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An overview on the concept of accreditation and quality assessment in the higher education system

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Abstract

Since the growth and development of every society in all aspects affected by the performance of human resources and success in this field requires education based on scientific principles, paying attention to maintaining and improving the quality of universities in various dimensions is one of the main concerns of specialists in higher education. But given that the definition of quality in higher education has multiple aspects and is somewhat ambiguous, it is very difficult to judge.

Therefore, evaluation as a tool that makes this judgment possible and documents the quality, is of particular significance. Meanwhile, the accreditation process as a consequence of a systematic evaluation to ensure quality in higher education has been intended more than other evaluation methods.

In recent years, there has been a lot of discussion about the concept of accreditation and how to establish accreditation structures in the country. In short, accreditation is the granting of a license or certification to an educational unit that, based on the judgment of experts in the field, has met the pre-determined criteria.

Keywords: Accreditation, Qualityassessment, Higher Education System, Evaluation, Educational Unit

Introduction:

Educational accreditation is an approach to improving the quality of education that has been welcomed all over the world. The experience of establishing this educational management approach has led managers to train experts while creating a unit in the organizational structure as «accreditation. (1)
Given that «accreditation» is an obvious commitment in an organization improving the quality of education, hence, «accreditation» is a sustainable behavior and performance in the organization.
Summarizing the definitions that have been presented classically for accreditation, accreditation is: granting a license or certification to an educational unit that has complied with pre-determined criteria based on the judgment of experts in the relevant field.
According to the definition provided by Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the United States, accreditation is a process based on self-assessment and evaluation of homogeneous institutions to ensure the quality of an institution or university course have been designed. aimed at improving quality, increasing accountability, and determining whether the institution or program The standards published by the relevant accreditation organization as well as whether it has met its mission and objectives or not.
Accreditation can be done on generality of an institution, or it can cover only training courses. If the evaluated unit in the accreditation system is the totality of an institution, the quality of the organization and the activities of that institution, including administrative affairs, budget, other resources and facilities, research affairs, educational facilities and quality assurance mechanisms in that institution will be evaluated. However, if the unit to be evaluated in the accreditation system is a training course, then the quality of the course is evaluated in a specific area. The main advantages of educational accreditation are: (1). Make a change in behavior (2). Increase commitment to quality (3). Improving the quality of communication in the organization (4). Facilitate and strengthen participation. (2)

Accreditation steps

In 1984, Scerven described the validation model in seven steps, which are as follows(3):

1) Preparation of standards
2) Internal evaluation by the institution itself
3) Team cohesion for internal evaluation
4) Visiting the Institute
5) Inspection report
6) Review the report
7) Final report

Therefore, one of the main stages of accreditation is the development of standards and their continuous review by specialized committees, and accreditation institutions identify reputable educational institutions based on the standards. Therefore, it is of significant importance to develop accreditation standards as a first step in this process.

Accreditation process

Validation is performed by experienced and specialized individuals by evaluating the quality of organizational processes and its performance compatibility to approved standards. An organization is evaluated that voluntarily but formally requests from an accreditation organization and the accreditation team evaluates the organization by relevant standards. After analyzing the findings, the degree of adaptability and compliance with the standards will be announced to that organization. Educational accreditation means the systematic evaluation of educational service centers with specific standards.

Although accreditation structures have differences in the details of their activities, they have common principles in terms of working methods. The accreditation process typically includes the following components:
a. Gathering information about the unit being evaluated. This step can be done by special questionnaires that have been prepared for this purpose.
B. Performing internal evaluation by the head of education, faculty members, executive officers of the institute and learners.
C. Visiting by external experts .
D. Report preparation by the evaluation board.
E. The final decision is made by the responsible organization of accreditation based on all the information gathered, which in many cases is made by a multidisciplinary committee.

Naturally, each of the accreditation structures makes changes in this general procedure, based on their needs and priorities. For example, in some accreditation structures, site visits are made jut to verify the provided information, and therefore, there is no need to use only experts in the relevant field to visit, or in many accreditation structures, internal evaluation are done in the intervals between external evaluations not before any external evaluation. (6–4)

Worthen introduces accreditation as the most well-known type of formalized professional evaluation systems. In this framework, accreditation as an assessment system of the program has the following main elements: (7)

1. An organization that is responsible for conducting periodic evaluations.
2. Standards and possibly developed tools applied to perform evaluations 2.
3. A pre-determined schedule (for example, once every five years) for evaluations. 3. A pre-determined timetable (for instance, once every five years) for assessments.
4. Using the opinions of various experts in order to judge the quality of the unit being evaluated.
5. The effect on the state of the unit to be evaluated based on the evaluation results.

By summarizing the above items, it can be said that accreditation is a process that is applied by a specific organization to conducting periodic assessments of educational departments and making decision about granting their educational qualifications by a group of experts in a specific area according to the predefined standards. Although initially , accreditation was done exclusively in the field of education, however , it currently includes other fields of research and services as well as education.(8) The goals of accreditation can be stated as follows:
- Replacing the accreditation model instead of evaluation in organizations
- Continuous improvement of the quality of all educational services
- Ensuring proper training of the learner
- Implement standard-based organizational processes and considering the consequences of each activity .
- Assist the organizational managers and leaders in conducting their strategic tasks.
- Providing an integrated monitoring model to ensure the provision of quality educational services.

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Following up the Implementation of accreditation standards at the organization level
- Visiting and monitoring the actions taken by organizational units in terms of accreditation documents.
Although most accreditation structures have traditionally focused mainly on adequate facilities, staff competencies, and process suitability, currently some of their principles and methods are under revision in order to rely more on outcome, especially input communication and the consequential process. In this regard, many accreditation structures try to include standards related to outcomes such as the percentage of graduates, the percentage of finding jobs by graduates , the percentage of dropouts, and the ratio of educational costs to graduates' income. (9-13)

Strengths and weaknesses of accreditation

For a more accurate understanding of the importance of accreditation, it is better to briefly point out its strengths. By summarizing the cases mentioned in various sources, the following points can be mentioned as the main strengths of accreditation: (13-9)
Assuring the government, community, executives of educational institutions, professionals, academics and learners about the quality of provided education.
Enhancing the quality of education by developing indicators and guidelines for evaluation.
- Encourage training centers for continuous improvement through continuous assessments. Providing advice to educational centers.
Supporting training centers against pressures that may threaten their educational efficiency.
- Comprehensiveness of the assessment process that prevents simplification in understanding the complexity of educational processes.
Enabling the systematic collection of information about the units to be evaluated.
- Relatively acceptable cost

Accreditation bodies emphasize that higher education institutions are responsible for ensuring the quality of their study programs. This means that the higher education institutions are the main responsible of for regulating and defining learning outcomes rests with (14,15).

However, as mentioned above, one of the most important benefits of accreditation is that by guaranteeing the quality of under evaluation unit, the government, society, executives of educational institutions and learners, ensure the quality of education and ultimately the quality of learners.

However, it's necessary to take into consideration that the value of accreditation is not limited to its inspection and supervision, but the experience of accreditation systems illustrates well the fact that the operation of these structures leads to the establishment and strengthening of the internal assessment process in educational institutions, and an endogenous effort to improve quality, which unfortunately usually is not given enough attention to this aspect of accreditation.

However, in many cases, the internal assessment carried out in the form of an accreditation process leads to the discovery of very crucial points. In fact, internal and external assessment in the form of an accreditation structure, cause these structures to benefit from the advantages of both methods (16-18).

It should be noted that in spite of various advantages of accreditation structures , but they are likely to have significant weaknesses as well as other assessment approaches that need to be carefully considered when establishing such structures. For this purpose, some of the most important drawbacks of accreditation structures are figured out as below:
1. Doubts about the reliability of the evaluation results and the probability that the evaluation results are based on the occurrence of expert judgment bias.

2. Doubts about the credibility of accreditation structures and the extent to which specialists in a field, seriously monitor the performance of their peers.
3. Uncertainty about the exact weight and importance of the set of criteria, which includes minor to very important items.
4. Just paying attention to the intended goals and ignoring other issues during evaluation time.
5. Preventing the views of those who are involved in an educational unit and have the most complaints against the quality of that educational unit.
6. Risk of standardization of training programs (21–13,19–9)

Basic questions about the quality of educational groups in the higher education system.

1. How can assess the quality of its educational departments and promote them?
2. If the «performance» of students is a measure for evaluation of educational quality of departments, what are the required competencies and how are they evaluated?
3. What is the evaluation process for quality improvement? how is possible to improve the student›s learning environment and their performance regarding the QA results? (22,23)
4. What is the quality enhancement assessment process and how can the student›s learning environment and success be enhanced based on the results?

Definition of quality in higher education

Quality is defined by INQAAHE as follows: a) compliance of the agent with the standards b) compliance of the agent with the objectives / expectations. Quality is discussed and studied from different perspectives: consumer, employer and faculty. (24)

Quality assurance also means continuous review of objectives and implementation processes to achieve the goals in order to maintain and improve their level of compliance with standards or expectations. In the field of quality some of the evaluated factors in the higher education system are: (23–20)

- Input (student; faculty, etc.)
- Process
- Intermediate output
- Final output
- Consequences (employment / unemployment; continuing education, etc.)

Internal and external evaluation: An fundamental approach to quality assurance in higher education

Various models have been proposed to evaluate the performance of universities. In general, global evaluation and accreditation models can be listed in the form of three main models. The bureaucratic model, the English model and the American model. This classification is based on the centralizati on or decentralization of accreditation, the executive structure, and the responsible institutions for implementing the accreditation process. (25)

Validation pattern

The conventional model of universities evaluation in successful countries, including 15 European countries, has the following structure: (22,23)

A) national system for coordination of evaluation affairs at the national level
- Continuous internal evaluation
- External evaluation by a national institution and publication of results

B) Academic self-accreditation system
-Continuous internal evaluation
-External evaluation by outsourcing through a homogenous committee by an academic center

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The University Quality Assurance Center plays a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of educational departments in implementing and monitoring the evaluation process. Some of the roles and tasks of this unit are:
-Promoting a culture of quality at university
-Assisting training groups in conducting internal evaluation
-Planning and providing external evaluation conditions
-Creating a teaching-learning quality network in the university
-Helping to strengthen the professional capabilities of faculty members. (22,23)

Conclusions and suggestions

Accreditation, as one of the most important guaranteeing and enhancing the quality of medical education, is an appropriate tool to ensure the provision of proper education to students and assistants at different levels of education and, ultimately, to provide appropriate services to society.

In recent decades, a rapid expansion of accreditation outside its original homeland, North America has been observed. This expansion has led to fundamental changes in some of the basic concepts of accreditation, such as the role of government in accreditation and its voluntary nature.
At the same time, the method and content of new structures are too similar to those of older structures. By internal and external evaluation of groups, quality can be assessed and planned for its improvement. Faculty members of educational departments are expected to take into consideration of group›s quality and participate in the implementation of internal evaluation.

In order to improve the quality of educational groups, initially the internal evaluation must be conducted. The main stages of internal evaluation include:

A) Forming an internal evaluation committee;
B) Data gathering ;
C).Data analysis and quality judgment;
D) Preparation of final internal evaluation report;
E) Follow proposals for improvement.

The suitable implementation of internal evaluation requires to develop the culture of quality. To develop the culture of quality in educational groups, following components should be emphasized:

1)Faculty members› trend to quality
2)Holistic in group activities
3)Pragmatism
4) Tendency to respond
5)Representation and transparency of the departmental affairs
6)Involvement of group members in planning to improve quality

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