Program self-accreditation policies in the Asia Pacific region and possible solutions for Vietnam's higher education

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Abstract:

Higher education systems in many countries have changed significantly in recent decades in their sizes and also in diversity. These changes have raised a major concern related to quality accreditation in each country: How to organize an accreditation system and mechanism which can adapt to such changes. Several countries have responded to this issue and also satisfied the developing needs in institutional autonomy by designing their own self-accreditation mechanism which allows mature institutions to be exempted from external accreditation of their programs and/or institutions as they can perform their own accreditation process. Vietnam's higher education was improving fast in size during the last decade, and planned to accredit all higher education institutions and programs periodically (currently 5 years). Such plan can be expected to cause a huge burden on the accreditation agencies (5 currently) in carrying out as the big number of institutions and programs. This paper aims to summarize the context and experiences of several countries in the Asia Pacific region which have applied satisfactory their own self-accreditation mechanisms and then suggest solutions to the burden in Vietnam's higher education accreditation.

Keywords: *Accreditation, Self-accreditation, Internal quality assurance, Vietnam higher education*

1. Introduction

Higher education volume in every country is continuously widening for satisfying the ever-growing education needs of people. Coping with such increase in enrollments, the traditional forms of education quality control by governmental have been modified into external quality assurance (EQA), in which accreditation has been used as one of the most widely methods in higher education (Chen & Hou, 2016).

Accreditation in higher education often includes two levels, institution and program. At many countries, the number of higher education institutions is several hundred, but of academic programs (of Bachelor degree and above) must be several thousand. In such context, many countries (the US, for example) regard accreditation as an optional EQA method that higher education institutions can apply for, not forced to do. Some countries (the UK, for example) use audit/review as a major EQA method to institutions and professional programs but mainly for publicly-funded institutions. In some other countries (Australia, for example), higher education institutions which satisfy national quality standards can be provided the right to self-accredit their academic programs. Self- accreditation in such countries is regarded as a means to lessen the accreditation burden for the accreditation agencies and also support to the enhancement of institutional autonomy.

2. Characteristics of accreditation and self-accreditation

Terminologies

"Accreditation is the act of granting credit or recognition to educational institutions that maintains suitable standards. It is a certification that a school or program meets prescribed academic standards" [1].

"Self-accreditation is the status accorded to institutions which, by virtue of the maturity of their internal quality assurance systems, are exempted from the external accreditation of their programmes" (Wong, 2013, para. 3).

"Self-accreditation is defined as the practice of mature institutions to maintain IQA systems and be exempted from external accreditation of their programs and institutions" (INQAAHE, 2014).

Accreditation vs. Self-accreditation

According to Chen and Hou (2016, p.3), accreditation and self-accreditation involve different evaluation procedures, purposes, frameworks, and standards (see Table 1).

Items	Accreditation	Self-accreditation
Standards	Same-for-all	Diversified and flexible
Framework	Fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose	Fitness for purpose
Purpose	Accountability and improvement	Self-improvement
Procedures	EQA and IQA	Predominantly IQA

Table 1: Major elements of accreditation and self-accreditation

- Standards: same-for-all versus diversified and flexible

In accreditation, all institutions or programs (of a country/region/system) have to conform to a common set of standards or criteria. But in self-accreditation, institutions are given more authority in designing their own standards or criteria according to their institutional contexts, missions and goals.

- Framework: fitness of purpose versus fitness for purpose

While the fitness-for-purpose approach refers to IQA, the fitness-of-purpose approach mainly relates to EQA. In accreditation, an institution first analyzes its institutional mission to develop institution/program goals and activities based on the fitness-for-purpose approach. Then these activities are assessed by external reviewers through the fitness-of-purpose approach to determine their appropriateness with the goals and mission. In self-accreditation, as it does not have any external review, the approach is mainly fitness-for-purpose.

- Purpose: accountability versus improvement

Accountability is defined as "the obligation of an individual or organization to account for its activities, accept responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner" [2] and it is a characteristic of accreditation, whereas self-accreditation demonstrates a stronger improvement-oriented purpose.

- Procedures: EQA versus IQA

EQA represents to the review activities performed by EQA bodies intended to demonstrate public accountability, whereas IQA is a QA process performed autonomously by institutions, and it emphasizes self-improvement (Vanhoof & Petegem, 2007). In accreditation institutions are reviewed by EQA bodies to assess their conformity to a predefined set of standards, but a self-accrediting institution mainly concerns on developing its IQA system for continuous improvement of quality.

3. Self-accreditation in the Asia Pacific region

According to Wong (2013), in a paper presenting self-accreditation in Taiwan, such practice was first implemented in the UK and has since been adopted by various countries including Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Australia. In the UK, however, self-accreditation is not a

formal process or grant applied to higher education. Universities in the UK are autonomous and self-governing institutions. They are audited/reviewed (at institutional level) by Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) which carries out external quality assurance by judging how reliably the universities and colleges fulfill their responsibility and encourages the institutions to keep improving the management of their standards and quality (Sywelem & Witte, 2009). Each university is responsible for the standards and quality of its academic awards and programs. In particular, institutions address their responsibilities for standards and quality through the assessment of students and their procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of programs (QAA, 2003).

3.1 Self-accreditation in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the self-accreditation status entitles a higher education provider to accredit its programmes except for programmes that require accreditation and recognition of the relevant professional body.

The Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007 (Act 679) regulates the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) to implement matters related to self-accreditation in several sections [3]:

− Section 61 provides for the application of self-accreditation status upon an invitation of the Honourable Minister and for MQA to conduct an institutional audit before the self-accreditation status is granted.

− Section 62 describes that a self-accrediting HEP may apply to register accredited programmes in the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR).

− Section 63 explains the certificate of self-accreditation.

− Section 64 is on the revocation of self-accreditation status or cancellation of registration of programmes.

MQA has published the Code of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA) as a guide to undertake institutional audits in general as well as the institutional audit to award the self-accreditation status.

In 2008, the Honourable Minister of Higher Education invited the first group of higher education providers to apply for the self-accreditation status. As of January 2017, nine higher learning institutions have been awarded self-accreditation status: five of them are public universities (Universiti Putra Malaysia; Universiti Malaya; Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia; Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia) while four are international university branch campuses (Monash University Malaysia; University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus; Curtin University, Malaysia and Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus) [4].

Self-accreditation is awarded by MQA to a university that has a solid and stable internal quality assurance system and it must have been operating for at least 10 years as a university and achieved Tier 5 in the Malaysian Higher Education Institution Rating System [4].

3.2 Self-accreditation in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong the higher education institutions are divided into "Self-accrediting" and "non-self-accrediting" types. For the non-self accrediting institutions, a process of accreditation is adopted, whereas the self-accrediting institutions are subjected to periodic audits or reviews (Wong, 2009). Wong (2009, pp. 4–5) further elaborates on the approach in Hong Kong as follows:

Hong Kong has an interesting external quality assurance system which features a combination of both accreditation and audit. The division between these two types of

approach is based on the concept of "self-accreditation" which has its origin in the British system dating back to the days of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). The more mature institutions, which are judged to be developed in their internal quality assurance, are no longer required to undergo external accreditation, and currently these are the eight institutions being funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC). Following the U.K. model, a system of audit has been put in place for these institutions. At the degree level, audit was carried out by the University Grants Committee (UGC), through the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review (TLQPR). Starting 2008, quality audit has been conducted by the Quality Assurance Council under the UGC. The objective of Quality Audit is "an audit of an institution's Fitness for Purpose in teaching and learning. The audit examines "whether an institution has procedures in place appropriate for its stated purpose", whether it pursues activities and applies resources to achieve those purposes. The audit is conducted by a peer review panel, through site visits to the institution. The panel examines 11 focus areas relating to institutional issues, but selective programmes are also examined to provide evidence of institutional processes in quality assurance…. There is no approval or non-approval decision, as the purpose of the reviews is to encourage and facilitate improvement. The objectives of such reviews are also grounded in the concept of self-accreditation, which recognizes the academic autonomy of the institution and its ability to award qualifications and maintain standards without external approval.

3.3 Self-accreditation in Taiwan

Before 2012, all universities must be reviewed at both program and institutional levels through compulsory accreditation. Since 2012, higher education system in Taiwan has implemented a dual-track quality assurance system comprising accreditation and self-accreditation institutions, in which self-accrediting institutions can accredit their programs without requiring approval from external quality assurance agencies. In contrast to other countries, the Ministry of Education of Taiwan authorized self-accrediting institutions to develop their own evaluation standards. Up to 2013, a total of 34 universities were approved for implementing self-accreditation approaches, whereas other institutions maintained the conventional accreditation approach (Chen & Hou, 2015). Chen and Hou (2015, p.1) further elaborate on the approach in Hong Kong as follows:

The accreditation and self-accreditation tracks have distinct evaluation purposes. The accreditation track involves the application of fitness-of-purpose and fitness-for-purpose approaches. An institution can establish its institutional mission adopting a fitness-for-purpose approach; subsequently, the mission statement is judged by external reviewers who determine the appropriateness by using a fitness-of-purpose approach. By contrast, the self-accreditation track entails adopting the fitness-for-purpose approach, enabling an institution to identify its strengths and determine review indicators. Third, the two tracks involve a distinct use of the accreditation results. According to the accreditation track, the MOE often uses the evaluation results as a reference to understand the quality of institutions for determining the numbers of student enrollments of the institution in the next year. Conversely, the results of self-accreditation are typically used by institutions for self-improvement.

3.4 Self-accreditation in Australia

The higher education sector in Australia is made up of universities and other higher education institutions. All providers of higher education that gain registration by Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) through meeting the Higher Education Standards Framework become 'Higher Education Providers'. There are several provider categories that use the word 'university':

– Australian University

- Australian University College

- Australian University of Specialisation

- Overseas University

- Overseas University of Specialisation.

A higher education provider must meet the additional criteria for use of a provider category that uses the word 'university'. All Australian universities have the right to self-accredit their courses while 'overseas university', 'overseas university of specialisation', and other higher education providers need to apply for self-accrediting authority. Self-accrediting authority is not a matter of provider status but a recognition of experience and capacity to self-manage critical higher education processes (TEQSA, 2014). Table 2 presents the National Register breakdown as at January 2017 which provides the numbers of all kinks of higher education institutions in Australia.

Provider Category	SAA* (full or partial)	Non-SAA	Total
Higher Education Provider	10	115	125
Australian University	40	0	40
Australian University of Specialisation	1	0	1
Overseas University	2	0	2
TOTAL PROVIDERS	**53**	**115**	**168**

*SAA = Self-accrediting Authority (a provider can self-accredit some or all of its courses)

Table 2: National Register breakdown as at January 2017 [5]

Drawing on the Higher Education Standards Framework, a provider's ability to effectively self-accredit its courses of study will fundamentally depend on two factors:

- the breadth and depth of disciplinary knowledge and expertise in place that is relevant to the Field/s of Education and courses of study being delivered and at the appropriate level; and

- the extent to which robust, mature, sufficient, and highly effective capacity and capability is embedded throughout the provider's higher education operations in the following areas:

  - academic governance

  - internal quality assurance, including processes for developing, approving, resourcing, monitoring, reviewing, improving, and discontinuing courses of study

  - scholarship, in particular as it relates to scholarship of the specific discipline or disciplines relevant to the proposed scope of self-accrediting authority

  - maintenance of academic standards and academic integrity.

4. Current approaches and challenges of Vietnam's higher education accreditation

4.1 Vietnam's higher education development in size

Table 3 presents the Vietnam's higher education development during 1987–2016 in size. The numbers include all types of universities and colleges (for associate degrees).

School year	HEIs	Private institutions	Public institutions	HE students
2015-2016	445 (223 uni.)	88 (63 uni.)	357 (160 uni.)	2,118,500
2009-2010	376	81	295	1,719,499
1987-1988	101	0	101	133,136

Table 3: Vietnam's higher education development 1987–2016

(Source: MoET Statistics on Training and Education [6] & Statistics Year Book of Vietnam [7])

4.2 Current approaches in institutional accreditation (for universities)

− Institutional accreditation is compulsory by national law

− Institutional quality accreditation started in 2004 based on the Temporary accreditation standards (10 standards, 53 criteria)

− Changing to official accreditation standards (10 standards, 61 criteria) in 2007, 5-year period

− Applying new accreditation standards (25 standards, 111 criteria) since 2017 (adopted from AUN-QA institutional accreditation framework), 5-year period

− From 2005-2014: accreditation organized by MOET. From 2015: organized by 5 agencies: 4 belong to universities, 1 belongs to Universities and Colleges Association

4.3 Current approaches in program accreditation (for bachelor degree and above)

− Program accreditation is compulsory by national law

− Program quality accreditation started in 2008 for some specialized programs (Teacher education, Health services, …), based on different set of standards

− Changing to current accreditation standards (11 standards, 50 criteria) in 2016 (adopted from AUN-QA program accreditation framework), used for all higher education programs

− From 2008-2014: accreditation organized by MOET. From 2015: organized by 5 above-mentioned agencies

4.4 Innovations in higher education accreditation

− Change in accrediting model: accrediting authority is assigned to "independent" agencies instead of the Ministry

− Implementation of ASEAN accreditation frameworks design by AUN-QA for programs (since 2016) and for institutions (since 2018)

− Open to regional/international accreditation like AUN-QA, ABET (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology), ACBSP (Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs)

4.5 Challenges in higher education accreditation

- Big number of institutions (445 universities and colleges in 2016) and programs (several dozen at each institution) compared with limited accreditation agencies (5 currently)

- Equal accrediting status (all institutions and programs need to be accredited) and period for all institutions and programs (currently 5 years)

- Limited capacity in human resource specialized in accreditation (around 240 of certified assessors till May 2017)

5. Possible solutions for self-accreditation in Vietnam

For solving the mentioned challenges in accreditation, one of possibilities learnt from international practices as presented above is implementing self-accreditation for university academic programs. This implementation can help to lessen the current burden that the accreditation agencies are facing in accrediting all institutions and their programs. In order to carry out this solution in the context of higher education of Vietnam, activities should be planned and then conducted as follows:

- Revising accreditation policies: National policies in higher education accreditation should allow institutions which satisfy minimum requirements/criteria can be granted the self-accrediting authority for their programs. Institutions categorized as National or Regional university (currently include VNU-Hanoi, VNU-HCM, Can Tho University, Da Nang University, Hue University, Thai Nguyen University) can be seen as "mature institutions" and may have some privileges for having this authority.

- Establishing minimum requirements/criteria for university's program self-accreditation: Among the international experiences in implementing self-accreditation in higher education, Australian practices should be studied in focus for developing minimum requirements/criteria for university's program self-accreditation in Vietnam. Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency has developed such criteria (TEQSA, 2014) and implemented since 2011.

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