

## Editorial

# Accreditation of the Iraqi Medical Colleges: The last warning

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### Abstract

By 2024, all international medical graduates (IMGs) intending to apply for certification or gain verification of their primary medical qualification (PMQ) by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) will require that their medical school has been appropriately accredited. The World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) Recognition Program is the only one accepted by the ECFMG for the recognition of medical school accrediting agencies. This applies to anyone intending to work or study in the United States, United Kingdom and an increasing number of countries adopting such approach. The process of accreditation of Iraqi medical colleges started in 2007 but to date there is no internationally recognized body in Iraq to accredit those colleges. This means by the 2024, graduates from Iraqi medical colleges may not be able to work and study in many parts of the world. Urgent action is required as we detailed in this article. Ministry of higher education, universities, medical colleges need to collaborate with the National Council to get it recognized by the WFME and save the future of thousands of doctors who will graduate in the forthcoming years starting with 2024 and on.

**Key words:** Accreditation, Medical Colleges, Iraq

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By 2024 (previously 2023), all international medical graduates (IMGs) intending to apply for certification or gain verification of their primary medical qualification (PMQ) by the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) will require that their medical school has been appropriately accredited. The World Federation for Medical Education (WFME)

Recognition Program is the only one accepted by the ECFMG for the recognition of medical school accrediting agencies. This applies to anyone intending to work or study in the United States<sup>1</sup>, United Kingdom<sup>2</sup> and an increasing number of countries adopting such approach. The process of accreditation of Iraqi medical colleges started in 2007 but to date there is no internationally recognized body in Iraq to accredit those colleges. The ECFMG has announced that, effective in 2023 (postponed to 2024 after Covid-19 pandemic), physicians applying for ECFMG Certification will be required to graduate from a medical school that has been appropriately accredited. To satisfy this requirement, the physician's medical school must be accredited by an accrediting agency recognised by WFME. The

WFME Recognition Programme is the only programme accepted by ECFMG at the current time for the recognition of medical school accrediting agencies. In the United States, international medical graduates (IMGs) comprise one-quarter of the physician workforce. Through its program of IMG certification, ECFMG assesses whether these physicians are ready to enter U.S. graduate medical education. ECFMG Certification is also one of the eligibility requirements for IMGs to take Step 3 of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) and to obtain an unrestricted license to practice medicine in the United States. For more and up-to-date information regarding the ECFMG 2024 requirement, please follow the website shown in Ref 2) [www.ecfm.org/accreditation/](http://www.ecfm.org/accreditation/). This means by the 2024, graduates from Iraqi medical colleges may not be able to work and study in many parts of the world. Urgent action is required as we detailed in this article.

### **History of accreditation**

Accreditation of medical schools has been in practice since the 19<sup>th</sup> century by different agencies in the United States before the LCME was formed in October 1942 as the sole agency for accreditation of medical schools in North America. The ECFMG, a private 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.<sup>3</sup> Since its establishment, the ECFMG has certified more than 320,000 IMGs, providing assurance to regulatory authorities, GME programs, and the public that these physicians have had their credentials reviewed and that they have met standards for basic medical knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Since its beginning in 1956, ECFMG has focused primarily on verifying the

credentials and assessing the competencies of individuals but not the medical schools they attended. In recent years, several emerging issues have led the ECFMG to modify its future eligibility criteria for certification to include an indicator of medical school quality in the form of accreditation by a recognized accrediting body. These issues include: 1. medical school quality and accreditation systems vary widely across the world; 2. the rate at which new medical schools are being established has dramatically increased over the past few decades, as has the number of physicians migrating and training in other countries; and 3. a small number of medical schools engage in questionable business and educational practices, misrepresenting their status and misleading prospective students. Given the resources necessary to institute and administer accreditation programs, their value could be questioned. Studies by Foundation for Advancement of International Medical Education and Research (FAIMER) and others have shown a positive association between accreditation and educational outcomes. A recent analysis of such research articles highlighted three that compared outcomes between accredited and non-accredited schools in a variety of countries. All three found a positive association between accreditation and examination performance, with students from accredited medical schools performing better on certain standardized exams. Two of the studies looked at performance on steps of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE), while the other examined scores on a country's national residency entrance exam.<sup>5</sup>

### **Current Medical School Requirements**

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* 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 IMED were eligible for ECFMG certification.<sup>6</sup> 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)* which adopted the 2024 deadline of the ECFMG.<sup>7</sup> The WFME Recognition Programme is the only program accepted by ECFMG for the recognition of medical school accrediting agencies. WFME is a non-profit, non-governmental organization founded in 1972 by several international health organizations to foster quality improvement at all stages of medical education. The purpose of the WFME Recognition Programme is to provide a transparent and rigorous method of ensuring the accreditation of medical schools worldwide is at an internationally accepted and high standard. The recognition process includes a self-evaluation by the accrediting agency against WFME's recognition criteria and a site visit by a team of WFME assessors. Most importantly, the accrediting agency, as described in the criteria, must have appropriate, publicly available standards that are regularly reviewed and updated, as well as the policies, procedures and structure to operate a fair and transparent accreditation system. This includes strict conflict

of interest policies and procedures, as well as maintaining an accurate list of accredited schools on the agency's website.<sup>8</sup> Recognition is generally awarded for a period of 10 years. A status report is required annually that must include a list of all medical schools that were accredited during the year or that are under review. At the present time, 20 agencies from a wide range of countries are recognized by WFME and other agencies are currently under review by WFME, with many more in discussion about initiating the recognition processes. Many of the recognized agencies have extended its mandate outside their countries and have accredited medical schools in other countries.<sup>9</sup> 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. The 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 is one.<sup>10</sup> The first final draft of the global standards was presented in Irbid, Jordan in 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.<sup>11</sup> Many countries in the region achieved that goal. 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 comprehensive national workshop was organized in Erbil and produced detailed National Roadmap with institutional plans of action for each medical college to achieve accreditation within the next 3 years, i.e. by 2015.<sup>12</sup> The committee succeeded in establishing a National Council devoted to the purpose of accreditation of medical colleges. However, the Ministry of Higher Education has not granted the required recognition, delegation, independent status and finance. During Erbil's meeting in 2012, the ECFMG deadline of 2023 (later moved to 2024) was thoroughly discussed with deans committee, deans and experts who agreed to and proceeded to develop the National Roadmap and the institutional plans. To date, the negotiations between the council and the ministry are still ongoing without any achievement of the status required by WFME. Despite that, the National Council of Accreditation has made marked progress and has accrediting 5 medical colleges. There are ongoing discussions to "convince" the ministry to reach a solution to avoid the

catastrophic situation which will face the graduates of all Iraqi medical colleges in the coming years starting with batch who are already studying and will graduate in 2024. Those young doctors will be unable to have their credentials recognized by ECFMG and other similar agencies in UK, Europe, Australia, Arabian Gulf states. Consequently, these doctors cannot study, train or work in all of these countries. The government, the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Health, deans and all the healthcare community in Iraq must take action and use the forthcoming months till January 2024 to get the National Council of Accreditation recognized by WFME if they want to avoid such a catastrophic situation that our young generation of doctors are going to face. As shown in (Table-1), ministry of higher education, universities, medical colleges need to collaborate with the National Council to get it recognized by the WFME and save the future of thousands of doctors who will graduate in the forthcoming years starting with 2024 and on.

**Table 1.** Iraqi National Council of Accreditation of Medical Colleges' (NC) status against WFME criteria for recognition.

No	WFME criteria for recognition	Current status in Iraq and what is actions are needed and by whom
<b>Part A Eligibility</b>		
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 NC's Law & Regulation
4	The agency operates within a framework that enables the establishment of agreements and the signing of contracts according to the laws of the country or countries in which the agency is seated and operates.	Ministry of Higher Education to issue NC's Law & Regulation
<b>Part B Accreditation standards</b>		
5	The agency uses comprehensive standards for accreditation appropriate to basic medical education.	The NC uses the recognized WFME global standards
6	The agency makes publicly available the accreditation standards.	The NC needs a website (requires Ministry approval)
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.	NC'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)
<b>Part C Accreditation process and procedures</b>		
9	Medical school self-evaluation	Medical colleges responsibility: most already done that.
10	On site observation and evaluation	NC already done many site visits and accredited 5 colleges so far.
11	Reports	NC'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 NC's Law, Regulation and delegations.
13	Accreditation decisions	Ministry of Higher Education to issue NC's Law & Regulation to enable NC to make valid decisions.
14	Activities subsequent to accreditation decisions	Ministry of Higher Education to issue NC's Law & Regulation
15	Agency has policies and procedures to investigate and act upon complaints	Ministry of Higher Education to issue NC's Law & Regulation
<b>Part D Agency policies and resources</b>		
16	Agency has policies and procedures	Ministry of Higher Education to issue NC's Law & Regulation
17	Agency has controls to ensure that the policies and procedures applied	Ministry of Higher Education to issue NC's Law & Regulation
18	Administrative and fiscal responsibilities	Ministry of Higher Education to issue NC's financial Law & Regulation
19	Maintenance of records	Ministry of Higher Education to issue NC's Law & Regulation
20	Availability and dissemination of information	Ministry of Higher Education to issue NC's Law & Regulation

## Conclusion

If we are to avoid the catastrophic situation that faces all graduates from Iraqi medical colleges, the Ministry of Higher Education must provide urgent support to the National Council 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 get its recognition by known WFME.

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### اعتماد كليات الطب العراقية : الانذار الاخير

بحلول عام ٢٠٢٤، سيتطلب من جميع خريجي كليات الطب حول العالم والذين يعتزمون التقدم للحصول على شهادة أو التحقق من مؤهلاتهم الطبية الأولية والاعتراف بها (شهادات البكالوريوس) من قبل اللجنة التعليمية الأميركية لخريجي الطب الأجانب (ECFMG) يتوجب أن تكون كلياتهم الطبية معتمدة من قبل مجلس اعتماد معترف به من برنامج الاعتراف بالفيدرالية العالمية للتعليم الطبي (WFME) وهو البرنامج الوحيد الذي تم قبوله من قبل اللجنة ذات النفوذ العالمي. وهذا ينطبق على أي طبيب يعتزم العمل أو الدراسة في الولايات المتحدة والمملكة المتحدة وعدد متزايد من البلدان التي تتبنى مثل هذا النهج. وكانت قد بدأت عملية اعتماد كليات الطب العراقية في عام (٢٠٠٧) ولكن حتى الآن لا توجد هيئة معترف بها دولياً في العراق لاعتماد تلك الكليات. هذا يعني أنه بحلول عام (٢٠٢٤) قد لا يتمكن خريجو كليات الطب العراقية من العمل والدراسة في أجزاء كثيرة من دول العالم. المطلوب إجراء عاجل كما ذكرنا بالتفصيل في هذه المقالة والمطلوب من وزارة التعليم العالي والجامعات والكليات الطبية ونقابة الأطباء إلى التعاون مع المجلس الوطني لاعتماد كليات الطب في العراق بإصدار التعليمات وتقديم العون للمجلس للحصول على اعتراف من الفيدرالية (WFME) وإنقاذ مستقبل آلاف الأطباء الذين سيتخرجون في السنوات القادمة بدءاً من عام ٢٠٢٤ وما بعده.