

QUALITY ASSURANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN KOREA

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Abstract

Accreditation is an effective tool for ensuring accountability in higher education that has been used in many countries. Over the last few decades, governments around the world have been concerned about quality assurance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). South Korea has spent a significant amount of resources to focus on higher education over the last few decades. Statistical data provided by global organizations show that enrollment and completion rates of students in higher education in South Korea are higher as compared to other OECD countries. To assure quality of higher education, the Korean Council for University Education (KUAI) has conducted university accreditation since 2011. The main purpose of this paper is to explain about KUAI's main role focusing on accreditation process, evaluation contents.

Keywords: *accreditation, quality assurance, enrollment and completion rates, KUAI*

I. Introduction

Demands for HEIs have continued to increase, as governments and the public have focused more on higher education quality and its accountability. We live in a “knowledge-based” society. UNESCO mentions that “a knowledge society is a society that is nurtured by its diversity and its capacities” (UNESCO, 2005). Today, our society requires people to continue their education and to find more effective ways to do so. Many factors have facilitated higher education over the world, and most of them are closely related to market-forces and economic development and/ or improvement in many countries. Since more high school graduates and non-traditional students have started to attend HEIs in response to these societal influences, higher education enrollments have increased globally.

Such an increase in the enrollment and completion rates has advanced South Korea with regard to higher education. There is little doubt that this fact guarantees that South Korea has made an effort to improve and facilitate the development of higher education. Unfortunately, it does not necessarily mean that the quality and competitiveness of South Korean higher education is also ranked in top in the world.

Since 2011, South Korea began to use accreditation to assure quality of HEIs. It aims at improving quality of higher education but it is not certain that this has been effective, in that South Korea as it continues to struggle to assure the quality of higher education. It is no exaggeration to say that human resources are the primary resources available in South Korea.

South Korea has already joined the ranks of advanced countries in terms of electronics and automotive industry; nonetheless, unlike these sectors, higher education in South Korea still lies on the border between advanced and developing countries with regard to competitiveness and global reputation.

II. The role of KUAI for quality assurance in higher education institutions

The Korean University Accreditation Institute (KUAI) was established in 2009 and began to conduct accreditation of HEIs in 2011. KUAI explains that “our primary goal is to promote national competitiveness through transparent and rigorous accreditation for Korean universities, which enhances university autonomy and strengthens accountability”. In South Korea, accreditation is not mandatory; rather it is based on voluntary participation.

Since 2011, KUAI has been once again recognized as an accreditation institute of evaluation and accreditation for higher education by MOE to implement the second round of the institutional accreditation which will take another 5-years, starting from 2015 to 2020. KUAI develops standards and guidelines for qualitative improvements in university education, contributes to promoting the development of university education and fosters talented human resources by conducting the accreditation process.

The primary purpose of accreditation is to provide HEIs with guidelines, including minimum requirements and accreditation standards, so as to strengthen the quality of higher education. Consequently, accreditation plays a significant role in ensuring quality of HEIs in Korea, which will thereby positively affect competitiveness of HEIs. According to KUAI, the main roles of accreditation are as follows.

1. Assuring and improving university education quality assurance
2. Strengthening university responsibility with the expansion of institutional autonomy
3. Satisfying the public’s right to know about university education quality
4. Increasing international acceptability of the evaluation system

A University should apply for accreditation by deadline. As deadline for application is approaching, KUAI holds presentation meetings to inform universities of the schedule and evaluation criteria. After this session, universities apply for accreditation and start preparing self-evaluation report. Meanwhile, KUAI holds a workshop on self-evaluation report for those who work at each university. The purpose of this workshop is to provide universities with detailed information regarding evaluation criteria as well as how to prepare a self-evaluation report. Once we’ve done with workshops for universities, KUAI starts to organize an evaluation group. This group mainly consists of professors recommended by each university. KUAI trains them through intensive workshops. Each year KUAI selects evaluators among those who attend intensive workshops. KUAI takes a look at evaluators’ qualification through basic information, qualifications, and attitude towards accreditation.

Universities have to submit self-evaluation reports by deadline and then they should prepare a site visit for evaluators. Meanwhile, KUAI holds a meeting for universities. After the self-evaluation reports have been submitted to KUAI, evaluators do a site visit for evaluation. After that, evaluators make an evaluation report. Evaluators discuss evaluation results and then make a decision. Universities may make a formal objection if they want to get reassessment and/or disagree with results. Figure 1 shows accreditation process briefly.



Figure 1. Accreditation Process

III. Evaluation Contents

Evaluation is to be done with structure of evaluation content which contains evaluation category, evaluation area, evaluation criteria and key evaluation criteria. Key evaluation which contains 1) quota of full-time faculty, 2) number of facilities, 3) new student enrollment rate, 4) retention rate, 5) ratio of educational expenditure to tuition, 6) ratio of scholarships to tuition and these are essential since universities can apply for accreditation only if they can meet key evaluation criteria.

Evaluation criteria consist of 5 categories, 10 areas, and 30 criteria. Evaluation criteria is a checklist which includes indicators used to assess compliance with the standards, and the findings of the evaluation are compiled to provide a basis for the decision on accreditation.

Table 1. Details of evaluation categories and areas

Categories	Areas	Criteria
1. Mission and Management	1.1 Management	1.1.1 Educational Objectives
		1.1.2 Development Plans and Specializations
		1.1.3 Self-review
	1.2 Finance	1.2.1 Financial Resources
		1.2.2 Budgets and Management
		1.2.3 Audits
2. Education	2.1 Academic Programs	2.1.1 Organization and Administration of General Education Programs
		2.1.2 Organization and Administration of Major-specific Education Programs
		2.1.3 System for Enhancing Academic Programs
	2.2 Teaching & Learning	2.2.1 Classes and Academic Courses
		2.2.2 Academic Records Management
		2.2.3 Support and Development of Teaching and Learning
3. Institutional Community	3.1 Faculty	3.1.1 Faculty Recruitment Systems
		3.1.2 Faculty Treatment and Welfare
		3.1.3 Support for Faculty Education and Research
	3.2 Staff	3.2.1 Staff Recruitment Systems
		3.2.2 Staff Treatment and Welfare
		3.2.3 Development of Staff Expertise
4. Educational Facilities and Students Support	4.1 Educational Facilities	4.1.1 Classrooms and Laboratories
		4.1.2 Student Welfare Facilities
		4.1.3 Libraries
	4.2 Student Support	4.2.1 Student Counseling System and Graduate Employment Support
		4.2.2 Support for Student Activities and Safety Management
		4.2.3 Aid to Minority Students
5. Achievements and Social Responsibilities	5.1 University Outcomes	5.1.1 Research Performance
		5.1.2 Educational Achievements
		5.1.3 Student Satisfaction
	5.2 Social Responsibilities	5.2.1 Community Service Policies
		5.2.2 Outcome of Community Service
		5.2.3 Contribution to Community and Industry

IV. Conclusion

The history of accreditation in South Korea is very short and, unlike many other countries, particularly the U.S., the UK and Australia, HEIs have been controlled by the central government and have had no autonomy. The Korean government has controlled all forms of HEIs, which could have been one of the decisive factors affecting the rapid development of higher education over the last few decades. However, the knowledge-based economy, globalization, and cross-border education require Korean higher education to be more accountable and effective.

South Korea has a very short history of accreditation under legislative regulation. There is no arguing that accreditation, in particular, institutional accreditation, should be considered the most important factor to improve and foster the development of HEI quality in South Korea. By studying the role and purpose of accreditation in other advanced countries, accreditation in South Korea can be improved.

Accreditation systems should be the primary tool for defining and assuring quality in the delivery of higher education. In other words, if accrediting agencies and processes can ensure that HEIs perform well, then those agencies have an important role to play in society. To make higher education institutions more accountable for assuring performance, accreditation in South Korea should be more consistent and transparent. Also, the accreditation system needs to focus more on outcome-based accreditation. Accrediting process should evaluate institutional effectiveness and the results need to be tied to federal funding.

All in all, each country has different backgrounds in accreditation specific to quality assurance; national goals and purposes are also different. Nevertheless, the most important thing that South Korea should take away is that many countries are forced to demonstrate quality of higher education through quality assurance systems. A strengthened accrediting system should play a significant role in higher education. The accrediting system can be major vehicle to promote innovation of higher education if its standards and processes can be revised to be more open and supportive of diversity in higher education institutions.

References

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