

Adopting Self-accreditation in Responding to Diversity of Higher Education: Quality Assurance in Taiwan and Its Impact on Institutions (0258)

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Introduction

Accreditation is one of the most widely used methods of external quality assurance (EQA). Assessing by an external quality assurance agency, the institution or program can be checked whether its operation meets the accreditation standards or not. The quality of institutions is assured through internal and external procedures for accountability and self-improvement (Kells, 1995; EUA, 2011; Hoecht, 2006; Raza, 2009). However, accreditation with the threshold standards cannot fulfill all institutional needs, especially for those prestigious institutions with mature QA system aiming at pursuing excellence. Hence, several countries started to implement self-accreditation in higher education. According to the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies of Higher Education (INQAAHE), self-accreditation is defined as the status according to the mature institutions to conduct their internal quality assurance (IQA) systems and exempted from the external accreditation of their programs or institutions (INQAAHE, 2014). It first started in the United Kingdom (UK) and currently some countries have adopted this quality assurance system including Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Australia (TEQSA, 2013; MQA, 2014). These nations gave self-accreditation status to the institutions with a mature IQA system to review their own programs toward high-level of standards.

Generally speaking, the accreditation standards are a single set of standards with limited room for institutions to make some changes. However, the dramatic changes of higher education has been raising discount with this standard-for-all accreditation. Due to higher education expansion, the technology changing the ways of learning, and the cross-border education blooming, higher education becomes more diversified. Judith Eaton, the president of Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), pointed out quality assurance should respond to diversity and make adoption accordingly, by changes within traditional QA or development of QA approaches outside traditional QA (Eaton, 2015). Taiwan's self-accreditation is a response to the diversity of higher education.

In 2012, Taiwan implemented self-accreditation and integrated it into national quality assurance system. Up to 2015, a total of 34 selected 4-year universities and 26 vocational institutions approved by the Ministry of Education (MOE) have taken part in the new system (MOE, 2013). In order to increase the flexibility of accreditation and encourage institution development with diversity, those universities would be able to develop their own accreditation standards and to invite external reviewers in the panel. It is a relatively new approach to increase the QA diversity by developing the institution-based standards. Hence, this study aims at investigating the content of the institution-based accreditation standards, and its implication for IQA of higher education institutions in Taiwan by the methods of content analysis and case study.

Results show that as comparing the indicators in the original accreditation track, the indicators developed by self-accrediting institutions kept unchanged most is "Support for student learning". This finding indicates that universities gives priority to the function of educating a qualified support required for student learning outcomes assurance. On the contrary, the theme deleted most frequently is "the Enrollments and Quality of Graduate Studies". The reason behind the number can be understood from the context. Taiwan higher education expanded fast since 1990s. However, the fertility rate is declining and the job market is saturated with university graduates, especially those doctorate degree holders. Recruiting graduate students is getting harder, not to mention maintaining the quality of

graduate studies.

The study also applied case study to examine how institution build up its IQA. Three types of models to develop their institution-based standards: bottom-up, hybrid, and innovative models. First, **Bottom-up Model**. Institution A is a small comprehensive university with 9,500 students. It started with analyzing the strength and weakness to build up the missions and review indicators at program level and then these were reorganized to form the goals and review indicators at college and institutional level (Lio, 2013; HEEACT, 2014). Through the bottom-up approach, the institution has facilitated all departments devoted into the review process from beginning to the end.

Second, **Hybrid Model**. Institution B is medium size with approximately 15,000 students. Two kinds of standards are developed: common and featured standards (Lin, 2014). The former are built with a top-down approach decided by the administration offices and focused on the basic requirements for program operation. The latter with a bottom-up approach started with the review indicators at program level, then transformed to form those of college and institutional level.

Third, **Innovative Model**. Institution C is a large comprehensive university with 33,000 students. Having long history of internal quality management, the institution decided to adopt a different evaluation framework from that in the accreditation track, the Context-Input-Process-Product (CIPP) model. To respect the differences among programs, the institution authorized each program to develop its indicators for review under the CIPP framework (Wu & Juang, 2013).

To sum up, institutions with different sizes and contexts took different approaches to develop their IQA systems. Large institution is inclined to conduct evaluation in the unit of college rather than program, while small institution can manage the QA activities at program with a bottom-up approach. Hence, the self-accreditation approach has shifted the evaluation method from centralization to decentralization.

In conclusion, with fast diffusion of knowledge exchange and development technology innovation, the quick response of higher education institutions to the environment changes is an important factor to success. Designing QA methods with fitness-for-purpose approach for a wide range of different higher education is significant (Halford, Jackson, & McClaran, 2015; Knight, 2014). Taiwan higher education has made its first step to open a window by creating a self-accreditation track for review. With a fitness-for-purpose approach and authorized autonomy, the institutions can concentrate on the institutional goals and long-term development by self-regulation. The diversity of higher education and educational policy changes has brought new challenges to the higher education. Responding to the fast change higher education with appropriate quality assurance system has become an important issue to the government. It needs to consider how to adjust the QA system and pursue excellence at the same time. Making a better balance between accountability and autonomy is an important issue to all stakeholders of higher education.

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