

ESTABLISHMENT OF INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS IN SELF-ACCREDITATION INSTITUTIONS IN TAIWAN: HAS QUALITY CULTURE BEEN EMBEDDED ON CAMPUS?

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Abstract

In 2013, the Ministry of Education (MOE), Taiwan launched a new quality assurance policy called “self-accreditation”, aiming to give institutional autonomy as well as to establish their internal quality mechanism. In the self-accreditation policy, higher education institutions are encouraged to develop their own QA framework based on missions and features. At the same time, the self-accreditation policy has brought several impacts on self-accrediting universities in terms of IQA implementation and quality culture building. Hence, the purpose of the study is to realize: (1) The establishment of internal quality assurance mechanism in 14 self-accrediting higher education institutions; (2) The challenges that self-accrediting institutions faced in terms of quality culture building.

Key word

Self-Accreditation, Quality Culture, Higher Education

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the number of Taiwan universities and colleges increased up to 160 with more than 1.3 million student enrollments, which has successfully transformed Taiwan Higher Education system from Elite type into universal type. Concurrently, quality issues related to “massification” in higher education have not only aroused public concerns but also resulted in the development of a quality assurance framework in Taiwanese higher education in the early 21st Century.

The Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT), the first national accrediting body, was established in 2005 with funds from the government and 153 colleges and universities. Prior to the establishment of HEEACT, several self-funded local accrediting bodies had been founded, including Taiwan Assessment and Evaluation Association (TWAEA), Taiwan Medical Accreditation Council (TMAC), Taiwan Nursing Accreditation Council (TNAC), the Institute of Engineering Education Taiwan (IEET) (Hou, 2014).

As a national accreditor, HEEACT operates both institutional and program-based accreditation. The external review costs are completely covered by the MOE. The detailed final reports are published on HEEACT’s official website (HEEACT, 2015). In 2006, HEEACT began a 5-year, program-based, and nation-wide accreditation. Starting in 2011, HEEACT conducted a new comprehensive assessment over 81 4-year national and private universities and also continued the second cycle program accreditation. Following the global trend of quality assurance, both institutional and programmatic accreditation focused on the assessment of student learning outcomes.

In 2012, the MOE determined to launch its “self-accreditation” policy in order to respond to various requests, particularly university autonomy enhancement and internal quality assurance establishment (MOE, 2013). Self-accrediting universities were expected to realize their strengths and weaknesses as well as to develop their own review standards. At the same time, they would be given authority to conduct an external evaluation over their programs without being reviewed by HEEACT. Therefore, the new policy represents that universities needed to build quality culture on campus. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to realize: (1) The establishment of internal quality assurance mechanism in self-accrediting higher education institutions; (2) The challenges that self-accrediting institutions faced under the new self-accreditation policy. Three research questions addressed as follows:

- (a) How did the self-accrediting institutions implement the self-accreditation policy?
- (b) How was internal QA established by self-accrediting institutions under the self-accreditation policy?
- (c) What challenges and impacts have been brought into 14 institutions?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Development of a self-accreditation system

According to the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE, 2013) self-accreditation is, “a process or status that implies a degree of autonomy, on the part of an institution or individual, to make decisions about academic offerings or learning” (INQAAHE, 2013). Self-accreditation derived from accreditation is defined as the status accorded to a mature institution conducting its IQA and which is exempted from the process of external accreditation (Harvey, 2014). In other words, self-accrediting universities are given autonomy to either award degrees in their own name or accredit their own programs without going through an external party. A self-accreditation institution is fully authorized to invite its review panel to inspect institutional or program quality. With greater familiarity with the specific nature of the institution itself, ideally, self-accreditation can lead institutions to a more informed process of self-improvement (Sanyal & Martin, 2007; Kinser, 2011). Hence, the main purpose of self-accreditation is to develop a quality culture on campuses throughout a rigorous internal quality review process by universities.

Self-accreditation tends to apply with a “fitness for purpose” approach only, inspecting how a university’s performance fulfills its specific missions. Within a well-developed internal quality assurance system, institutional capacity will be also enhanced in order to deal with more complicated quality issues, such as program restructuring, faculty development, etc. (Stensaker, Langfeldt, Harvey & Westerheijden, 2011). With the emphasis on self-enhancement, self-accreditation focuses more on the development of internal quality assurance rather than external review.

2.2 Quality mechanism and quality culture at the institutional level

In order to achieve the university educational objectives quality should be part of the institutional mission and vision in carrying out all the activities of teaching, learning and research. This means putting internal quality management systems, policies and procedures in place according to relevant regulations, bylaws, and statutes. Through effective institutional management and a well-structured internal quality system, a quality culture will emerge. The university leaders should initiate the process and support all quality activities, including processes and procedures. Quality assurance should be an integral part of institutional governance and clearly identified within the overall institutional management structure and system. This requires the collaboration and engagement of administrators, faculty and staff across all levels of academic sectors and disciplines, with the functions and responsibilities of all administrative sectors and academic units with regard to quality being clearly defined (Hou, 2016).

The functions and responsibilities of the quality assurance office need to be clearly articulated. It should develop a quality assurance manual for faculty and staff and provide training for them. A healthy and balanced quality assurance system would express both educational objectives and social expectations. Public accountability will develop into a quality plan, particularly the provision of information to the public.

In order to ensure the university’s long-term sustainability, the quality assurance system is able to adapt to change through feedback mechanisms and consultation with stakeholders, including faculty and staff representatives, student bodies, government, industry and other external agencies (Hou, 2016).

2.3 Rationales and Phases of Self-accreditation in Taiwan

According to the MOE, universities could apply for self-accreditation status if they meet one of the following criteria: they are recipients of MOE grants of the Development Plan for World Class Universities and Research Centers of Excellence; (2) recipients of MOE grants of the Top University Project; (3) recipients of MOE grants for the Teaching Excellence Project exceeding 6.7 million in USD over a consecutive four years. Currently, these are 34 institutions eligible for application.

Applicants for self-accrediting status engage a two stage process. In the first stage the applicant is required to submit documents and evidence demonstrating their capacity to conduct an internal review process. All documents will be reviewed by a recognition committee organized by the MOE. The review standards, including eight aspects (MOE, 2013):

- (1) University has set up its own self-accreditation regulations based on the consensus of the whole university.
- (2) The self-accreditation standards developed by the university are properly integrated with its educational goals and uniqueness.
- (3) A steering committee of self-accreditation is organized by the university and its responsibility is properly defined in the regulations. The committee consists of 3/5 external experts.
- (4) The whole review process of the self-accreditation is properly designed with multiple data resources and self-improvement function.
- (5) The peer reviewers should be comprised of experienced experts, academic scholars, and industrious representatives.
- (6) The self-accreditation system is fully supported by the university itself with enough financial support and human resources.
- (7) A feedback system set up by the university continuously makes self-improvements according to the accreditation results and the review comments.
- (8) The self-accreditation results are transparent and will be announced to the public.

The second stage focuses on the actual review process and procedures undertaken by self-accrediting institutions and recognizes review outcomes submitted by the self-accrediting institutions. The audit is carried out by HEEACT through document checks. After going through and approving HEEACT's audit, the MOE allows self-accrediting institutions to publish their review outcomes on their official website (Chen & Hou, 2016). By the end of 2016, the self-accrediting policy has been moving to the new stage. The qualifications of applicants are not only limited to those with Research and Teaching Excellence Project recipients. Since 2017, all universities are eligible to identify themselves as a self-accrediting authority.

3 Research Method

Fourteen accrediting institutions were selected as research subjects in order to document how MOE's self-accreditation policy impacts institutional internal QA. Three focus groups targeting the reviewers from accreditation outcomes recognition task force, heads of QA office, program heads and faculty members will be held respectively. The research team invited the total of 24 representatives to take part in focus groups. The data from focus groups were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) method for generating meaning from transcribed and interview data. Their methods of noting patterns and themes; clustering items into categories; building logical chains of evidence through noting causality and making inferences; and making conceptual coherence allow typically large amounts of qualitative data to be reduced (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). In addition, Triangulation involving using multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding were adopted a method for validation or verification of major findings (Patton, 2001).

The interview questions for focus groups are as follows:

Part I: The establishment of internal quality assurance mechanism

1. What do you think of self-accreditation process undertaken by universities/colleges? Did they comply with the principles of equity, impartiality, and transparency? Were the evaluation items and criteria appropriate?
2. Do you think that self-accreditation process undertaken by universities/colleges fully engaged different stakeholders, such as college, staff, students, and alumni? Why?
3. Do you think that the procedures of recruiting committee and qualifications of reviewers were developed at universities appropriately?
4. Do you agree that the highly passing rate at self-accrediting institutions means good quality of departments and programs?
5. What are the big challenges for universities and colleges to implement self-accreditation during the process and procedures?

Part II: Role of quality assurance unit at self-accrediting universities

- (1) What do you think that the organizational structure, level and human resources of quality assurance office should be? For which level would they be more appropriate?
- (2) What responsibilities do you think the institutional self-accreditation committee should take?

- (3) How do you think the quality of staff at a QA office can be ensured? What kind of training programs did your university provide for QA staff and faculty members?
- (4) What commitment do you think that universities themselves should have in administrative support, financial resource, and human capital in order to undertake self-accreditation?
- (5) How do you think the relationship between the administrative cadre and academic programs should look like?
- (6) How do you think a QA office should help other academic programs to undertake the internal review process?
- (7) How do you think a QA office should help academic programs to develop their characteristics?
- (8) How do you think a QA office should help academic programs to build quality culture through the review procedures?

Part III: Impact of Self accreditation on higher education

- (1) Do you think that self-accreditation can help universities and colleges promote the development of quality assurance mechanisms?
- (2) Do you think that self-accreditation can help universities and colleges develop their features?
- (3) Do you think that self-accreditation can encourage faculty members and staff to participate in the development and planning of academic programs actively?
- (4) How do you think the eligibility of self-accrediting universities and colleges should be determined? Should their self-accreditation status be terminated if they do not implement it appropriately? And How?
- (5) What kinds of advantages and disadvantages of self-accreditation policy have been brought to Taiwan higher education?

4 Major Findings

- (1) Most universities tended to adopt HEEACT model, including standards and review procedures
 Given the fact that universities were given autonomy to develop their particular features through a self-accreditation process and related procedures, they would be able to determine if they would like to follow the HEEACT model or operate with their own standards. The MOE did not set up specific regulations for either set of review criteria or the composition of a review panel.

In reality, most universities tended to follow the HEEACT QA model without many changes which has led to a lack of innovation though some self-accrediting institutions tended to strengthen the “internationalization” character within the review procedures, such as having internationalization item, inviting international reviewers, etc. (Hou, et.al, 2014). Yet, there are still a plenty of aspects in external review process which needed to be improved, including selection of reviewers, composition of panel, final accreditation decisions, etc. Even so, internal quality assurance culture has been gradually developed and eventually embedded with campuses.

- (2) Reviewers recruitment and training are the biggest challenges
 Self-accrediting universities faced several challenges, including unclear reviewers’ recruitment process and procedures, insufficient human resources and lack of standards for final decisions making(see table 1). There are four major approaches of a panel composition: (a) recommended by reviewed programs and approved by institutional steering committee; (b) recommended by programs, colleges, Dean of academic affairs, and Vice presidents, then approved by institutional steering committee; (c) recommended by programs and colleges, and selected by President; (d) Screening certified reviewers by HEEACT, then selected by evaluated programs and approved by institutional steering committee. Yet, QA office did not have the capacity in reviewer training.

Table 1: Analysis of 14 self-accrediting institutions’ quality assurance mechanism

	Dimensions	QA mechanism by institutions
1.	Evaluation Items	Between 4-9 items
2	Additional feature standards at institutional level	50% did
3	Number of evaluation indicators	Between 13~51/ one adopted HEEACT’s standards and indicators
4	Additional feature standards at program level	13 institutions did

5	Recruitment of reviewers	There are four models: (1) recommended by reviewed programs and approved by institutional steering committee; (2) recommended by programs, colleges, Dean of academic affairs, and Vice presidents, then approved by institutional steering committee; (3) recommended by programs and colleges, and selected by President; (4) Screening certified reviewers by HEEACT, then selected by evaluated programs and approved by institutional steering committee.
6	QA staff training offered	13 institutions did
7	Authority of Self-accrediting Activity	(1) Office of Research and Development; (2) QA office; (3) Office of Academic Office, (4) Task Force on QA; (5) University Secretariat
8	Human Resources	Around 1-4
9	Budget	(1) From University Fund (2) proposed by the office in charge
10	Alignment/ embedded with Lon-term Strategic plan	12 institutions did
11	Transparency	13 institutions did
12	Final Review Status	(1) All comply with HEEACT model (2) 9 out of 14 has a rating system over each indicator

Sources: compiled by Authors

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The core value of quality assurance is continuous self-improvement. Hence, an institution is expected to become a learning organization through a well-established internal quality assurance mechanism. But there would be challenges of implementation in several aspects. First, shared responsibility between administration and academic sectors is needed. Sometimes the roles and responsibilities of administrative sectors and academic units for assuring quality are not clearly defined. This can create misunderstandings and hamper implementation.

Second, inclusion of faculty could not be ignored. In some institutions, faculty members do not take much part in quality assurance activities due to their heavy responsibilities in teaching and research. Engaging them more fully is a major challenge. Third, development of indicators and learning outcomes measures are supposed to be carried out and supported by top administrators, faculty members, and students. For developing criteria and quality indicators needs the engagement of various stakeholders, reaching consensus can be time consuming. In addition, quality culture building would result in more administrative work and this extra burden may create resistance on campus. Last, there remained large gaps in the feedback cycle remain on most campuses. A functioning feedback cycle enhances the quality of the whole institution. However, it was found that most universities did not develop a systematic alignment between review results and strategic quality goals successfully.

In conclusion, the key aim of a quality culture is continuous enhancement of quality. It can be seen that self-accreditation has already been implemented in several Asian countries, including Taiwan. As a late-comer, the Taiwan government is attempting to build universities' capacities by giving them more autonomy. However, it remains a very challenging job for universities to strike a balance between the often perceived conflict between accountability and autonomy. From the perspective of universities, self-accreditation will definitely encourage them to develop their features and strengths through a well-established internal quality assurance mechanism. In reality and perhaps in future practice, it will likely take universities a greater period of time to develop their quality culture in a manner that is firmly rooted on campus.

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HOW TO LINK STUDENTS' LEARNING OUTCOMES AND OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS

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Abstract

Many countries are trying to improve the cooperation between education and labor market. Russia is not an exception. The paper aims at drawing attention to the growing need to provide tight links between these two worlds. The effective mechanism to achieve this linking is to embed requirements of occupational standards into educational programmes, namely to develop competencies and learning outcomes in correspondence with occupational standards.