A Study on Comparison of Accreditation Organization and System of International Higher Education between the US and the UK

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Abstract

When it comes to the issues about accreditation of international higher education, it is needed to clarify what paradigms that the US and the UK systems belong to. Nevertheless, according to recent research, the distinction between international higher education and transnational higher education is blurred. In this research, the comparison would emphasize the accreditation organization and system of international higher education in the US and the UK. Therefore, following four questions are studied: (1) What is the conceptual/methodological idea that leads international higher education accreditation? (2) What are the main aspects included in the comparison between the US and the UK international higher education accreditation? (3) What is the causal relationship between the effectiveness in different international higher educational accreditations in the US and the UK? (4) What would the trend toward the US and the UK international higher education accreditation be like? Finally, according to the conclusions, the US and the UK both provide their own model for other countries to emulate. However, at the level transnational accreditation, if the problem of general standards of accreditation could be resolved, there is the possibility for accomplishment of mutual credit and degree recognition.

Keywords: quality assurance, international higher education, higher education accreditation in the US, higher education accreditation in the UK
1. Introduction

When it comes to the issues about accreditation of international higher education, it is needed to clarify what paradigms that the US and the UK systems belong to. Nevertheless, according to recent research, the distinction between international higher education and transnational higher education is blurred. Moreover, when it comes to the discussion about transnational higher education accreditation, information is unclear and there are many aspects overlapping with international higher education. Therefore, in order to explain the topic as completely as possible, international higher education accreditation would be the major issue. Furthermore, comparison of the accreditation organization and system of international higher education in the US and the UK would be studied in this paper.

2. Methodology

The methodology of this paper taken by the authors would study more deeply the literature review of official reports of CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation), QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) and OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). Before that, the demands of quality assurance would be mentioned and cited from several journal articles and books. Then, the following paragraphs would be the definition of international higher education and transnational higher education. In addition, quality assurance of international higher education is the major aspect of the paper and comparison between the US and the UK accreditation agencies/association (QAA and CHEA) would be included. However, the detail of accreditation requirements would not be discussed since it is involving too many issues. The points in the paper would be the concepts of quality control, international higher education, transnational higher education, CHEA and QAA as the response to the demands of international education accreditation, and several issues of international higher education accreditation in the US and the UK. Therefore, the websites of CHEA and QAA are also the references. In addition, two current newsletters regarding international accreditation would be added into this paper.

In this paper the research questions are (1) What is the conceptual or methodological idea that leads international higher education accreditation? (2) What are the main aspects included in the comparison between the US and the UK international higher education accreditation? (3) What is the causal relationship between the effectiveness in different international higher educational accreditations in the US and the UK? (4) What would the trend toward the US and the UK international higher education accreditation be like? Finally, the comparison of the accreditation organization and system of
international higher education in the US and the UK are summarized.

3. Literature Review

Freed and Klugman (1997) mentioned the quality issue in higher education and the detailed indicators of higher education quality assessment. Knight (1999) provides the public overview of the definition of international higher education which includes the specific area such as transnational higher education. Damme (2002) discussed the difference between CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation) and QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) which include the level of each one—QAA is real quality assurance agency and CHEA is the association offers forum and holds meetings for its member who are colleges presidents and quality assurance agencies. Jackson (2006) also described the detailed task and auditing process of QAA toward China project. In terms of essential issue of international accreditation, Damme (2002) also argued that CHEA has achieved the professional consensus and accreditation standard. Rather, INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education) just finished the initial standard and still has much to do in consolidate the association of different international accreditation systems.

Accreditation of International Higher Education in the US—CHEA and QAA

Damme (2002) discussed about the relationship between government and accreditation system. That is, the US has the history that state control is weaker than institutional autonomy in higher education accreditation. Therefore, the US has several national voluntary accreditation associations, either regional or institutional professional bodies, which are not directly powered by the state but the accrediting outcomes are the indicators of funding establishment. According to Kaufmann (2001), although the US has been exporting higher education programs abroad, it lacks of national framework and laws of international higher education accreditation. Nevertheless, to some extent this problem has been resolved by the raising of CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation). Damme (2002) argued that CHEA reformulates the relationship between the state and accreditation agencies. Practically speaking, CHEA is the combination of higher education institutions and accreditation agencies at regional level. At level of international higher education, CHEA’s work is including identify emerging interest and issues for education accreditors of divergent academic fields in the US, gathering annual accreditation data and outcomes analysis, creating the forum, meetings and conferences for mediation and discussion regarding accreditation affairs.
On the other hand, in terms of international higher education exportation, UK has been the major international higher education provider. According to Kaufmann (2001), even though the UK has no fixed regulation, it has a powerful agency – QAA (Quality Assurance Agency)—dealing with international accreditation. From the perspective of consumers, an agency which deals with most of international higher education accreditation is essential. In several official reports about international accreditation QAA is often the indicative agency mentioned in the UK education quality assurance. Therefore, the appearance of CHEA and QAA represent students need an indicative agency to tell them which institution or program is fitting for them. At the level of international higher education, divergent accreditation system seems cannot be catching up the demands of the consumers.

**CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation)**

Because the tradition of US higher education accreditation, CHEA acts not as an official organization to implement most accreditation works. Damme (1999, 2002) argued that CHEA as the organization to integrate data provided by many accreditation bodies and create several guidelines toward this field. Therefore, CHEA is often cited for the discussion of cross-border education accreditation papers. When it comes to transnational accreditation issues such as mutual degree and credit recognition, it is really difficult for various quality assurance agencies in the US to corporate with other countries with consistent standards or criteria. CHEA has been the indicative and representative unit for the purpose of international education collaboration. With the members of 3000 degree-granting colleges and universities and sixty recognized institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations, CHEA acts as the role of presenting what the consensus of US higher education leaders toward the other countries. Overall, with regard to international accreditation, the US tends to delegates this responsibility to many separated and independent agencies rather than to one official agency.

**QAA (Quality Assurance Agency)**

Compared to CHEA, QAA has more practical vision about international accreditation implementation. Moreover, there have been several official reports about what QAA’s objectives and practices are toward this field. Jackson (2006) indicated that what QAA's responsibility is to safeguard the quality of UK programs delivered to the host countries. Because several students claim that they didn't receive same quality of education in the host country and several critics in the press are also about poor quality of programs overseas, the demands of reporting to the stakeholders about UK higher education
quality has been generated. The major agency of taking these tasks is QAA, and QAA tends to implement audit overseas at the level of country. According to Jackson (2006), the approach has the advantage of integrated information regarding the whole condition of UK programs provided in other countries. Nevertheless, the advantage is the accrediting process is separated from the audit of England, North Ireland, Scotland and Wales. If the linkage between these mechanisms could be created, the accreditation outcomes overseas could be more closed to the quality requirement used in the UK.

In terms of audit practicing, Jackson (2006) described the two parts of the process. The first part is the audit team hold meeting with senior staff of the institutions to discuss the education scheme in the UK. Moreover, the interviews and meetings with UK students who are in the programs and discussing with managing staff who implement and take charge of the programs.

After that, visiting to the institutions in the host countries to see how these programs are practiced by these overseas partners. Jackson (2006) also indicated similarly the process also includes the meeting with the administrative staff, teaching staff and representative students in the programs. What is important is that through this part the key point is to assure that students could receive same quality of programs which are provided in the UK and the host country rather than seeing if the programs are consistent with the academic objectives of the host institutions. Certainly, the auditing reports would be finished by the audit team to present whether these host institutions have achieved the standards of granting awards of these UK programs.

Jackson (2006) mentioned that China project is an obvious example of the auditing mentioned above. Due to the amount of higher education institutions, the participants in China projects are almost equal to the half of all the institutions in the UK. It is a special characteristic that gathering up-to-date information of accrediting outcome is expensive and time consuming. Nevertheless, information renewing is still the essential aspect from the perspective of stakeholders—students and parents. In addition, the accrediting outcomes would have indispensable impact on the recruitment of perspective students. Jackson (2006) also indicated that China has the potential market for exporting UK programs in spite of unfamiliarity of Chinese government about international higher education. On the other hand, in terms of limited financial resources and the goal of distributing UK programs all over the world, QAA has difficulty to spend much time and fund on keeping regular relationship of accreditation with China institutions. Jackson (2006) recommended that audio auditing could be the alternative. As the follow-up tracking after major accreditation process, it is indeed unnecessary to send audit team to the host country regularly. Rather, change of demands of stakeholders, the
link between program renovation and the context of host countries are important. Moreover, franchising privilege to institutions for implementing programs overseas is another choice. In this way quality has been proved as maintained in the certain level and needs no intensified audit. QAA provides them a methodology for evaluating their outcomes of programs in the host country. This approach could be the way to give institutions confidence of practicing programs in different country and competing with other institutions in the higher education market around the world. However, this approach still has the technical problem. That is, the standard of this approach is involved in more complicated issues. Compared to only audit and assure the same quality in UK and in the host country, the standard of this approach needs more attention to control the factors of institutional level. For example, the criteria for judging which UK institutions are qualified to do this way would be the upcoming work.

Some Issues of Accreditation Practicing-Distance Learning.

As to cross-border higher education, distance learning would be the typical way of that. Damme (2002) argued that although the US government has been concern about creating new accreditation standards to apply to the distance learning quality control, the accreditation community finally chose to use existing standards to accommodate for distance learning. Again, it reveals that accreditation system in the US has been a considerable independent unit because the decision making most of time is according to the accreditation body itself. Moreover, Damme (2002) mentioned that there is still a new agency setting up for distance learning accreditation: the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC). However, in terms of controversy, traditional quality requirements such as the number of PhD staff have been removed. In addition, because there are divergent accreditation standards among different accrediting agencies, common process or methodology of accreditation is not existed. Because of the debate of keeping or changing several requirements in accreditation standards, the US offers the inconsistent principles for consumers to judge. Damme (2002) mentioned in the UK QAA has the regulation of distance regulation: “Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning.” From this point UK provides students more clear way to evaluate the efficiency of distance programs.

Guidelines of International Accreditation.

CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation) still has several principles for the accreditors working about accreditation of non-United States institutions and programs (Principles for United States accreditors working internationally: accreditation of non-United States institutions and programs). Generally speaking, the principles are
about consideration and expectation of accreditors when they undertake accreditation outside the US, including international higher education (not specifically mentioned what type of international higher education) including US online-based and web instruction/programs exporting to foreign countries, and the responsibilities of US accreditors when working with institutions of foreign countries. The principles include all the forms of international higher education, especially the online-based and web instruction/programs are closed to the definition of transnational education mentioned above. Sometimes the distinction is not so clearly according to current academic research reports. Sharing Quality Higher Education across Borders: A Statement on Behalf of Higher Education Institutions Worldwide (2005) and Sharing Quality Higher Education across Borders: A Checklist for Good Practice (2005) mentioned that accessibility, quality, accountability, transparency are the major items for international higher education accreditation. On the other hand, in the UK, QAA has its own standards which include integrity, professionalism, accountability and openness. Even though there are little different items in UK and US –QAA and CHEA—standards, the similarities between them are the focus of accountability, transparency and accessibility. At the public level, accountability to colleges and universities is involved in the issue about whether the accreditation has the value of indication of resource distribution. Transparency and accessibility are related to the communication among colleges, consumers and government. In terms of international higher education these common indicators could be the essential factors impacting on the value of accreditation.

4. Results

The comparison of the accreditation organization and system of international higher education in the US and the UK are summary as follows.

Table 1 Summary: Table of Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>US/UK</th>
<th>Essence</th>
<th>Distance Learning</th>
<th>Guidelines of International Accreditation</th>
<th>The Role of International Accreditation Integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The US(CHEA)</td>
<td>an union of various agencies</td>
<td>inconsistent</td>
<td>guidelines for all the agencies in the US</td>
<td>CHEA is a good model of international accreditation union in the US</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>accreditation</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>standards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The UK (QAA)</td>
<td>an accreditation agency</td>
<td>more consistent</td>
<td>specific guidelines for QAA</td>
<td>QAA is not an union but a real accreditation agency</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>standards</td>
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5. Conclusions

As mentioned above, international higher education has been the new emerging category for the public. In terms of higher education finance, international higher education is also the alternative for colleges and universities to resolve their problem of budget reduction and decline of student enrollment. Nevertheless, with the trend that consumerism has been highly regarded nowadays, quality has been a big issue in all the fields including higher education. Although the US and the UK has the tradition of region higher education accreditation in the past, it is hard to direct the old approaches to international level perfectly. In order to satisfy the demands of students, parents and the other stakeholders, CHEA and QAA have been founded to represent that international higher education accreditation has been put into practice by the two countries, even though the objective and task are a little different for CHEA and QAA. Overall, according to the recent studies, the US and the UK both provide the model for other countries to emulate. However, at the level transnational accreditation, if the problem of general standards of accreditation could be resolved, there is the possibility for accomplishment of mutual credit and degree recognition.

References


