

Quality Assurance: Institutionalizing Pragmatism

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Abstract: *Internationalisation of education is a major force to reckon with in our generation, most importantly, in the UK. Traditional boundaries have disappeared and colleges are welcoming students from all over the world for specialised and advanced programmes. In this situation, students need more information on the efficacy of the courses offered, the quality of education and the reputation of the institution they want to apply to. Accreditation therefore serves as a buffer that helps students be discerning in their choice of universities and courses. Apart from the other stakeholders who have an interest in accreditation, the impact of making an informed choice is high for students, as their career and life depend on the education they receive and its quality. This article discusses the importance of accreditation in creating checks and balances that help students make an informed choice in their ambitions for higher education but emphasis in the United Kingdom.*

Keywords: Quality assurance, Institutionalisation, Accreditation, Global phenomenon

1. Quality Assurance: Institutionalising Pragmatism

Internationalisation is a major driving force in education, with unprecedented growth in the mobility of students, service providers and institutions. Technological growth is allowing increased access to international higher education for students and allowing universities to find new students through the virtual mode across the world. While there is an explosion of the possibilities available to students and the opportunities available to universities, there are also risks associated with such student mobility and exponential growth in higher education (Knight, 2008). A fundamental challenge in education today is to ensure quality of teaching offered at a university and the value of the courses and degrees it offers to students, from the same country and from across borders and continents (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2007). Herein lays the role of a third party in certifying the quality of an institution of higher education. This is called accreditation and is a quality assurance process for universities.

In the growth of number of institutions and dynamic range of courses offered (Marginson, 2006) and the media through which they are offered create a social responsibility for universities to assess the quality of the services they provide to the stakeholders involved, as public money is so often invested in higher education institutions (Knight, 2007). The stakeholders are students, the government, the industry and the university management. Accreditation puts a seal of approval for what universities do.

For universities accreditation serves the following advantages (BAC, 2014):

1. Endorsement for the university
2. Greater credibility
3. Quality feedback to improve upon
4. Better access to international students
5. Expertise and advice that can help the institution grow

Quality assurance or accreditation is a trend across the world, especially in higher education (Lowrie & Willmott, 2009). It is an activity that tends to measure the effectiveness and accountability of the working of a

university or institution (Oliver, 2005). Quality in delivering education can be seen from many perspectives as discussed below.

1. "Quality as value for money" (Biggs, 2001) is one perspective where the university has to be accountable for the funding it receives from the government and the academic fees collected from students.
2. "Quality as fit for purpose" (Biggs, 2001) where the purpose for which the institution exists is fulfilled and, therefore, the university is offering quality.
3. "Quality of transforming" (Biggs, 2001), where the achievement of a certain level of quality has to be able to be demonstrated by results and achievements.

According to Oliver (2005), accreditation has been a popular concept in the UK for some time and hence the process has evolved into one of foresight and discretion. The UK system of accreditation for higher educational institutions intends to accomplish the following (Oliver, 2005):

1. Promotion of high standards and quality of teaching and learning
2. Provide students, industry employers and other stakeholders with reliable information on each institution of higher education
3. Where standards are not met, recommend actions for swift recovery and improvement
4. Recommend standards regularly to ensure better accountability for public funds

Accreditation is a checkpoint for institutions and their responsibilities in providing quality education. Accreditation creates the checks and balances that are needed to ensure that students can make a confident and informed decision in choosing an institution of higher education. Any accreditation exercise has to address the following fundamental questions (Altbach et al. 2009):

- The internal quality assurance policies of the institution and their deployment to enhance the quality or the execution of its policies
- Effectiveness of the internal quality assurance policies in improving quality – achievements before the after the implementation of the policies
- Processes and evaluation systems that are in place to measure quality in the first place

- Priorities of improvement for the institution – a clear action plan to enhance or augment weak areas
- Improvements compared to the previous audits; changes implemented to improve quality and evidence of improvement

While discussed the benefits of accreditation of higher education institutions for universities and the institutes themselves, the benefits to students are the primary advantage of the system. Accreditation scores help students select and apply for colleges that are good. A good rating from a reputed accrediting agency has worldwide implications for universities, as global students get attracted to the credentials of the institution (NBA, 2014). Accreditation ensures that students can be assured of a standardised quality of education, which has a balance between academic quality and industry relevance. Proper accreditation can also mean that the needs of employability of the students are incorporated into the courses, processes and activities offered by the institution. Students passing out of accredited institutions are more employable as the schools inherently offer courses are suited to the needs of the corporate world (NBA, 2014).

2. Conclusion

Accreditation is a global phenomenon, as universities are trying to earn distinctions to attract the best students from across the world. Access to overseas education and specialised courses mean that students are willing to transcend boundaries to study the course of their choice. As institutions of higher education increase, corporate organisations seek ways to identify the right institutions to go to for their recruitment needs. An accredited institution stands a better chance of ensuring the employability of its students. Accreditation means that universities conform to a standard quality level and, therefore, the society and the government can be assured that public spending in these institutions is funds well deployed. Therefore, accreditation is a vital process in ensuring quality education for students, the primary beneficiaries being students, who get to make decisions that are objective and pragmatic.

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