
FRAMEWORK OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION- AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: *One of the hallmarks of the American higher education has been its quality. In U.S.A colleges and universities are under constant pressure to strive to make their programs career oriented so as to meet the changing needs of the industry and the society. The accreditation process of colleges and universities in U.S.A is non-governmental operation. As a result colleges and universities fiercely compete in the market of higher education. Institutional autonomy allows them to changing their curriculum to inculcate and incubate entrepreneurial culture through their various programs. It is no accident that many American universities dominate the World University Rankings. There is lot of discourse in academia that an educated workforce is essential for a prosperous and sustainable economy. This has lead to heightened policy interest in higher education in American universities. This paper uses variety resources, data and facts to discuss accreditation process in U.S.A. The main focus of this paper is to explore models of accreditation being used in U.S.A and how they can be useful for other countries.*

Keywords: *Accreditation, Higher Education, Quality Assurance, U.S.A*

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is a misnomer for today's mix of institutions serving a range of students with varying standards with widely contrasting motivation for furthering their education. There is ongoing concern that massification of higher education has resulted in lowering of standards to an extent that it has been reduced to vocational training, or worst a paper degree. In U.S.A colleges and universities are under constant pressure to strive for better quality. International ranking are not the perfect measure of quality but they do rely on certain benchmarks, criteria and indicators to support their findings. Although rankings emphasizes flexibility in functioning, independence, integrity, responsibility and accountability for effective checks and balances but the methods of evaluating quality and enhancing institutional efficiencies have been constantly questioned. In USA educational institutions receive assessment reports from their respective parent organizations in order to improve their standards within a specific time frame.

1.1 University Rankings are valuable

Although many public universities in USA are largely funded by states and offer international programs they have achieved only a modest gain in university rankings. In spite of efforts to improve academic standards, research influence (measured in terms of citation impact) and reputation has been negligent. In 1980 there were 1957 four year colleges. By the end of 2014 the number has increased to 2968. Out of 2968 universities 682 or more are private universities and they dominate the world rankings.

Table-1 Top-10 World University Rankings 2015-2016

Top-10 Universities	Ranking
California Institute of Technology (USA)	1
University of Oxford (UK)	2
Stanford University (USA)	3
University of Cambridge (UK)	4
Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)	5
Harvard University (USA)	6
Princeton University (USA)	7
Imperial College London (UK)	8
ETH Zurich – Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (Switzerland)	9
University of Chicago (USA)	10

(Source: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2016/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25>)

The Times HE Asia University Rankings 2015-16 released in September 2015 are based on the same criteria as The World University Rankings, powered by Thomson Reuters. These university ranking employ 13 carefully calibrated performance indicators to provide most comprehensive and balanced comparisons available and are well trusted by students, academics, university leaders, industry and various governments. In Times HE Asia Rankings of 2015-16 (Table-1) 6 universities in the Top-10 are from USA and all of them are private universities.

2. UNIVERSITY ACCREDITATION PROCESS IN U.S.A.-AN OVERVIEW

Accreditation of colleges and universities in U.S.A is carried out by either private or a non-profit organizations created for this specific purpose. Hence external quality review of higher education is a nongovernmental enterprise. In USA the accreditation structure is decentralized and complex, mirroring the decentralization and complexity of American higher education. Figure-1 briefly describes the 5-Step operation of accreditation. It consists of i. Self Study, ii. Peer Review, iii. Site Visit, iv. Judgment by AO, v. Periodic External Review

Over the years, two types of accreditors have evolved in U.S.A- First category consists of institutional accreditors and the second consists of specialized or programmatic accreditors. Institutional accreditors evaluate institutions as a whole, determining, among other things if an

institution has adequate administrative, fiscal, and human capacity to carry out its mission and goals. While an institution's offerings and oversight over its individual departments and schools are reviewed during the course of accreditation, such as academic departments and schools are not individually and separately reviewed.



Figure 1: Operation of US Accreditation

2.1 Types of University Accreditors in U.S.A

The second category of specialized or programmatic accreditors evaluates a particular school, department, or program typically related to a given profession or vocation, e.g., medicine, law, school teaching assistant or massage therapy. Although a number of states in U.S.A require students to graduate from a particular program with specialized accreditation for licensing purposes (e.g., medical school), for purposes of Title IV eligibility under the government's Higher Education Act, it is institutional accreditation that is the key.

American accreditation agencies review colleges and universities in its own 50 states and in 125 other countries. They review thousands of programs in a range of professions and specialties which includes science, law, medicine, business, nursing, social work, pharmacy, arts and journalism. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is one of the private, non-profit national organizations that coordinate accreditation activity in the United States. According to the 2014 CHEA Almanac of External Quality Review (www.chea.org) some 35 accrediting organization operated in USA. They are National Faith-Related (religion) Accrediting Organizations (1), National Career-Related Accrediting Organizations (7), Regional Accrediting Organizations (3), Programmatic Accrediting Organizations (24).

These organizations derive their legitimacy from the colleges, universities and programs that created accreditation, not the government. In 2010–2014, accrediting organizations employed more than 900 paid full- and part-time staff and worked with more than 20,761 volunteers.

Accreditation bodies in U.S.A carries out the following 4 roles: i. Assuring quality, ii. Increasing access to federal and state funds, iii. Enhancing private sector confidence and iv. Easing transfer of credits among colleges and universities.

2.2 Values and beliefs of accreditation process in U.S.A.

The accreditation and QA process adopted for American universities is built upon a core set of traditional academic values and beliefs. These are highlighted in the following statements:

- Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for academic quality; colleges and universities are the leaders and the key sources of authority in academic matters.
- Institutional mission is central to judgments of academic quality.
- Institutional autonomy is essential to sustaining and enhancing academic quality.
- Academic freedom flourishes in an environment of academic leadership of institutions.
- The higher education enterprise and American society thrives on decentralization and diversity of institutional purposes and missions.

It is clear that higher education in ASEAN will continue to expand, especially women participation across the region will substantially expand and the population will become more diverse (including increase in the number of international students, older and part-time students). As a result the social base of higher education in ASEAN will continue to broaden. But excepting for Singapore, all other members in ASEAN are lagging behind in improving quality of higher education. Figure-3 given below lists a few key criteria used for QA. A clear set of quality indicators are used within each category and they do not signify rank of importance. They are usually provided in random order. They are usually scored with on a simple 4 point scale (0=Deficient, 1=Developing, 2=Accomplished, 3=Exemplary). For examples, under Institutional Support an indicator such as “The institution has a governance structure to enable clear, effective, and comprehensive decision making related to its programs” would be rated or quantified between 0-3.

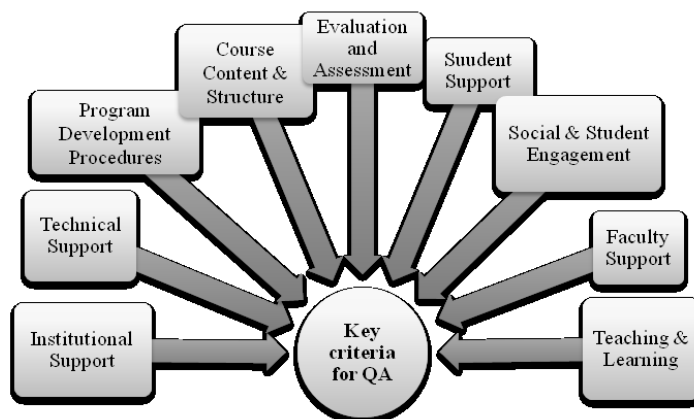


Figure 2: Key Criteria for used QA in USA

CONCLUSIONS

With increasing emphasis on international programs the least the universities in the region can do is to benchmark themselves against its peers, and yet it seems that majority universities in ASEAN don't care about any regional or international benchmarks. With respect to QA much more can be learned from successful institutions, organizations, and industries unlike our own. It seems that the primary obstacle to real transformation in higher education in ASEAN is not a lack of resources, technology challenges or any other external pressure. The biggest blockade to change is ineffective mental models. Trying to operate within a new regional context or economic environment by applying the same assumptions and approaches will not produce the kind of dramatic changes needed. Continuously challenging and adapting established mental models is a must for succeeding in the new AEC. All traditional assumptions about quality of teaching and learning should be challenged, and faculty and administrators must be willing to experiment with a range of new approaches. The best accreditation practices used in USA should be carefully examined and adopted to improve the QA in higher education in ASEAN

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