

Impressions on Accreditation As a Tool for Quality Assurance of the Internationalization in Higher Education: Gains and Challenges

Sehkar Fayda-Kinik¹

Istanbul Technical University, Turkey¹

Abstract

Regarding the international dimension of higher education, quality assurance is a key component for higher education systems around the world, and the purpose and functions of quality assurance must be investigated locally as well as globally. Accreditation, as a tool for quality assurance of the internationalization in higher education, is a mark of distinction for academic programs. Universities with all their stakeholders inside and outside the institutions directly benefit from the involvement in a comprehensive assessment of how effectively the program or institution meets its stated mission. This study aims to investigate the impressions of academics on the accreditation process of the programs in the context of internationalization utilizing a qualitative research design. The study group consists of 20 instructors working at a state university in Turkey. The data gathered from the remarks of the instructors were analyzed through qualitative content analysis method. The results of the study revealed six themes: Perceived accreditation, perceived functions of accreditation, change contingent on accreditation, perceived organizational performance, perceived organizational improvement, and quality assurance. With respect to the codes found out under the themes, perceived accreditation were made up of compliance in standards, international recognition, determination of qualifying criteria, mechanism for quality assurance, improvement in the conditions, and overcoming the deficiencies; perceived functions of accreditation involved standardization, internationalization, improvement, increase in performance, a tool for quality assurance, sustainability, modernization, external inspection, and reliability; change contingent on accreditation comprised of regular reporting, accountability, international validity, improvement in technology, systematization, and effective use of resources; perceived organizational performance consisted of professional development, organizational division of labor, administrative arrangements, and unchanged performance; perceived organizational improvement involved improvement in technology, physical conditions, and programs; quality assurance involved accreditation, standards for organizational needs, and in-service training.

Keywords: Accreditation, quality assurance, internationalization, higher education

1. Introduction

Internationalization in higher education has been the center of expanding consideration. Therefore, studies on the internationalization of higher education institutions clearly address issues of higher education beyond national boundaries [1], which provides opportunities for universities to benefit from increasingly diverse individual experiences [2]. This diversity triggers the change universities have had to face, and the role of quality assurance comes to the forefront with regards to responding to the challenge resulting from the change the paradigm of internationalization has created. Accordingly, the requirements for international recognition, standardization, and accountability have dramatically become considerable factors for universities to improve.

Quality assurance is a key component for higher education systems around the world, and the purpose and functions of quality assurance must be investigated locally as well as globally [3]. Shin described quality assurance as “the system to enhance the quality of education” [4]. Even though some researchers use the term quality assurance interchangeably with the concept of “accreditation” [5], quality assurance is an umbrella concept representing accreditation.

Accreditation, as a tool for quality assurance of the internationalization in higher education, is a mark of distinction for academic programs [6]. Universities with all their stakeholders inside and outside the institutions directly benefit from the involvement in a comprehensive assessment of how effectively the program or institution meets its stated mission. A variety of accreditation types such as institutional and programmatic accreditation [7], are offered by some external agencies “conducting the process to encourage and promote school improvement, thus fostering excellence in the education” [8]. Therefore, higher education institutions tend to enter into the process of accreditation resulting in self-study applications in order to meet their international needs and assure quality in their organizations,



which results in a variety of gains as well as challenges. This study aims to investigate the impressions of academics on the accreditation process of the programs in the context of internationalization utilizing a qualitative research design.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research design of this study was specified as qualitative data collection gathered in order to find out the impressions of academics on the accreditation process of their institution. The study group specified through purposeful conventional sampling comprised of 20 instructors working full time at a state university in Turkey.

2.2. Study Group

In this qualitatively designed study, 20 lecturers were interviewed. The demographic characteristics of the academics are as follows: 5 (25%) of these lecturers are male and 15 (75%) are female. In terms of seniority, 1 participant (5%) with 1-5 years, 6 participants (30%) with 6-10 years, 4 participants (20%) with 11-15 years, 4 participants (20%) with 16-20 years, 2 participants (10%) with 21-25 years and 3 participants (15%) with 26-30 years of experience in the field took place in the study.

2.3. Data Collection Instrument

In this study, a semi-structured interview form including 7 open-ended questions was used to collect data from academics about the accreditation process of the institution. After necessary validity and reliability procedures were followed, the data collection instrument was prepared by the researcher to determine the extent how the study group perceived accreditation process with its benefits and challenges in terms of quality assurance.

2.4. Data Collection

Utilizing the semi-structured interview form put into its final form after examining the existing literature on accreditation, the interviews were made with 20 instructors at the proper place and time specified before.

2.5. Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data obtained from the instructors, content analysis was used in the light of scientific knowledge in the field. Each participant was given a representative code (T1, T2, ..., T20). The number of participants and the times they stated the codes were analyzed accordingly. During the content analysis, themes and codes revealed were used in a scientifically interpretive way depending on the literature on accreditation.

3. Findings

Based on the findings obtained from content analysis, 6 themes were revealed: Perceived accreditation, perceived functions of accreditation, change contingent on accreditation, perceived organizational performance, perceived organizational improvement, and quality assurance. Under the theme of perceived accreditation, 6 codes were found out as compliance in standards (8/20), international recognition (6/20), determination of qualifying criteria (6/20), mechanism for quality assurance (4/20), improvement in the conditions (3/20), and overcoming the deficiencies (3/20) (See Table 1).

Table 1. The Codes for Perceived Accreditation

Theme	Codes	N	f
Perceived accreditation	Compliance in standards	8	35
	International Recognition	6	19
	Determination of qualifying criteria	6	16
	Mechanism for quality assurance	4	38
	Improvement in the conditions	3	19
	Overcoming the deficiencies	3	13



Under the theme of perceived functions of accreditation, 9 codes were identified as standardization (8/20), internationalization (7/20), improvement (7/20), increase in performance (6/20), a tool for quality assurance (5/20), sustainability (4/20), modernization (3/20), external inspection (3/20), and reliability (3/20) (See Table 2).

Table 2. The Codes for Perceived Functions of Accreditation

Theme	Codes	N	f
Perceived functions of accreditation	Standardization	8	40
	Internationalization	7	13
	Improvement	7	8
	Increase in performance	6	13
	A tool for quality assurance	5	37
	Sustainability	4	6
	Modernization	3	7
	External inspection	3	14
	Reliability	3	12

Under the theme of change contingent on accreditation, 5 codes were detected as regular reporting (11/20), accountability (8/20), international validity (7/20), improvement in technology (6/20), systematization (5/20), and effective use of resources (4/20) (See Table 3).

Table 3. The Codes for Change Contingent on Accreditation

Theme	Codes	N	f
Change contingent on accreditation	Regular reporting	11	19
	Accountability	8	11
	International validity	7	7
	Improvement in technology	6	13
	Systematization	5	10
	Effective use of resources	4	5

Under the theme of perceived organizational performance, 4 codes were revealed as professional development (8/20), organizational division of labor (7/20), administrative arrangements (6/20), and unchanged performance (5/20) (See Table 4).

Table 4. The Codes for Perceived Organizational Performance

Theme	Codes	N	f
Perceived organizational performance	Professional development	8	9
	Organizational division of labor	7	14
	Administrative arrangements	6	13
	Unchanged performance	5	24

Under the theme of perceived organizational improvement, 3 codes were found out as improvement in technology (10/20), improvement in physical conditions (7/20), and improvement in programs (6/20) (See Table 5).

Table 5. The Codes for Perceived Organizational Improvement

Theme	Codes	N	f
Perceived organizational improvement	Improvement in technology	10	13
	Improvement in physical conditions	7	11
	Improvement in programs	6	8

Under the theme of quality assurance, 3 codes were detected as accreditation (10/20), standards for organizational needs (10/20), and in-service training (8/20) (See Table 6).

Table 6. The Codes for Quality Assurance

Theme	Codes	N	f
Quality assurance	Accreditation	10	110
	Standards for organizational needs	10	10
	In-service training	8	9



4. Discussion

Accreditation is an internationally recognizable standard-based process [9], which supports the findings of this research because the perception of accreditation involves compliance in standards, international recognition, determination of qualifying criteria, mechanism for quality assurance, improvement in the conditions, and overcoming the deficiencies. Accreditation aims to define criteria and improve the quality of the institution according to these criteria. Accreditation is a quality control mechanism through assessment [10]. Accreditation is an opportunity to address the institution's shortcomings [11].

The perceived functions of accreditation were revealed in this study as standardization, internationalization, improvement, increase in performance, a tool for quality assurance, sustainability, modernization, external inspection, and reliability. This implication supports Eaton's [9] description of the functions regarded as "trust-based, standard-based, evidence-based, judgment-based and peer-based" in nature.

As another finding in the study, change contingent on accreditation is inevitable for higher education institutions. The types of the change were revealed as regular reporting, accountability, international validity, improvement in technology, systematization, and effective use of resources. Accreditation in education is a process that regulates the control of colleagues in order to increase institutional quality ensuring academic development in educational institutions and fulfilling social accountability, and evaluating a team of colleagues/peers [12]. Stensaker and Harvey characterized quality assurance as the main global accountability tool in higher education [13], which requires regular reporting, systemization, and effective use of organizational resources.

As for organizational performance, the accreditation process brings about a number of benefits and challenges universities have to face. Professional development practices and organizational division of labor are inevitable stages to be accredited because organizations need to meet the standards asked for accreditation. Based on these stages, it can be implied that administrative arrangements due to accreditation will positively affect organizational performance. However, it was also determined that the accreditation process did not affect the organizational performance, the arrangements made mostly on paper and did not reflect directly on student achievement in classroom work. Although accreditation is a tool to increase institutional quality, there may be situations where the work done through accreditation cannot be internalized by the institution, which results in unchanged performance within the organization. Especially unchanged performance as the finding of this study is in parallel with the literature. According to Sarrico et al. [14], "the accreditation process itself as assessment does not necessarily lead to improvement".

Quality assurance in higher education is an indispensable phenomenon in the internationalization paradigm. However, although the value of high-quality education systems is accepted by all knowledge-based societies, achieving this ideal becomes difficult due to unbridgeable gaps between political discourses and the reality of educational environments [15]. When the quality assurance models and trends that will contribute to transnational regulations in higher education are analyzed, the model dealing with the development of true international quality assurance and accreditation agreements is among the prominent quality assurance models recently [16]. Nevertheless, some lecturers in the study are of the opinion that the standards set by foreign and another institution cannot be sufficient in evaluating and improving the institution's unique conditions. Therefore, what is important for quality assurance is setting standards according to institutional needs. In conclusion, higher education institutions take gains and challenges into consideration during the accreditation process.

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