix is 1.12. The calculated consistency ratios for the four stakeholder groups were 0.015 for students, 0.023 for faculty, 0.047 for administrators and 0.036 for employers. All CR values are below the acceptable threshold of 0.10 (Saaty, 2008), confirming acceptable consistency in the pairwise judgments.

The consistency results show that all stakeholder groups - students (CR = 0.015), faculty (CR = 0.023), administrators (CR = 0.047) and employers (CR = 0.036), achieved acceptable consistency levels (CR < 0.10), confirming the consistency of their pairwise judgments.

Step 5 aggregates and contrasts the priority weights (row averages) for each accreditation criterion across the four stakeholder groups: Students, Faculty, Administrators and Employers, as shown in Table 5 and Figure 1. This comparison helps identify the differences and similarities in stakeholder perspectives on what matters most in accreditation outcomes.

As summarized in Table 5 and illustrated in Figure 1, stakeholder priorities diverge clearly: faculty place greatest emphasis on teaching quality, students prioritize support services, administrators emphasize employability outcomes and employers assign equal highest weights to teaching quality and continuous improvement (0.248 each), while research output is consistently lowest across groups.

The observed divergence in stakeholder priorities is consistent with prior accreditation research showing role-dependent valuation of quality outcomes, where faculty emphasize

Table 5. Comparative priority weights of accreditation criteria across stakeholder groups

Criteria	Students	Faculty	Administrators	Employers
C ₁ : Teaching quality	0.221	0.418	0.310	0.248
C ₂ : Research output	0.095	0.099	0.113	0.133
C ₃ : Student support services	0.381	0.129	0.161	0.149
C ₄ : Employability outcomes	0.126	0.244	0.247	0.223
C ₅ : Continuous improvement	0.178	0.110	0.169	0.248

Source(s): Author’s own work

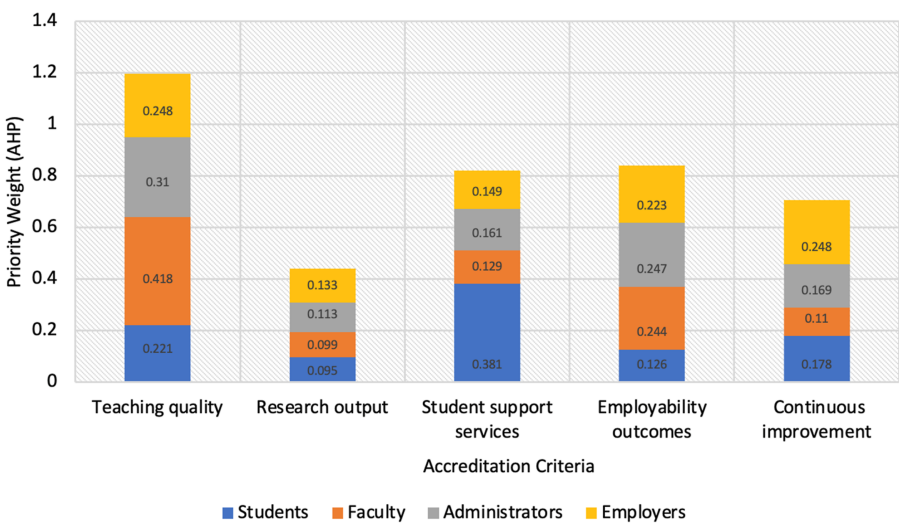


Figure 1. Stakeholder prioritization of accreditation criteria using AHP. Source: Author’s own work

pedagogical standards, students prioritize support-related services and employers focus on employability and continuous improvement (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Ahmad & Qahmash, 2020). Unlike studies that aggregate perceptions at the institutional level, the present AHP results quantify these differences, enabling direct comparison and providing a decision-oriented basis for accreditation design. The statistical significance of these differences, confirmed through ANOVA testing, indicates that stakeholder variation is not incidental but structurally embedded in accreditation perceptions.

4.1 Statistical testing of inter-group weight differences

To strengthen rigor beyond descriptive weighting, AHP-derived criterion weights were compared across stakeholder groups using one-way ANOVA for each criterion, followed by post hoc pairwise comparisons to identify where significant differences occurred ($p < 0.05$). Individual criterion weights were calculated for each respondent and subsequently compared across the four stakeholder groups using one-way ANOVA. This combination of consistency-screened AHP weights and inferential testing provides both decision-oriented ranking and statistical evidence of meaningful inter-group differences.

Criterion weights assigned by faculty, students, administrators and employers were compared, with the stakeholder group as the independent variable. Before performing ANOVA, Homogeneity of variance was assessed using Levene's test. Levene's test indicated that the homogeneity of variance assumption was satisfied ($p > 0.05$). The ANOVA results revealed statistically significant differences across stakeholder groups, with teaching quality showing $F(3,236) = 6.42$ ($p = 0.0002$). For example, teaching quality showed $F(3,236) = 6.42$ ($p = 0.0002$), indicating that at least one group's mean differed significantly from others; similar significant results were found for research output, student support services, employability outcomes and continuous improvement. Post hoc pairwise comparisons identified specific significant differences: students rated student support services significantly higher than faculty and administrators; employers prioritized employability outcomes more highly than faculty and administrators; faculty valued teaching quality significantly more than students and employers; administrators prioritized continuous improvement significantly higher than faculty and students. No significant difference was found between administrators and employers regarding research output. These results affirm meaningful variation in stakeholder priorities, suggesting the necessity of stakeholder-sensitive resource allocation in accreditation policies.

5. Discussion

The findings from this AHP-based study highlight distinct differences in how stakeholder groups students, faculty, administrators and employers prioritize accreditation outcomes in UAE higher education. Faculty were assigned the highest importance to teaching quality, reflecting the expectation that accreditation should reinforce instructional excellence and directly support their primary role as educators.

Faculty assigned the highest importance to teaching quality (0.418), reflecting the expectation that accreditation should reinforce instructional excellence. Students prioritized student support services (0.381), highlighting the importance of a broader educational experience. Administrators assigned their highest weight to teaching quality (0.310), followed by employability outcomes (0.247), reflecting a combination of instructional and workforce-oriented institutional priorities. Employers assigned equal highest weights to teaching quality and continuous improvement (0.248 each), indicating that they value both instructional quality and systematic quality enhancement.

Students, however, prioritized student support services, highlighting their concern with the broader educational experience, including academic advising and co-curricular activities. One

reason students may assign higher weight to support services than to broader outcome measures is that support services are experienced directly and immediately through advising, counseling, career guidance and access to learning resources, whereas outcome indicators such as learning outcomes or employability measures are often communicated at an institutional level and may appear less visible to individual students. In the UAE context, institutional quality initiatives frequently emphasize structured student experience systems (e.g. centralized advising and career services, wellbeing support and administrative responsiveness), making service quality a salient proxy for “how accreditation improves my study life.” In addition, students may interpret accreditation benefits through practical enablers that reduce academic uncertainty and improve progression (e.g. course guidance, internship support) rather than through long-term outcomes that materialize after graduation. These contextual factors help explain the comparatively higher priority students place on support services in this study. Interestingly, research output received the lowest prioritization from all groups, indicating a collective preference for tangible, functional accreditation outcomes rather than symbolic or prestige-driven metrics.

Collaborative decision-making in accreditation can be operationalized by using stakeholder-specific AHP weights as formal inputs into accreditation review and planning processes. For example, institutions can compute composite accreditation scores using weighted criteria derived separately from students, faculty, administrators and employers, and then examine alignment or tension across groups during accreditation self-studies. Joint accreditation committees can use these quantified weights to prioritize action plans, allocate resources and justify trade-offs transparently, rather than relying on informal consensus or managerial discretion. In this way, collaboration becomes a structured, evidence-based process grounded in measurable stakeholder preferences.

Comparisons with regional and international studies reveal contextual nuances. Administrators in UAE traditional campuses emphasized continuous improvement more strongly than their counterparts in distance-learning environments, suggesting that delivery mode impacts the relative importance of accreditation criteria. Contrasting findings from neighboring countries showed that UAE administrators’ emphasis on continuous improvement created a larger gap compared to faculty prioritization of teaching quality, possibly reflecting the performance-oriented accreditation environment in the UAE. Additionally, while students internationally often balance the importance of learning outcomes with student services, UAE students clearly favored support services, which may reflect the greater visibility and immediacy of these services in students’ educational experiences. Overall, this study underscores the necessity of differentiated accreditation frameworks tailored to specific stakeholder priorities. Accreditation strategies should balance administrators’ strategic goals, respect faculty instructional autonomy and enhance transparency and outcome-based communication for students, aligning local practices with broader international quality standards.

Rather than advocating generic stakeholder collaboration, this study demonstrates how collaborative accreditation decision-making can be implemented through the systematic use of stakeholder-weighted evidence. By integrating AHP-derived priorities into accreditation reviews, curriculum planning and quality assurance cycles, institutions can move from symbolic stakeholder inclusion toward transparent, data-driven governance. This operational approach directly links stakeholder perceptions to actionable accreditation decisions, supporting outcome-based reforms and policy alignment within the UAE higher education system.

5.1 Actionable recommendations and implications

Based on stakeholder priorities, UAE universities and accreditation bodies should form joint accreditation committees comprising faculty, students, administrators and employers to ensure inclusive and real-time decision-making.

Given students' strong emphasis on support services, higher education institutions should strengthen learner-centered teaching environments by integrating academic advising, career guidance and wellbeing support directly into the learning process. Teaching and learning can be transformed by embedding structured mentoring, early academic intervention mechanisms and career-readiness activities within curricula, ensuring that accreditation-driven quality assurance visibly enhances the day-to-day student learning experience.

Faculty prioritization of teaching quality highlights the need for accreditation systems to directly support pedagogical innovation and instructional development. Institutions should invest in continuous professional development, outcome-based curriculum design and evidence-informed teaching practices. Aligning accreditation criteria with teaching quality encourages reflective pedagogy, improved assessment alignment and the adoption of active and technology-enhanced learning approaches that improve student engagement and achievement.

Employers' equal emphasis on teaching quality and continuous improvement (0.248 each) suggests that accreditation systems should strengthen both instructional quality and mechanisms for systematic quality enhancement, while maintaining strong links with industry needs. Curriculum transformation should include industry-aligned learning outcomes, project-based assessments, internships and employer involvement in curriculum review. Such changes ensure that accreditation requirements translate into graduates who possess practical skills, applied competencies and workplace readiness.

Administrators' strong emphasis on teaching quality and employability outcomes underscores the need for teaching and learning systems that are responsive to institutional and workforce priorities. Institutions should use accreditation as a mechanism to monitor learning outcomes, evaluate teaching quality and inform strategic curriculum renewal. Embedding learning analytics, student feedback and periodic program review within teaching practices supports sustainable quality enhancement.

Overall, adopting stakeholder-weighted accreditation frameworks can shift higher education from compliance-driven evaluation to a learning-centered quality culture. By aligning accreditation expectations with pedagogical priorities, institutions can promote coherent teaching strategies, transparent learning outcomes and continuous improvement that directly benefit learners and society. Together, these stakeholder-specific implications show how accreditation can act as a lever for transforming teaching and learning, rather than functioning solely as a compliance mechanism.

Institutions should develop stakeholder-specific evaluation rubrics aligned with AHP-derived criteria priorities, emphasizing teaching and research for faculty, support services for students and employability outcomes for employers. Enhanced student support services must be implemented with clear outcome metrics and transparent reporting to address student expectations effectively, while structured employer-academic partnerships should formalize industry engagement through advisory boards and curriculum reviews. Accreditation criteria should be streamlined to reduce complexity, focusing primarily on key areas such as teaching quality, research output, student support services, employability and continuous improvement supported by regular annual feedback loops for ongoing revision. Recognizing operational challenges, clear conflict-of-interest policies, training programs on analytical methods and phased rollouts with institutional leadership engagement are essential to overcome resistance and ensure successful implementation of these recommendations.

Stakeholder priorities in accreditation vary by role: faculty value teaching quality, students prioritize support services, employers emphasize employability outcomes and administrators focus on continuous improvement, while research output is least important. Using the AHP, this study quantified these preferences with acceptable consistency. Institutions should adopt targeted strategies enhancing student support services, investing in faculty development and aligning curricula with industry needs while forming advisory committees that include all stakeholders. Accreditation agencies are encouraged to revise evaluation criteria to reflect these priorities. Integrating these insights into national and international quality frameworks

5.2 Limitations of the study

While this study offers valuable insights into stakeholder perspectives on accreditation, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, although the AHP is a powerful MCDM tool, it involves completing numerous pairwise comparisons, which can be cognitively demanding. Even with a limited number of criteria, participants may experience fatigue or confusion, potentially affecting the consistency and quality of responses. Furthermore, AHP relies on subjective human judgments, which, despite the application of consistency thresholds, are susceptible to individual biases and perceptions. Second, the model used in this study focused only on five accreditation criteria to reduce the response burden and maintain analytical clarity. While this approach improved reliability, it may have omitted other relevant dimensions that are important to specific stakeholder groups. Future research could consider expanding the number of criteria, using hierarchical models, or applying hybrid approaches like fuzzy AHP or AHP-TOPSIS to capture more nuanced perspectives and handle uncertainty. From a sampling standpoint, the study employed purposive sampling across four higher education institutions in the UAE. Although these institutions were varied in type and accreditation experience, the non-random selection limits the generalizability of findings to the wider UAE or global higher education sectors. Future studies should consider stratified random sampling to enhance representativeness. Additionally, to preserve anonymity, demographic data such as institutional type, program level and field of study were not collected, which may have influenced stakeholder perceptions. The reliance on self-reported data also presents potential biases, including social desirability and differing levels of familiarity with accreditation concepts. Despite the use of guided instructions and expert-reviewed definitions, interpretation variability may have occurred. Future studies could address these issues by integrating qualitative methods like interviews or focus groups to triangulate findings and provide deeper contextual understanding.

Future research could strengthen these findings by adopting mixed method designs that combine AHP with qualitative approaches such as focus groups or semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data would allow deeper exploration of why stakeholders prioritize certain accreditation outcomes, provide contextual explanations for quantitative weight differences and help identify latent factors not captured through predefined criteria. Such triangulation would enhance interpretive validity, support theory development and offer richer guidance for accreditation policy and practice, particularly in complex higher education systems like the UAE.

6. Conclusion

Accreditation remains a crucial tool for ensuring quality and accountability in higher education, yet the diverse perceptions stakeholders hold regarding its outcomes are not sufficiently understood. To bridge this gap, this study used the AHP to analyze how students, faculty, administrators and employers in four UAE institutions prioritize accreditation criteria: teaching quality, research output, student support services, employability outcomes and continuous improvement. Based on responses from 240 participants, distinct differences emerged: students ranked student support services highest, faculty prioritized teaching quality, administrators emphasized employability outcomes and employers assigned equal highest priority to teaching quality and continuous improvement. Conversely, research output received comparatively lower priority across all groups, reflecting its secondary status within stakeholder perceptions. The results also highlight notable differences across stakeholder groups, including students' significantly greater emphasis on student support services and faculty's stronger emphasis on teaching quality. The practical implications of these

differentiated priorities suggest the necessity for recalibrating UAE accreditation frameworks. Recommended strategies include forming joint accreditation committees with balanced stakeholder representation, creating customized stakeholder-weighted evaluation rubrics, improving transparency regarding student outcome metrics, developing structured employer-academic partnerships and simplifying accreditation criteria to reduce respondent burden. Identifying and proactively addressing operational barriers, such as potential conflicts of interest and limited institutional capacity, is essential for successful implementation. The findings also have important pedagogical implications for higher education teaching and learning. Faculty were assigned the highest priority to teaching quality, indicating that accreditation should directly support pedagogical innovation, continuous faculty development, outcome-based curriculum design and evidence-informed teaching practices. This priority can be translated into stronger alignment between learning outcomes, teaching strategies and assessment, while students' emphasis on support services highlights the need to integrate academic advising, learning resources, career guidance and learner support into the educational experience. In addition, the importance assigned to employability and continuous improvement suggests that teaching should incorporate industry-relevant learning, experiential activities, feedback mechanisms and systematic use of learning evidence to improve student achievement and graduate readiness.

From a policy perspective, these findings support the emphasis on human capital development, employability and performance-driven quality in higher education. By making stakeholder priorities explicit, accreditation authorities and institutions can recalibrate outcome-based standards and performance-oriented evaluation mechanisms toward areas with the highest perceived value, strengthening teaching quality, improving student support systems, deepening employer engagement and institutionalizing continuous improvement. Embedding stakeholder-weighted evidence in accreditation cycles can enhance accountability and public trust, while helping institutions demonstrate measurable educational and workforce impact aligned with national development priorities.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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