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The Impact of International Accreditation on the Quality of Public Universities in Malaysia A Proposed Framework

Natrah saad*

Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz School of Accountancy,

Sarah artiqah saad

Faculty of Accountancy

Saifulrizan norizan

Faculty of Accountancy, UiTM Cawangan Sarawak,

Idawati ibrahim

Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Saliza abdul aziz

Kolej university poly-tech mara kuala lumpur, malaysia kota samarahan, sarawak, malaysia

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Abstract

Purpose The primary purpose of this study is to propose a framework to examine the impact of international accreditation on the quality of public universities in Malaysia, particularly business schools. This is important to answer how accreditation affects our teaching and learning, research and publications, internationalization and industrial engagement. **Design/methodology/approach** – This study reviews past studies to evaluate the existing international accreditation framework. Based on the review, a more comprehensive international accreditation framework that evaluates the impact of international accreditation on the quality of public universities in Malaysia is proposed. The framework shows the relationship between teaching and learning, scholarship work, external engagement, and the quality of public universities. **Findings** - The proposed framework demonstrates the relationship between teaching and learning, scholarship work, and external engagement, and the quality of public universities. In this framework, the quality of public universities (dependent variable) is to be measured in terms of three dimensions: learning experience, intellectual capital, and internationalisation. Apart from the direct relationship, the moderating variable of financial support is also included. **Research limitations/implications** – The suggested framework has several critical implications in

unveiling the impact of the accreditation elements on the quality of public universities. However, it can only be confirmed upon validation of the framework. Originality/value - The framework (once validated) may provide insights to the public universities in making reasonable contemplation before proceeding with any accreditation. In other words, the findings are expected to serve as guidelines to other HEIs who might be interested in embarking on this painstaking journey.

Keywords

International accreditation framework, Teaching and learning, Public universities, Internationalisation

Introduction

Globalisation in the 21st century presents universities and states with a number of challenges and opportunities. One of the concerns is how to assure quality in higher education, which in turn enhances global competitiveness. This leads to the popularity of accreditation and global rankings (Marginson & der Wende, 2007) and the flourishing of national and international accreditation institutions. It is reported that 90% of Europe and the Asian-Pacific region governments have successfully developed a national quality assurance system (Hou, 2012). In Malaysia, the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) acts as an accreditation body that accredits the academic programmes offered in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Specifically, the functions of the MQA are to (i) implement the Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF); (ii) develop standards and credits and all other relevant instruments for conferment of awards; (iii) quality-assured HEIs and programmes; (iv) accredit courses that fulfil the set criteria and standards; (v) facilitate the recognition and articulation of qualifications; and (vi) maintain the Malaysian Qualifications Register (Malaysian Qualification Agency, 2022). The agency was established in 2007 to replace National Accreditation Board (responsible for accrediting programs offered by private institutions) and Quality Assurance Division (which managed and coordinated the quality assurance system in public HEIs).

Nonetheless, national and international accreditation is being pursued concurrently in many Asian nations, including Malaysia. Among the sought-after international accreditations in business-related fields are the American Association of Collegiate Business Schools (AACSB), European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) Programme Accreditation System (EPAS), and EFMD Quality Improvement System (EQUIS). Such a scenario has led to many studies overseas examining the relationship between international accreditation and the quality of public universities (Romero, 2008; Zammuto, 2008). However, to the researchers' knowledge, there is scarce literature on the local settings despite the fact that it is crucial to the nation, considering the amount of investment for international accreditation is exceptionally huge. Questions like how accreditation affects our

teaching and learning, research and publications, internationalisation, industrial engagement, and many more have yet to be answered. Perhaps, there is anecdotal evidence of the positive and negative effects of accreditation. However, more solid and empirical proof is needed for more informed decision-making in the future. This is important for public universities to make reasonable contemplation before proceeding with such accreditation. In other words, the findings from this model (once validated) are expected to serve as guidelines to other HEIs who might be interested in embarking on this painstaking journey.

In proposing this framework, this paper offers justifications based on the accreditation frameworks and previous studies. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. The following section reviews related literature, including an overview of international accreditation, a selected framework of the accreditation system, and the impacts of international certification. This is followed by a proposed research framework, while the final section concludes the paper.

Review of Related Literature

This section provides a review of past studies related to international accreditation, the existing international frameworks, and their impacts. Based on this review, the modified framework to measure the impact of international accreditation is designed.

International Accreditation

Accreditation is defined as a voluntary process of approval of an institution or program by an accrediting agency or body according to its own mission and goal (WASC International, 2022). Eaton (2012) defines accreditation as the cycle of self-study, peer review, site visit and judgment by an accrediting agency, and periodic review that forms the basis of quality assurance in higher education. The accreditation, which usually involves a culture of self-reflection and self-improvement (Marginson, 2009), often equates to quality. Hence, it is not surprising to see the presence of many accreditation agencies around the world. In developing countries alone, more than 80 accreditation agencies are available (Hou, 2011). However, the United States of America (US) has become a substantial exporter of quality assurance (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2008). Hayward (2006) claimed that foreign colleges and universities were inclined towards US accreditation due to its reputation. One reputable accreditation agency from the US is the American Association of Collegiate Business Schools (AACSB). The agency was established in 1916 and has accredited 856 business institutions in 56 countries (AACSB, 2019). In Malaysia, six HEIs have AACSB-accredited: Universiti Malaya, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance Malaysia, and Monash University Malaysia.

In addition to AACSB, another influential voice in management education is the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD), based in Brussels, Belgium. EFMD, founded in 1972, offers two accreditation systems, namely EFMD Programme Accreditation System (EPAS) and EFMD Quality Improvement System (EQUIS). Globally, there are 113 programmes and 183 faculties/schools accredited under EPAS and EQUIS, respectively (EFMD, 2019). In Malaysia, the only two programmes that are EPAS-accredited are Bachelor of Accounting (Hons.) and Bachelor of Accounting (Information Systems) (Hons.) offered by the Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz School of Accountancy, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Conceptual Framework of International Accreditation Systems

Conceptual Framework of International Accreditation Systems represents the seal of quality by the institutions, which consists of a commitment to excellence regarding the fundamental aspects such as coherence of curriculum, teacher quality, and the reputation of alumni (Espinoza, 2013). In relation to this, AACSB, EPAS, and EQUIS have their own distinctive framework that represents their strengths and focus. For instance, AACSB defines a set of rigorous criteria and standards, as well as coordinates peer reviews and consultations in order to recognise high-quality business schools. There are 15 standards to be observed under AACSB accreditation, which are organised in four primary categories, namely: (i) strategic management and innovation; (ii) participants – students, faculty, and professional staff; (iii) learning and teaching; and (iv) academic and professional engagement. These standards are built around the three themes of engagement, innovation, and impact (AACSB, 2019) and expressed in the following framework.

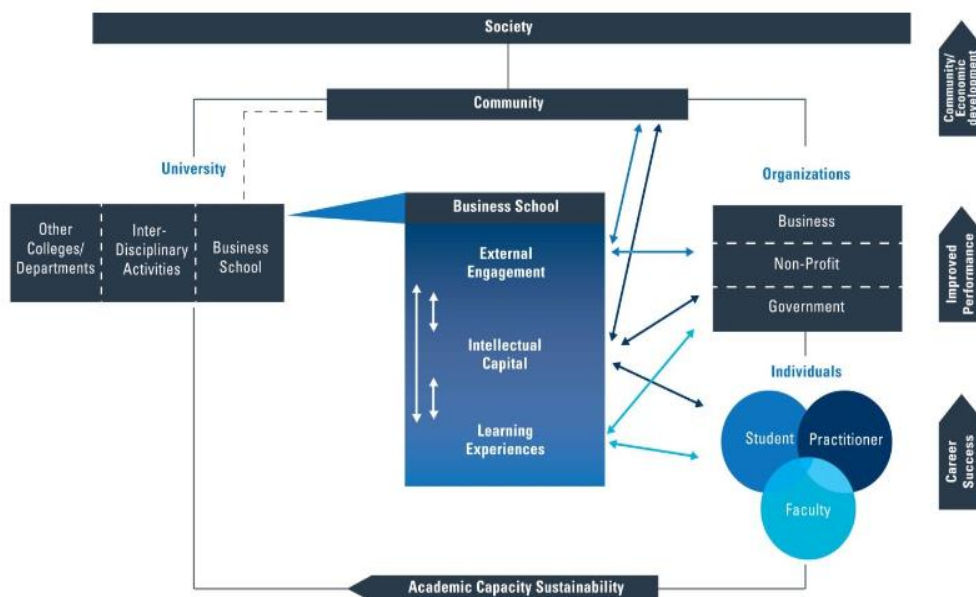


Figure 1: AACSB Framework

As one of the most thorough accreditation systems for business and management programmes, EPAS covers all facets of programme provision, from its institutional, national and international environment. This element should be embedded in the programme’s design, delivery, outcomes, and impacts. In particular, it focuses on academic rigour, practical relevance, internationalisation, ethics, responsibility, and sustainability. Diagrammatically, the EPAS framework is set out in Figure 2. The institutional context reviews the extent to which the programme is an integral part of the institution’s strategy and the extent to which its various stakeholders support it. Programme design covers an assessment of the likely market for this area of study and is linked to market needs. As for programme delivery, it should specify the student entry criteria, leading to an appropriate quality of student intake and international student mix. Programme outcomes are concerned with evaluating the quality of student outputs in terms of assessed work during the programme itself, their career path, programme’s reputation, and standing. Quality assurance refers to the presence of effective and robust quality assurance processes which should cover design and review, including approvals, monitoring of teaching quality, and rigour of assessment processes (EFMD, 2019).

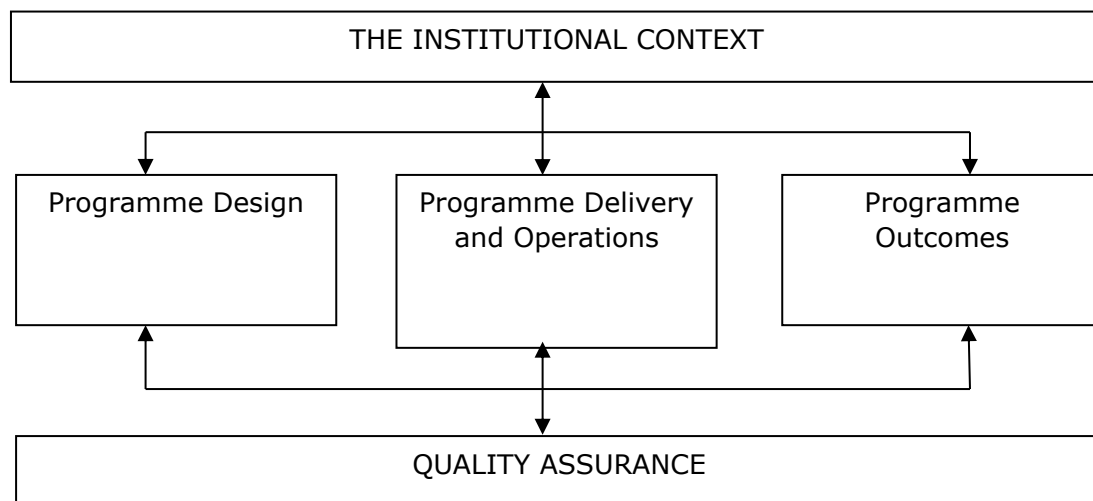


Figure 2: EPAS Framework

EQUIS is highly regarded globally as it is considered the most comprehensive institutional accreditation system for business and management schools. EQUIS ensures rigorous quality control in ten areas: governance, programmes, students, faculty, research, internationalisation, ethics, responsibility and sustainability (ERS), and engagement with the world of practice (EFMD, 2019). The EQUIS process is based on the conceptual framework of quality criteria as set out in Figure 3. It considers each component of the framework and the interrelationship between them. Context, governance, and strategy describe the school and its position in the regulatory and competitive environment. In terms of internationalisation, the school is expected to have a clear, articulated strategy and policies for internationalisation. As for ERS, the school should have a clear understanding of its role as a globally responsible organisation. Connections with practice are well defined as industrial and professional engagement.

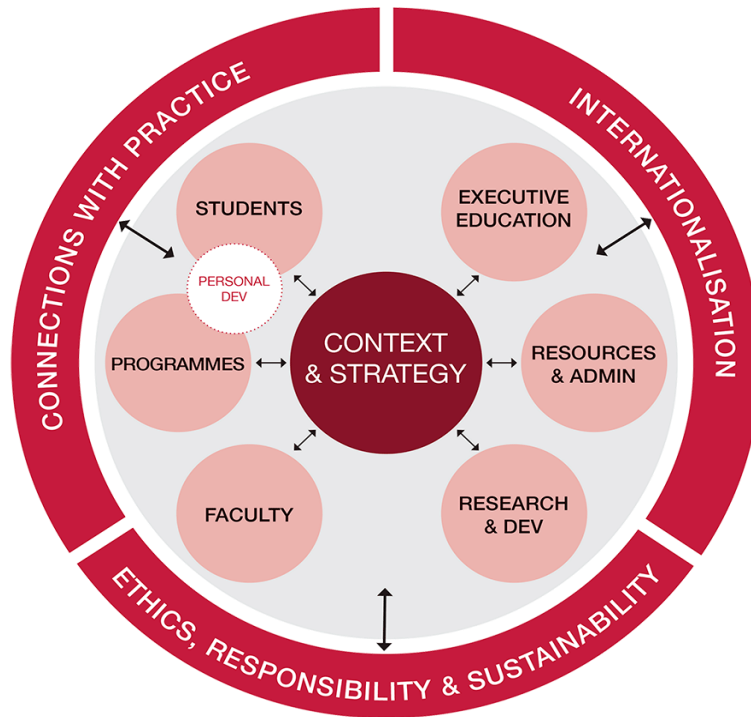


Figure 3: EQUIS Framework

A review of these frameworks provides the guideline for developing the proposed model research framework in this paper.

Impacts of International Accreditation

The experience of business schools that go through the AACSB accreditation has been more reviewed compared to EPAS and EQUIS. Romero (2008) presented seven positive impacts of AACSB, which include (i) improved strategy of business school; (ii) encourages flexibility and creativity; (iii) provides numerous value-added benefits through related reporting; (iv) provides flexible guidelines in the areas of graduate admissions; (v) faculty qualifications; (vi) curriculum requirements; and (vii) provides value for schools and stakeholders. Zammuto (2008) was of the opinion that accreditation acts as a quality differentiator and shows a positive impact for part-time international students. The researcher further suggested that accreditation protects education quality and encourages improvements in the curriculum. Durand and McGuire (2005) claimed that accreditation provides protection from environmental factors, such as budget cuts. Volkwein et al. (2007) opined that students would benefit immensely from the international certification where more collaborative work and active engagement took place in their learning. Also, they had opportunities to study abroad through exchange programmes, which exposed them to real-life experiences. Further, they claimed that international accreditation opens up more involvement in professional and society chapters.

One of the main components highlighted in international accreditation is curriculum design. In this respect, Volkwein et al. (2007) supported that international certification has resulted in programme changes positively. An

example would be the alignment of curriculum, instructional practices, and expected learning outcomes. Learning experience may also change accordingly, through a blend of inside and outside classroom learning. Such transformation has improved the quality and character of students.

In addition, Zammuto (2008) claimed that international accreditation had encouraged the scholarship of the faculty members. This is attainable through increasing scholarly activities such as publishing in top journals, involvement in high-impact research, and paid consultancy work. In addition, it provides faculty recruitment advantages and promotes more excellence in teaching. Financially, the accreditation may also positively affect professors' salaries (Levernier & Miles, 1992).

With these numerous advantages of international accreditation, it is not surprising that many institutions worldwide would place great efforts into attaining international accreditation despite its time-consuming and long-range process. It is also important to note that international accreditation has disadvantages, as suggested in previous studies. For instance, Leif (2001) pointed out that accreditation (i) may be too prescriptive and limit the number of students; (ii) may involve great cost; (iii) standards may not be in congruence with programmes; and (iv) may be disrupted when there is a limited pool of resources or improper coordination of all departments. Consistently, Noorda (2011) argued that accreditations are petrifying existing standards rather than promoting dynamic growth. Prior to this, Westerheijden (2003) highlighted the negative impacts of accreditations to include (i) promoting homogeneity instead of diversity; (ii) adaption of published criteria which is a time-consuming process; (iii) a compromise among the participants in the decision-making process.

Proposed Research Framework

Building on the above empirical evidence and research problem, a proposed research framework for this study has been developed and depicted in Figure 4. Reflecting the objective of this paper, that is, to propose the evaluation on the impact of international accreditation on the quality of public universities in Malaysia, the framework shows the relationship between teaching and learning, scholarship work, and external engagement, and the quality of public universities. In this framework, the quality of public universities (dependent variable) is to be measured in terms of three dimensions: learning experience, intellectual capital, and internationalisation. While for the independent variables: (i) teaching and learning comprise curriculum design and pedagogical element; (ii) scholarship work are to be measured by research, publication, and consultation; and (iii) external engagement consists of professional engagement, industrial collaboration, and community service. Considering the existing literature, it is also postulated that the abovementioned variables may be insufficient in explaining the quality of public universities. Hence, the moderating role of financial support is included in the framework, which suggests that the availability of funding may improve the quality of public universities or vice versa.

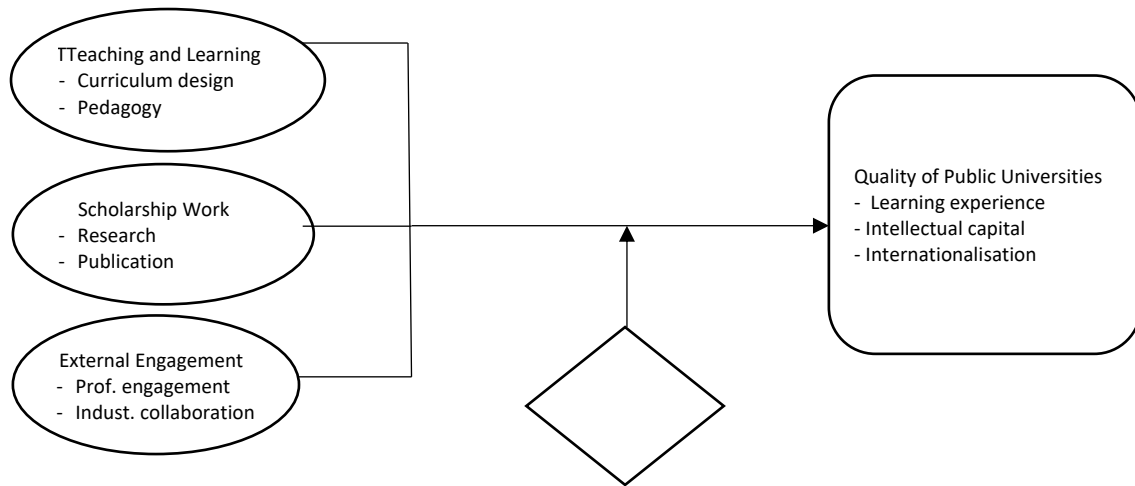


Figure 4: Proposed Framework on Quality of Public Universities

Conclusion

In this paper, a proposed model is presented to evaluate the impact of teaching and learning, scholarship work, and external engagement on the quality of public universities. Apart from the direct relationship, the moderating variable of financial support is included in the proposed framework. The suggested framework has several critical implications in unveiling the impact of the accreditation elements on the quality of public universities. This framework, if validated, from the perspectives of management, faculty members, and students will provide essential insights to MoHE and respective universities on the potential advantages and drawbacks of pursuing international accreditations. In a similar vein, the evidence on the role of financial support, if significant, may justify the need for a special budget request for accreditation purposes.

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