

## The Roles Accreditation and Quality Assurance Play in Higher Education Institutions

### Abstract

Accreditation is a process of controlling and evaluating the progress of an institution's program based on pre-determined and standard criteria. A correlation exists between quality assurance plus accreditation and the goals in higher education institutions. Quality assurance and accreditation standards are the suitable tools for measuring the quality of educational services. In the present paper, the Persian and English articles indexed in scientific databases including ISI, SID, PubMed, PubMed Central, Scopus and Web of Science have been reviewed and evaluated by using the following keywords: "Accreditation," "Quality Assurance," and "Accreditation Indices."

The results showed that quality assurance and accreditation are very important in higher education institutions because, through them, universities can meet the needs of customers (students, parents or organizations) in propounding quality education while achieving short and long-term goals. The use of quality assurance and accreditation systems paves the path to the success of most higher education institutions worldwide. The reviews done to fulfil the present research also indicated that quality assurance is an excellent mechanism for predicting deficiencies and diagnosing difficulties before they occur during the implementation of the project in educational institutions. Accredited international certifications can be a positive incentive to achieve excellence and improve performance.

**Keywords:** Accreditation, Quality Assurance, Accreditation Indices, Quality Education

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### Introduction

The term "credit" is an index of quality; while, accreditation process is a voluntary process to promote higher education institutions through program development and performance requested supposedly by educational institutions or programs. Accreditation certificates, which ensure the quality of graduates offered to the labor market, are usually the means for the universities' reputation worldwide (Abdeen, 1992). Accreditation is, therefore, a regulatory and legal process that certifies the educational institutions of program identification based on which an institution has certain criteria for quality education. In fact, an institution can be accredited only when it has reached a certain required standard (Mohammed, 2013). Accreditation is an ongoing process, and the initial acquisition of accreditation does not guarantee unlimited credit status. Institutional reaccreditation period may vary from a few years to 10 years, which usually includes three main activities: 1. Activities of faculty members, managers and staff of the institute on quality (standards, criteria), 2. Investigation of evidence by the Accreditation Association, visiting the campus, interviewing professors and staff, and a report of self-assessment to the Accreditation Association Commission, 3. Examination of evidence by a group of professors and peer specialists and communicating the decision to the institute and other areas (Nguyen, 2019). Regardless of the path through which accreditation occurs, the principle is the same: self-regulation and continuous improvement based on periodic examinations under the guidance of a reputable agency (Sanyal, 2007). Higher education institutions have recently

started to see accreditation and quality assurance as up to date philosophies to provide quality education for meeting global growth and outputs that appropriately meet the labor market's needs at the national and international scales (Ebisine, 2015). To surpass in various fields and meet the needs, solutions must be looked for or management philosophies must be established to help higher education institutions develop human resources as the only way to grow and develop (Al-Banna, 2007). This is possible through the adoption of strategy, application of comprehensive quality management, quality assurance and accreditation, which is a great success in helping to achieve the goals of many for-profit companies as well as higher education institutions and consequently the society as a whole. Quality assurance and accreditation system in higher education are modern systems that help deal with difficulties by addressing operations (input-processes-output-feedback) and comparing them with many local competitive standards for achieving the highest possible international level. Continuous evaluation leads higher education institutions to re-examine their programs, processes and activities to identify strengths and weaknesses to develop and improve conditions based on objective data rather than speculation. This way, they can achieve quality assurance in various fields (Mohammed, 2014). Labor market is the main external environment for higher education institutions because it attracts university graduates in various fields; as a result, close attention must be directed toward the needs of these environments because customer satisfaction has become an ultimate goal. Obviously, the more educational services, the higher customer

satisfaction. Furthermore, it is believed that quality control and quality assurance are the two strategies that can help expand the reach of leaders in higher education institutions and adopt new modern global standards for development and growth (Vasiliki, 2015). However, difficulty arises because many educational services are offered by educational institutions of very similar form and content today. While, they are expected to offer unique services to be able to compete in the global market. On the other hand, competition exists when these educational institutions adopt quality assurance and quality control systems, which should be a reason to use the intuitions of higher education system to achieve goals in the near and distant future, as well as customer satisfaction, being the goal of any for-profit or non-profit institution (Loralyn, 2020). Therefore, there must be a relationship between applying quality assurance and accreditation standards and achieving goals in higher education institutions. Henceforth, accreditation is not only a situation but also a process. As a situation, it provides the public information needed for an institution or program to meet the quality standards set by an accreditation agency. As a process, accreditation reflects that in achieving recognition by an accreditation agency, the institution or program commits itself to self-study and external examination by its peers to not only meet the standards but also continually seek ways to promote the level of those standards (Hanh, 2019). Therefore, quality assurance and accreditation standards are suitable tools for measuring the quality of educational services because the accreditation process leads the institution to innovative and modern educational approaches, as well as giving reliable information about the quality of education provided by the institution for the beneficiaries. To conclude, evaluation and accreditation process develops a culture of quality in higher education institutions, instilling a positive attitude in them towards quality improvement for the benefit of the beneficiaries as a whole.

### ***Types of accreditation***

There are two basic types of educational accreditation: "institutional" and "specialized" or "programmatic" (Mohammed, 2013; Mathew, 2020).

Institutional accreditation includes all programs, sites and methods of presentation without any effect on the quality of the institution's educational programs. Institutional accreditors grant Institutional Accreditation Status to the entire institution, including its programs. However, such a situation does not guarantee the quality of individual programs. Beneficiaries often refer to two categories of institutional accreditation: regional and national accreditors.

Regional Accreditation: Credit awarded to a higher education institution by an accredited association or commission that

carries out accreditation procedures in a specific geographic area. Regional accreditation agencies generally focus on specific areas of the country. They start as leagues of traditional universities in certain regions of the country (Valerie, 2014).

National Accreditation: In general, national accreditation agencies are faith-related or job-related. Faith-related accreditors investigate religious institutions. Job-related accreditors endorse mainly private and professional institutions (Alexandra, 2020).

Specialized Accreditation: Programmatic accreditation agencies (sometimes known as specialized accreditation agencies) operate throughout the country, examining single-purpose programs and institutions (such as engineering and technology). In many cases, specific programs (such as law) are approved by a specialized accreditation organization. In contrast, a regional or national accreditation agency accredits the institution in which the program is presented. Programmatic accreditation can indicate that a particular department meets the standards set for a particular field of study. For example, many prospective employers require a graduate of a reputable program accredited by a specific programmatic accreditation agency; since, licensing requirements for the specific disciplines require recognized programmatic accreditation. Some programmatic accreditation agencies accredit vocational schools that are independent in their activities. Thus, a specialized or programmatic accreditation agency may also operate as an institutional accreditation agency (Ibrahim, 2003)

### ***Methodological procedure***

In the present article, the research in Persian and English databases, including Google Scholar, SCOPUS, Science Direct, PubMed and Web of Science were reviewed. The necessary criteria for selecting qualified articles were benefitted. The criteria included the strategies to ensure quality and credibility of the articles under study. The keywords used in Iranian databases were: accreditation, quality assurance and accreditation indices. All dissertations in the databases were reviewed regardless of the publication dates. Using the keywords Accreditation and Quality assurance in the Scopus database, 243 articles were obtained, 58 of which fitting the inclusion criteria. Using the mentioned keywords in the PubMed database, 310 articles were obtained, 34 of which going with inclusion criteria. Every effort was made to achieve all the available resources.

Based on the information obtained from the titles and summaries of the articles, 53 articles were selected and their entire texts were studied, some of which were then removed from the review list due to a lack of necessary criteria (quality assurance and accreditation of universities). 22 articles were

thoroughly examined and included in the table of results. After completing the search in each section, the obtained studies were sorted by year of publication. Afterwards, the selected studies abstracts were reviewed based on their purpose. Studies published in English or Persian without any time limit up to the end of 2021 were included in case their full texts were available. Review articles were excluded also. The search result from the keywords was expressed in 160 articles which were assessed based on inclusion criteria. In this review, the issues of organizational requirements for accreditation standards, quality assurance, quality assurance indices in universities and the relationship between quality assurance and accreditation, accreditation indices, were examined.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on the investigated challenges

1. Concern of faculty members and other beneficiaries about the quality assurance process	Altman, 2014
2. Concern about the quality assurance process by itself	Lomas, 2003
3. Lack of awareness toward the quality of digital learning and technology integration	Stella, 2004
4. Failure to transmit a culture of quality	Monika, 2018
5. Inspection and control instead of improving and upgrading the quality	Ryan, 2015
6. Limited participation of university administrators with little to no involvement of university staff	Kirsten, 2015
7. Insufficient manpower	Lung-Sheng, 2013
8. Increased workload	Yung-Chi, 2015
9. More demand for teaching quality and learning assessment	Hou, 2012
10. Long time and expensiveness	Jacques, 2006

***Quality Assurance Indices in Universities and the Relationship between Quality Assurance and Accreditation***

Quality assurance indices can be summarized as follows:

1. Strategic management: the institute's projects should include the institute's mission and educational goals.
2. Quality of management: this index examines the ability of the institution to provide services.
3. Marketing: it is an index to meet the needs of students plus the needs of the labor market and society.
4. Human resource development index: includes continuous training of human resources to do things effectively for high productivity.
5. Ensuring a healthy and safe environment: for all educational institution staff, students and beneficiaries.
6. Management index: that allows staff to meet the needs of students and staff.

7. Service index: for identifying the needs of different learners and students and striving to achieve them.

8. Program implementation index: programs' learning outcomes should meet students' plus society's needs.

9. Ranking Certificate Index: confirms that only eligible students are awarded the final certificates.

The importance of accreditation for universities stems from its application in many categories such as society, students, graduates, labor market institutions and competition (Kumar, 2020).

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a US organization that qualifies many accrediting organizations for accreditation. Creditors seek to identify CHEA for various reasons: Recognition of CHEA gives academic legitimacy to accrediting organizations and helps strengthen the position of these organizations and their institutions in the higher education community. CHEA aims to support academic quality self-regulation through accreditation for validating the

quality of higher education accreditation organizations, including regional, private, and programmatic accreditation organizations (CHEA, 2005; CHEA, 2010). According to the CHEA, three factors affect the quality assurance process in international higher education. First, competitive quality assurance, second, recognizing quality assurance at the regional level and third, the need for an international quality assurance framework with the endorsement of and interaction between countries (Nguyen, 2021). Regional accreditation is comprehensive and shows that an institution has achieved quality standards in faculty, management, curriculum, student services and overall financial well-being (Amri, 2021).

An accrediting body recognizes the quality of an institution's education (Stura et al., 2019). Accreditation is a tool to facilitate quality education, improve academic/non-academic services, transparency in the system and accountability at appropriate levels. Reputable international agencies such as NAAC, ENQA, CHEA, INQAAHE and others have emphasized the importance of universally accepted standards/criteria. An accreditation process includes professionalization of quality assurance, Teaching-Learning, quality research and innovation. The benefits of accreditation are observable in the transfer of student credit from one accredited institution to another, the higher acceptance of degrees to continue their education worldwide, the comparison with other institutions and the adoption of best practices, continuous improvement in overall processes and budget use, etc. The impact of accreditation on the quality and excellence of higher education institutions in the world has been evaluable through its results, based on established processes that the experts' review in the relevant fields at regular intervals. The impact of accreditation and ranking is evident in registration/admission. The survey results show that more than 80% of the applicants choose their favorite institution/program based on their credibility and ranking status (Kumar, 2020).

The key elements in evaluating quality standards according to the academic definition of quality include goal setting, institute management, planning, creativity, innovation of university professors, and student ability (Harvey, 2005). Perception of quality assurance is multidimensional, and the views of quality assurance professionals refer differently to faculty members, staff, and students (Smidt, 2015). A common quality assurance framework can provide a consistent assessment concerning design, content and training (Shelton, 2014). There are two concepts of quality in higher education. The first is the implicit concepts of value, intellectual property, and performance, and the other is the concept of professor-student collaboration at the university (Barnett, 1992). Research done by the University of Jordan and Malaysia has concluded that there is a desirable correlation between quality assurance and accreditation in universities (Alsoud, 2021). There should be regulations to

ensure the quality and certification of university programs. Having a quality assurance system is necessary to strengthen accountability. Higher education providers, investors, future employers, and students are important in ensuring educational programs' quality (Hughes & Diaz-Granados, 2018). Accreditation is a form of the external quality assurance process. An external body, often called an accreditation agency, analyzes the operations and services of educational institutions to determine whether they meet the set educational standards or not (Eaton, 2018).

Quality Assurance and Accreditation strengthen the competition between educational institutions and rank them according to their commitment to the set criteria. Educational institutions make various efforts to meet the standards and achieve quality assurance and accreditation (Angela, 2018). The University of Malaya ranks 13th among Asian universities and the first in education in the Arab world. Jordan has become an industrial country through a high-quality education system. Almost all Jordanian institutions have a special position worldwide due to having the best educational standards, including increasing the number of institutions providing higher education, enrolled students, faculty members, academic staff, and tuition plus government funding (Shirazi, 2020). Quality assurance and accreditation agencies believe that organizational management affects the learning environment and the quality of education (Rybinski, 2020). Many higher education institutions consider quality to be an integral part of any university's performance for accreditation (Garwe, 2013).

In 2013, Ramírez stated that quality assurance and accreditation models are a product of Western countries such as the United States and Europe (Gerardo, 2014). In African universities, a lack of awareness toward quality assurance and accreditation is an important concern among university beneficiaries (Hayward, 2006). The findings show that managers and professors in the Republic of Georgia were somewhat aware of the quality assurance and accreditation process, contrary to employers and students. Through creation of quality control boards, the quality assurance and accreditation process in the UK requires funding agencies to monitor the performance of universities (Sayed Ahmad, 2018). Studies have shown that quality assurance systems are key areas, and quality assurance processes benefit students' teaching and learning. According to the findings, in both Russian and German universities, the quality control structure provides useful results for quality improvement. They have found that an external control system affects the involvement of faculty, staff and students in quality assurance processes (Peggy, 2015).

### *Challenges of quality assurance and accreditation*

Therefore, quality assurance and quality accreditation provide quality human resources to meet the needs of the labor market in many different areas. Quality assurance is part of quality management that believes quality requirements are satisfiable and ensures the quality control of higher education, accountability and quality enhancement. It is likely that after 2020, universities will have to implement quality accreditation of higher education institutions. In this case, some challenges are listed in Table 1 (Table 1).

### ***Accreditation and some indices for evaluation***

The criteria of educational institutions are more about inputs. The peer review team's responsibility is that the universities modify the entries according to the standards required for validation. Although, variations exist in the detail provided by different accreditation agencies, the main dimensions are largely similar. The three US accreditation agencies (ACICS (Accreditation Service for International Colleges, UK)), India (NBA (National Board of Accreditation, India) and South Asia (SAQS) have set important criteria for highlighting similarities in key issues and differences in detail. In the United States, 17 factors are used as standards or criteria for evaluating the quality of universities. Some of these factors include the mission, goals, planning and effectiveness of the institution, student relations, admission and employment, educational activities, student services, planning management - development and evaluation, educational facilities and library resources and facilities, etc. In South Asian countries, including South Korea, the major classes for determining the performance characteristics and finally the evaluation of the university include factors such as background and mission, curricula, facilities of the institution, management and student finance, faculty members, physical resources, executive education, personal development, program quality, research and development and participation in the society. Some Asian countries, including India, evaluate the performance through standard tools and factors such as:

- Institute programs (objectives, structure, budget, organization, etc.),
- Support facilities (such as libraries, laboratories, computers, etc.),
- Research awards and grants, scholarships and patents, liaison with international schools,
- Liaison with journals (editorship and judges),
- Research projects with non-governmental organizations,
- Career success of students, who have already graduated,
- Facilities and technical support,
- Academic support units,
- Teaching-learning process,
- Governance,
- Institutional support and financial resources,

Continuous improvement in the achievement of results, consulting projects,

Board membership in corporate organizations and representation in policy-making institutions (Mathew 2020).

The process of applying quality assurance and accreditation has the following principles:

Focusing on the basic needs of the recipients (student, society, labor market),

Unifying views, goals and strategies in the educational community,

Promoting active participation and creating opportunities,

Focusing on operations, methods, product and output,

Following the specific recommendations of different participants, students and society should maximize the development and transfer of knowledge and skills (Mehrnosh, 2002).

### ***Elements of success in quality assurance and accreditation***

1. Promoting a culture of quality and academic credibility is achievable through developing public awareness toward the value of quality and increasing people's desire to achieve the highest performance levels.
2. Dissemination of other supportive cultures among all the institute's personnel; cultures such as knowledge of networking, the culture of reward and punishment, culture of self-honesty, culture of work and productive progress, the culture of competence and talent, and adoption of competency standard.
3. Experience and sacrifice should be the only criterion in selecting leaders to ensure quality performance.
4. Developing training programs to train staff within the institution on evaluation and self-assessment and a degree of seriousness for doing so.
6. Participation of heads of departments and centers in the process of selecting all operations, examining staff attitudes toward the application of quality.
7. Examining the status of workers in the university and the possibility of presenting a request.
8. Study of the bylaws and basic regulations governing the work of the university.
9. Realization of material and human resources.

According to research, the main purpose of universities to ensure quality is to differentiate the necessary and preferred standards. The country's medical universities are different in size, number of students, facilities, resources, number of professors, etc., and it will not be fair to evaluate all of them with the same standards. In the proposed accreditation system, by presenting the necessary and preferential standards together, it has been attempted to overcome this difficulty to some extent. Therefore, depending on the type of university, some will be able to achieve preferential standards, and others will try to move towards achieving preferential standards and thus become better. Accreditation standards should also be reviewable periodically to be responsive to changes that occur

following each accreditation in institutions and changes that may occur over time in each institution (QS, 2019).

### **Discussion**

Accreditation is a very organized practice. Such an organized system did not come into being in one day, nor was it imposed from outside. Of course, the peer review team is from outside the institution. However, most accreditation agencies are associations that several institutions create, often including creditable ones. Moreover, the validation process begins only when the relevant institution has the same request. Major global changes have affected higher education systems worldwide to respond more to local needs, national concerns and global issues. In this regard, the higher education system must be accountable and consider rapid policy changes to deal with the realities of a changing world (NAAC, 2019; THE, 2019). Different countries have responded to this need differently by designing, developing and implementing quality assessment frameworks at the organizational and national levels. For example, almost all European countries have established national systems for assessing the quality of higher education. In this regard, developing countries have also sought to build continuous quality improvement and accountability capacity.

In Iran, the evaluation of higher education program quality began in 1996. Since then, efforts have been intended to build capacity for quality management and evaluation at the organizational and national levels. Based on the experiences of different countries, the process of creating a higher education quality assurance system can be divided into some steps such as conducting pilot studies, conceptualizing a system, developing a sense of ownership among faculty members and higher education administrators, promoting a culture of evaluation and implementation of evaluation mechanisms. Evidence shows that the self-assessment process significantly impacts faculty members' participation in quality improvement (ITA, 2019). In 1999, the Iranian Educational Research Association analyzed the effect of self-assessment on promoting the culture of quality in academic departments. Consequently, authorities set a quality assurance model for higher education in Iran, including an academic self-assessment process followed by an external review. Therefore, the quality assessment model used in Iran is an academic self-assessment that includes a set of 25 indices of inputs, processes, products, outputs and results of the department system; it contains an external quality assessment performed by peer review (Kwame, 2014; Pradeep, 2021). Two of the major difficulties is transparency and accountability, as part of the academic profession value systems that should be applied to a higher degree in higher education management processes. Accordingly, there is a need for the commitment and attention

of policymakers. Thus, to develop the capacity to link knowledge with economic growth, higher education decision-makers should give more weight to the culture of evaluation. They should strengthen the six dimensions of an evaluation culture. These dimensions are as follows: 1) Awareness and participation of all faculty members in voluntary self-assessment. 2) Wholistic view on increasing quality. 3) A practical approach in providing recommendations for quality improvement. 4) Applying self-assessment report recommendations as feedback to departments at the organizational level. 5) Promoting institutional accountability through self-assessment. 6) Strengthening the transparency of higher education, especially among directors in general. As mentioned above, one of the challenges is to consider the relationship between faculty members' motivation for participating in quality enhancement and their ownership and for stimulating the academic environment to build confidence in other beneficiaries in higher education (CHEA, 2010; Lindsey, 2012).

Improving the higher education system in developing countries requires self-reflection, which is achievable through self-assessment, which depends on increasing the higher education environment's capacity for self-reference, self-correction, self-direction, self-organization and self-renewal. As some have argued, the focus of establishing quality management and evaluation systems, both in national and institutional scales, is on power and values. In general, the national quality management system and evaluation should be in balance with the external socio-cultural structure of the country. However, in developing countries, where there is a deeper need to develop the capacity to link knowledge to economic growth, such a balance requires the concerted efforts of faculty members in general and higher education administrators in particular. Iran has been active since 1996 in designing and implementing a pilot program to assess domestic quality. It then implemented a national self-assessment program in main areas over the following years. Although it has designed national quality management and evaluation system, it has not yet become fully practical. The University of Tehran is the only institution that established a university quality assessment center. Therefore, we can consider it a self-accredited university (Harvey, 2004).

One of the important points of accreditation system is providing some indices for each standard as well as determining each indicator's evaluation method and success. This will assist universities in conducting self-assessment and inspection teams in external evaluation (Harvey, 2020; AMDISA, 2020). Probably, most accreditation organizations have not defined a specific index for the standards. University accreditation has a special place in ensuring the achievement of minimum standards in the university's education, research,

student, etc., dimensions and continuous improvement in the quality of these activities in universities and higher education institutions of medical sciences. Therefore, the existence of an appropriate model for accreditation of universities is one of the priorities in monitoring and evaluation systems (NAAC, 2018). Performance indices are a suitable tool for designing and implementing educational, research, and managerial programs in universities and higher education institutions, as well as evaluating these institutions. By performance indices, the specific functions, theoretical ideas, norms, set goals, past performances and current conditions of the universities can be examined or compared with the global standards. Different councils globally use different criteria and standards to evaluate the quality of universities, including many performance factors and indices.

Quality assurance in higher education institutions is encouraged through self-assessment and search for some independent accreditation organizations. Institutional accreditation builds trust in the academic community and contributes to job stability by gathering instructors in activities to improve professional preparation and training. There is a need for a common framework for the quality assurance model. Moreover, although quality is a major concern for accrediting institutions, regional and international accreditation structures are decentralized and complex. One of the primary goals of quality assurance and accreditation is to maintain innovation in education and increase learning and capabilities (Ravikumar, et. al., 2021). Most Asian countries have established a national quality assurance system for their higher education institutions, but international accreditation is more acceptable because of its global recognition. The level of "recognition" has facilitated the evolution of students' guaranteed learning. For students who want to study in other parts of the world, accreditation supports the transfer of credit between educational institutions or the admission of higher education students through the general admission of educational institutions. It also provides international exchange opportunities for students. Therefore, higher education institutions should apply for quality assurance and accreditation as a tool to achieve global goals and standards.

### **Results**

Universities should look for various internal quality assurance tools for educational services. It is essential to spread a general quality culture in higher education institutions. Therefore, quality assurance and accreditation is a way to find educational institutions' strengths and weaknesses, difficulties and shortcomings.

### **Suggestions**

The following suggestions can be made regarding the use of performance indices and accreditation:

- Development and expansion of databases at the medical universities level and the relevant ministry to have accurate, up-to-date and fast information.
- Application of the indices developed experimentally in a university of medical sciences and determining these indices to evaluate the quality and accreditation of medical universities.
- Establishment of a National Accreditation Council with legal powers for university accreditation.

### **Conflict of interest**

The Authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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