

Federal Decree-Law No. (48) of 2021 on Higher Education

We, Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates,

Having reviewed the Constitution,

And Federal Law No. (1) of 1972 regarding the Competencies of Ministries and the Powers of Ministers, and its amendments,

And based on the proposal of the Minister of Education, and the approval of the Cabinet,

Have issued the following Decree-Law:

Article (1)

Definitions

For the purposes of implementing the provisions of this Decree-Law, the following words and phrases shall have the meanings assigned to each of them, unless the context otherwise requires:

State: The United Arab Emirates.

Ministry: The Ministry of Education.

Minister: The Minister of Education.

Higher Education: The education that follows the general education stage and is provided by higher education institutions that grant students an academic or professional degree in accordance with the stages stipulated in Article (5) of this Decree-Law, upon their successful completion of all academic courses accredited by the Ministry.

Higher Education Institution/Institutions: Public and private higher education institutions in the State that offer academic programs accredited by the Ministry to obtain an academic or professional degree in accordance with the stages stipulated in Article (5) of this Decree-Law.

Public Higher Education Institutions: Higher education institutions owned by the State, one of the member Emirates of the Federation, or one of their institutions, which provide physical, virtual, or hybrid higher education services, and include universities, colleges, and higher education institutes.

Private Higher Education Institutions: Non-governmental educational institutions that provide physical, virtual, or hybrid higher education services and include universities, colleges, and higher education institutes, and these institutions may be for-profit or non-profit.

Institutional Licensure: The document issued by the Ministry to a higher education institution, which authorizes it to operate, provide higher education services, and be listed in the National Register of licensed higher education institutions operating in the State.

Programmatic Accreditation: The document by which the Ministry recognizes and approves that a program or programs of a higher education institution have been evaluated and have met the required standards and conditions, which authorizes the higher education institution to start offering the program to students and to list the program in the National Register of accredited higher education programs.

Article (2)

Objectives

This Decree-Law aims to achieve the following:

1. Regulate the licensing of all types of higher education institutions in the State and the accreditation of their programs.
2. Supervise the educational process in higher education institutions in coordination with the relevant federal and local government entities concerned with higher education.
3. Ensure the effective governance and management of higher education institutions.
4. Enhance the quality and competitiveness of higher education in the State.
5. Encourage scientific research in higher education institutions.

Article (3)

Scope of Application

1. The provisions of this Decree-Law shall apply to all higher education institutions in the State, except for those operating in the free zones of the State.

2. Subject to clause (1) of this Article, no natural or legal person may provide or advertise the provision of higher education services in the State for the purpose of granting a certificate without first obtaining a license and having its academic programs accredited by the Ministry.
3. The Cabinet may, upon the proposal of the Minister, exempt any higher education institution from some provisions of this Decree-Law.

Article (4)

Competencies of the Ministry

For the purposes of applying the provisions of this Decree-Law, the Ministry shall assume the following competencies:

1. Institutional licensure and programmatic accreditation for higher education institutions in the State of all types, levels, and specializations, as specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law.
2. Evaluating the performance of higher education institutions, the quality of their educational outcomes, their classification, and periodic oversight.
3. Developing and supporting scientific research activities in the State in coordination with higher education institutions and public and private entities.
4. Withdrawing and revoking institutional licensure and programmatic accreditation, suspending a higher education institution, imposing other administrative penalties, and taking necessary measures to preserve students' rights, including managing the higher education institution, as specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law.
5. Any other tasks assigned to it by the Cabinet.

By a decision of the Cabinet, upon the proposal of the Minister, any local government entity concerned with education affairs may be delegated some of the competencies assigned to the Ministry in this Decree-Law and its Executive Regulations, with respect to higher education institutions located in that Emirate.

Article (5)

Stages of the Higher Education System

1. The Ministry shall work to ensure that the higher education system is integrated with the general education system within a futuristic and sustainable vision, through a system of successive and sequential educational stages, in a way that supplies society with properly, modernly, and comprehensively qualified cadres, serves the labor market, and achieves the State's goals and its future and developmental plans.
2. The higher education system consists of stages, each corresponding to a specific level in the National Qualifications Framework of the State.
3. Higher education in the State is divided into the following stages:
 - a. Diploma stage.
 - b. Higher Diploma stage.
 - c. Bachelor's stage.
 - d. Postgraduate Diploma stage.
 - e. Master's stage.
 - f. Doctorate stage.

The Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law shall specify the conditions for passing each of these stages, including the number of years of study, the number of credit hours for each stage, and the level of each stage according to the levels of the National Qualifications Framework of the State.

Article (6)

General Controls for Licensing Higher Education Institutions

1. It is prohibited for any natural or legal person to operate, promote, or advertise any higher education institution in the State without first obtaining institutional licensure from the Ministry.
2. To establish a higher education institution in the State, it is required to meet the requirements of the competent local authorities, ensuring that the location, building, and facilities of the higher education institution are

suitable for the educational process and meet health, safety, and security standards as specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law.

3. The Ministry shall grant institutional licensure based on a comprehensive evaluation of the extent of the higher education institution's compliance with the institutional licensure standards and conditions set by the Ministry, including conditions for student admission and their rights, and the general conditions for employees of the higher education institution.
4. The institutional license issued to a higher education institution may not be transferred, sold, exchanged, or assigned, either explicitly or implicitly, without the Ministry's approval.
5. The higher education institution must obtain the prior approval of the Ministry before implementing any substantial changes it intends to apply to the institution, as specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law and the institutional licensure standards and conditions.
6. The license granted to a higher education institution is limited to practicing educational, training, research, and scientific activities as specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law.
7. To grant a license to a higher education institution, it must have a distinctive name in accordance with the conditions and controls specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law.
8. The owner of the higher education institution must provide financial guarantees and securities that ensure the institution's ability to meet its financial obligations, as specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law.
9. Any other conditions stipulated in this Decree-Law and its Executive Regulations.

Article (7)

General Controls for Programmatic Accreditation

1. A higher education institution is prohibited from promoting or advertising any academic program, admitting students, or commencing studies therein before obtaining programmatic accreditation from the Ministry.
2. The Ministry shall grant programmatic accreditation based on a comprehensive evaluation of the extent of the higher education

institution's compliance with the programmatic accreditation standards and conditions set by the Ministry.

3. The higher education institution must obtain the prior approval of the Ministry before implementing any substantial amendments to its programs, as specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law and the programmatic accreditation standards and conditions.

Article (8)

Classification and Evaluation of Higher Education Institutions

Licensed higher education institutions are subject to periodic classification, evaluation, quality performance, and educational oversight by the Ministry, as specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law.

Article (9)

Information and Data of the Higher Education Institution

1. The higher education institution shall provide the Ministry with any information, documents, or records related to its higher education activities or its performance, upon the Ministry's request and as specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law.

2. The higher education institution is obligated to periodically provide the Ministry with all data of its students, graduates, and employees, as specified by the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law.

Article (10)

Penalties

1. Without prejudice to any more severe penalty stipulated in any other law, anyone who commits any of the following acts shall be punished by imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year, and a fine of not less than (10,000) ten thousand Dirhams and not exceeding (1,000,000) one million Dirhams, or one of these two penalties:

a. Engaging in higher education activity without a license from the Ministry.

- b. Offering, teaching, or advertising higher education programs not accredited by the Ministry.
 - c. Announcing the granting of certificates according to the stages stipulated in Article (5) of this Decree-Law before fulfilling the necessary requirements and licenses.
 - d. Violating the standards and conditions of institutional licensure or programmatic accreditation.
 - e. Failing to provide the information, documents, and data requested by the Ministry.
 - f. Failing to cooperate with the judicial enforcement officers stipulated in Article (11) of this Decree-Law.
 - g. Violating the provisions of this Decree-Law, its Executive Regulations, and the decisions issued in implementation thereof.
2. The penalties stipulated in this Article shall not prejudice the authority of the Ministry to impose the administrative penalties provided for in this Decree-Law, its Executive Regulations, and the decisions issued in implementation thereof.

Article (11)

Judicial Enforcement

The employees of the Ministry or the competent local authority, who are designated by a decision of the Minister of Justice based on the recommendation of the Minister, or by a decision of the head of the local judicial authority, as the case may be, shall have the capacity of judicial enforcement officers in proving violations of the provisions of this Decree-Law and its Executive Regulations. They shall have the right to enter any higher education institution, inspect its records, and take any other necessary measures to determine the extent of the higher education institution's compliance with the provisions of this Decree-Law, its Executive Regulations, and the decisions issued in implementation thereof.

Article (12)

Governance of Federal Public Higher Education Institutions

Notwithstanding any provision contained in the laws establishing federal public universities, the Cabinet shall issue a decision on the governance of federal public higher education institutions in the State, including the regulation of their boards of trustees, mechanisms for appointing their directors, regulation of administrative, financial, human resources, and contractual matters, their scholarship systems, and their funding mechanisms.

Article (13)

Reconciliation of Status

Higher education institutions existing before the implementation of the provisions of this Decree-Law must reconcile their status and the status of their employees within one year from the date of the entry into force of the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law. This period may be extended for similar periods by a decision of the Cabinet upon the proposal of the Minister.

Article (14)

Executive Regulations

1. Without prejudice to any other provision in this Decree-Law, its Executive Regulations shall regulate the following:

a. Requirements and conditions for institutional licensure, programmatic accreditation, periodic oversight, classification, evaluation, quality performance, and conditions for financial guarantees and securities to be provided by higher education institutions.

b. Conditions for passing each of the stages stipulated in Article (5) of this Decree-Law, including the number of years of study, the number of credit hours for each stage, and the level of each stage according to the levels of the National Qualifications Framework of the State.

- c. Cases of withdrawal and revocation of institutional licensure and programmatic accreditation, and the measures the Ministry can take in these cases.
 - d. Donations and grants provided to higher education institutions.
 - e. Controls for advertisements, publications, and the use of titles related to higher education.
 - f. Official holidays and vacations for higher education institutions.
 - g. Violations and administrative penalties.
 - h. Deadlines and methods for appealing decisions issued by the Ministry in implementation of the provisions of this Decree-Law and its Executive Regulations. In all cases, a lawsuit challenging a Ministry decision shall not be accepted before an appeal is filed against it.
2. The Cabinet, upon the proposal of the Minister, shall issue the Executive Regulations of this Decree-Law within three months from its effective date.

Article (15)

The provisions of this Decree-Law shall not prejudice any competencies assigned to the Ministry in any other legislation.

Article (16)

Repeals

1. Any provision that violates or conflicts with the provisions of this Decree-Law is hereby repealed.
2. The regulations and decisions issued before the implementation of the provisions of this Decree-Law shall remain in force, insofar as they do not conflict with its provisions, until the issuance of the regulations and decisions that replace them under the provisions of this Decree-Law.

Article (17)

Publication and Entry into Force of the Decree-Law

This Decree-Law shall be published in the Official Gazette and shall come into force as of December 01, 2021.

Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan

Issued by us at the Presidential Palace in Abu Dhabi:

Date: 13 / Safar / 1443 H

Corresponding to: 20 / September / 2021 AD

Related Legislations

Law No. (17) of 2024 on the Establishment of Dubai National University

Decision of the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research No. (18) of 2024 regarding Mechanisms for Supporting Students to Enroll in Higher Education

Decision of the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research No. (19) of 2024 regarding Admission Standards for Higher Education Institution Programs

Amiri Decree No. (14) of 2025 on the Establishment and Organization of the Sharjah Council for Higher Education and Scientific Research

Decision of the Chairman of the Education, Human and Community Development Council No. (5) of 2025 regarding the Governance of Higher Education Study for National Students Abroad

Decision of the Chairman of the Education, Human and Community Development Council No. (6) of 2025 on the Formation of a Special Committee to Consider Exceptions to the Decision on the Governance of Higher Education Study for National Students Abroad

Cabinet Decision No. (81) of 2025 concerning Service Fees and Administrative Fines at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

Decision of the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research No. (173) of 2025 regarding the Governance of Higher Education Institutions' Obligations concerning Practical Training for Students

Decision of the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research No. (220) of 2025 on Licensing Higher Education Institutions and Accrediting their Academic Programs

Cabinet Decision No. (55) of 2022 was issued concerning the governance of federal public higher education institutions