

Current Context of Accreditation and Quality Assurance: Challenges in the New Environment

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Abstract

This article reflects the current context of higher education that fosters the need for accreditation and quality assurance. The rapid growth of technology and globalization have accelerated the expansion of educational investments and these investment need to be evaluated to ensure their relevance. Examples of quality assurance schemes – accreditation arrangements in Australia and the United States and the challenging environment of higher education in Thailand are then reflected and followed by a description of the development of quality assurance scheme at Rajamangala Institute of Technology (RIT). Its successful and satisfactory outcomes – the institute certified ISO 9000, the continuous improvement and sustainable quality development are discussed and ended up with RIT future plan in response to the requirement of external audit of its quality services in accordance with the National Education Act 1999.

Introduction

Due to the rapid growth of high technology and globalization, changes have become unquestionable in all situations – in business, in education or even in daily life. In other words, the rapid progress of high technology and the borderless context of globalization have resulted in the world open market – a highly competitive context that accelerates changes in all sectors involved. Under the high competitive environment in business, for example, there are a variety of choices of the same products or services of different brands at hand for the customers to select from. In accordance with this, an individual as a customer would need to adapt himself/herself to be more selective and well aware of the differences of the offers in order to make a good choice wisely; and manufacturers, on the other hand, would also need to make some modifications or improvements of their products/services and management in order to attract more customers.

Obviously, only the product or service that meets the customers' needs, especially the one with 'special offer' that goes beyond their expectation can maintain its own status and stay in the market safely.

This means that only the well-known or widely-accepted product/service, especially in terms of quality, can easily win the market shares. The higher the quality of the product or service is, the longer the product/service can enjoy its prestige in the market. This is no exception for educational and training services.

The New Environment of Higher Education

In the last decades, it was possible that an institution could offer any educational or training services that were felt useful and necessary. These services were supply-driven and mass production. Apparently, they were mostly in the form of fixed disciplinary content, classroom-based approach, written examination paper; and modifications of the services were based only on the academics' decision or at the institution's own choice, but not any more are these the cases in the current context of higher education.

Educational and training programs have now become demand-driven, serving the needs of the stakeholders – the national development plan, the community, the parents, the students and industries. The following is a brief reflection of the new environment of higher education.

1. Customers are more demanding. Graduates are required to be a well-round qualified manpower - fully developed in terms of professional knowledge and skills, information and technology skills, and desirable personal attributes such as communication skills, social and life skills, responsibility to society, positive attitudes and virtue.
2. Competition is becoming greater and greater. Expansion of local and overseas educational investments and the possibility of the more challenging home-delivery programs by means of electronic delivery i.e. distance education result in ample choices of the same products, possibly at a lower cost and shorter time.
3. High technology is rapidly changing. ICT development helps ease the access of new knowledge and information and it also facilitates professional and skills development in the new mode of learning, by means of e-learning with no limitation of time and place.
4. Reinforcement of international/regional cooperation commitment such as a free education market is in trend. This would enlarge the competition and induce insecurity among providers.

In this new environment, the public and the customers would need to know which institution offers cost-effective programs, relevant to their needs and which does not. The providers will also need to ponder what measure can guarantee their survival or thriving. Obviously, there is a need to ensure that an institution has the real potential to fulfill the aims stated as serving the interest of the public and of the individuals and also to confirm the institution's thriving future. This is why quality assurance and accreditation, as well as proper arrangement are brought to the public attention.

Current Context of Accreditation

As mentioned earlier, there is a great demand for quality assurance together with sufficient and appropriate arrangement in current situation of higher education. In Australia, for example, various models for a new approach to quality assurance and accreditation have been reviewed when inadequate and improper arrangement of accreditation is perceived. Eventually, the Modern Australian Model is developed, providing separate arrangements of accreditation for both institutions which have been given power to accredit their own courses and for non-self accrediting providers. This is in response to the aims of the Australian government - to protect the international reputation of its higher education, for public accountability, to inform student choice and to promote and improve quality processes and outcomes as well as disseminate good practice (Department of Education, 2002:1).

Similarly, in the United States, accreditation has become a sensitive issue that needs careful consideration and handling. The stated key roles of accreditation for the interest of the American public are: to detect, eliminate and prevent fraud and abuse and to assure adequate standardization of what an academic represents in order to facilitate transfer of credits from one institute to another. In short, the two key roles are determining a standard of quality and performance for minimal acceptability in the interest of the public and quality improvement. The debating issues concern the roles of accrediting committee compared with professional accrediting committee, the supportive environment for accreditation and the voluntary participation of the institutions accredited (Glidden, 1998:2).

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education, an organization responsible for higher education accreditation within Middle States region clarifies the term accreditation that it is the means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by educational community. The accrediting process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and

integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence and minimizing the scope of external control. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in the process is a measure of its concern for freedom and quality in higher education and its commitment to striving for and achieving excellence in its endeavors. More details are also highlighted that accreditation is an expression of confidence in an institution's mission and goals, its performance, and its resources (Middle States Commission, 2002: iv).

In Thailand, accreditation is an essential mechanism for quality assurance of education at all levels, especially in private schools and higher education institutes. In addition, new programs or new curricula in any institution also need to be accredited by the departments under the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of University Affairs. Currently, there is a lot of movement concerning quality assurance, especially after the enactment of the National Education Act 1999 and the National Education Reform. Decisions on what mechanisms and systems are to be used and how these will be managed are still in the process. Generally conceptualized, the practice of quality assurance is to be congruent with the following features clearly stated in the National Education Act 1999:

1. Curricula at all levels of education will be diversified, aiming at human development with a desirable balance of knowledge, critical thinking, capability, virtue and social responsibility.
2. The teaching-learning process will aim at enabling the learners to develop themselves at their own pace and to the best of their potential. Flexible delivery in the form of formal, non-formal and informal is encouraged to promote a life-long learning and a learning society.
3. The learning process of education will emphasize knowledge, morality, learning process and integration of the knowledge about oneself and the relationship between oneself and society; scientific and technological knowledge and skills; knowledge about religion, art, culture, sports, Thai wisdom and the application of wisdom; knowledge and skills in mathematics and language as well as in pursuing one's career and the ability of leading a happy life.
4. Participation and partnership in education will be encouraged and supported in different ways, aiming at the public interest and learners' development.
5. Educational standards and quality assurance will be enhanced. Quality assurance systems will be established and annual reports of

each institution will be made available for agencies concerned. In addition, all educational institutions will receive external quality evaluation at least once every five years.

(ONEC, 1999:201 – 208)

In response to this, several boards of committee are set up to work on quality assurance systems appropriate for the aims set. Concerning higher education, the Bureau of Higher Education Standards, Ministry of University Affairs, is taking the leading role in preparation for the five-year quality audit scheme as required. Several activities, such as seminars, internal audit pilot projects, selection of qualified auditors etc. have taken place, aiming at establishing the appropriate quality mechanisms and systems, raising the awareness of quality among all involved and engaging the higher educational institutions in the quality assurance culture. The concrete example of quality assurance publicized by the Ministry of University Affairs is the Self Study Report (SSR) which is defined as the process of learning, monitoring and checking the implementation of the quality assurance within an agency. It includes review which might cover reviewing, evaluating, criticizing and determining one's own problems and ways to tackle them in the context of the internal quality assurance (Bureau of Higher Education, 2002: 2)

Challenges in the New Environment

Apparently, the new environment has put all institutions, including RIT in a challenging situation – the new environment in which any institution would need to carefully consider its own present and future status. For example, RIT - a tertiary educational institute with sixteen faculties at its main campus at Pathumthani Province and 35 campuses all over the country will be overseen by the Commission of Higher Education under the new Ministry of Education after the merging of the two ministries – the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of University Affairs. This means that RIT is a member in the quality assurance scheme of higher education and its quality will definitely be evaluated by the Bureau of Higher Education Standards which will eventually become a public company in the near future.

What has RIT done to prepare itself for this new and challenging context? Has it ever employed any quality system in its network? How? Actually, it is the pride of RIT in having the firm commitment to quality assurance it has initiated since 1996 and by means of several mechanisms it has achieved a continual development through out the last six-years of its quality assurance scheme. The following pictures its basic principles, the mechanisms and systems employed, and the outcomes from its quality

assurance scheme during those six years, ending up with its future plan for further development in terms of quality assurance and improvement.

Basic principles leading to recognition/accreditation in the new environment

1. In satisfying the demanding customers, it is necessary that RIT know what is expected and why; and, in line with this, its curriculum development needs to incorporate and integrate the expectation into the programs offered. The closer to the demand the program is, the higher value the program gains. This is in accordance with the 'Value Discipline' and 'Customer Intimacy' that would definitely satisfy the customers and attract more.
2. In a high competitive environment, it is essential that RIT employ a preventive measure of defections instead of corrective to ensure the right service at the first time and to impress the customers. The quality of its end product – the graduates includes their practical-oriented experience, high productivity, technological skills, social and life skills, communication skills and positive and ethical attitudes. Careful planning, development and implementation of the curriculum and management under its quality assurance scheme could lead to 'Accountable Operational Standards' and achievement of the aim. Most importantly, the sense of quality can consequently be instilled in personnel at all levels, including the students and this is the key to sustainable development of the quality culture among all.
3. Infrastructure within RIT network in support of ICT development is to be developed in hands with resource sharing policy in order to cope up with the rapid change of technology with limited budget. Efficient management of the facilities is also necessary to enhance the students learning and development and to ensure life long learning and maximum use of the facilities provided. The outcome of this is the students' self development skills – knowing how to learn, where and why.
4. In meeting the criteria of being a quality higher education institution, staff development is obligatory in order to upgrade their professional qualifications and skills in meeting the standard requirements as well as the customers' demand. Not surprisingly, the staff members become more productive and challenged.

5. In achieving all the above aims, a shared goal in moving towards a quality institution is the prime factor supported by corporate commitment of the leader and all members, including the students. By means of clear policy, leadership commitment, corporate responsibility and effective communication, integrated in the 'Plan-Do-Check-Act' process, the implementation of quality assurance scheme can be at ease in reaching the aims set.

Quality mechanisms/systems employed and the outcomes

1. RIT community has identified the institute vision, mission, goal and strategic plans by means of a seminal process that enhances the corporate commitment of all involved.
2. Research results are based on in the process of institutional and curriculum development. Data from surveys of needs and feedback from industries and other stakeholders, including the requirements of professional associations in meeting accreditation criteria, are applied to direct the modification of the curriculum, the implementation, follow-up and evaluation. This development is normally planned as a three-year cycle and has led to accountability in its academic services management.
3. The 5 S's system is introduced and well understood in terms of its value and management. This has engaged personnel at all levels, including the students in the fundamental quality culture. By means of systematic arrangement in having the auditors thoroughly trained, the evaluating tools carefully prepared, revised and publicized and the regular biannual audit, the personnel and students' awareness has been raised, concerning the healthy working environment, fast-lane services – a convenient and time-saving working procedure, standard housekeeping. Moreover, corporate responsibility has been realized and all these aspects are fully developed as habitual characteristics.
4. The international quality assurance system – the ISO 9000 together with Self Assessment Report (SSR) is employed in light of its aim in gaining recognition from outside as well as in ensuring its quality of its services. This has incorporated involvement of personnel at all levels, including the students to fulfill the aim set – to be an organization certified ISO 9000. Satisfactorily, all involved have the direct experience on becoming a quality organization and their awareness of quality services has been elevated and sustained; corporate commitment

has also been achieved and teamwork and leadership with corporate responsibility are well-established in all working units involved.

5. Staff development programs in cooperation with local and overseas universities are initiated and fully supported. In line with its need for qualified teachers, further study and participation in seminars, symposiums and conferences are encouraged and awarded. A long-term plan with details of fields of studies to be focused and timing, together with regular reviews of the needs is the key to increase the institute's potential in tailoring the quality programs that fit the customers' needs.
6. Sufficient budget is allocated in support of research, invention and innovation, aiming for the development of a new body of knowledge, the learning and teaching process, society, inventions and innovations. In light of its responsibilities in undertaking research and serving society, RIT regional research and training centers have been established and well-equipped with qualified staff and modern laboratories. The quality of its research work is clearly proved as a means to better quality of life. Substitute energy sources are introduced and experimented for the maximum benefits of the public – a healthy environment, economic waste management and energy-saving, while the quality of some local products is obviously improved by means of RIT research results and technology transfer services.

Future Plan for Further Development

Considering the stated roles of accreditation in the United States, it is interesting to focus the role in assuring adequate standardization of what an academic represents in order to facilitate transfer of credits from one institute to another. The need for transfer of credit, accreditation of work experience as well as prior learning and flexible delivery is clearly stated in the National Education Act 1999 and it is more likely that this will need to be put in practice in the very near future.

Concerning this, RIT still feels the need for further development with the quality that complies with the criteria of the Bureau of Higher Education Standards that mean to be applicable for credit transfer and accreditation of work experience and prior learning. On top of its continuous development with full efforts and satisfactory achievements in its quality assurance scheme, RIT long-term quality policy needs to be conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated with an aim for consolidated

quality culture within the network. One aspect in the long-term quality policy is to become the centers of excellence - to facilitate and strengthen its campuses' potential in becoming the centers of excellence in various fields. This is not far from its reach because RIT has such a wide variety of multi-disciplinary expertise to offer. By means of mobilization, resources sharing and empowerment of the working units within its network, excellence in individual fields in each campus can be achieved. In adding the flavor to this, networking with both local and overseas institutions is an essence.

Another activity in the process of quality improvement is the development of a set of indicators and criteria, concerning the proposed nine aspects for quality assurance.

The aim is to make them more objective and concrete so that evaluation can be conveniently undertaken and reflect accurate outcome. These nine aspects are:

1. Vision, mission, goal and strategic plan
2. Teaching and learning
3. Student development activities
4. Research, invention and innovation
5. Academic services for society
6. Support and promotion of art and culture
7. Management
8. Finance and budget
9. Quality system and mechanisms

All these have been analyzed and clarified under RIT organizational context. A set of criteria and indicators have also been prepared in readiness for piloting the internal audit. Obviously, there is a lot more to do in introducing this set of criteria, piloting the internal audit that will eventually lead to further modification and a wider implementation. Under these preparatory stages of further quality assurance and the fruitful outcomes of its original quality assurance scheme, RIT is definitely ready to fully participate in the national quality assurance scheme, deeming it as one of the key factors to further development, recognition and accreditation.

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