

ACCREDITATION

AND CERTIFICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES FOR UNIVERSITY QUALITY MANAGEMENT

LA ACREDITACIÓN Y CERTIFICACIÓN EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR: PERSPECTIVAS PARA LA GESTIÓN DE LA CALIDAD UNIVERSITARIA

Mohammad Narimani¹

E-mail: narimani@uma.ac.ir

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4671-3893>

¹ University of Mohaghegh Ardabili. Iran.

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ABSTRACT

Accreditation and certification are fundamental pillars for consolidating quality in higher education institutions. This article analyzes the processes, criteria, and perspectives of accreditation as a quality assurance mechanism, as well as the role that certifications play in validating institutional and academic standards. A theoretical and regulatory review is undertaken to understand their impact on contemporary university management, highlighting the need for comprehensive, transparent, and continuous improvement-oriented evaluation models. The results of the analysis show that accreditation not only guarantees educational quality but also strengthens accountability, institutional competitiveness, and social trust in universities. Finally, perspectives are presented that point to a more strategic, evidence-based university management aligned with international standards.

Keywords:

Accreditation, certification, university quality, educational management, institutional evaluation.

RESUMEN

La acreditación y certificación constituyen pilares fundamentales en la consolidación de la calidad en las instituciones de educación superior. Este artículo analiza los procesos, criterios y perspectivas de la acreditación como mecanismo de aseguramiento de la calidad, así como el papel que desempeñan las certificaciones en la validación de estándares institucionales y académicos. Se aborda una revisión teórica y normativa que permite comprender su impacto en la gestión universitaria contemporánea, destacando la necesidad de modelos de evaluación integrales, transparentes y orientados a la mejora continua. Los resultados del análisis muestran que la acreditación no solo garantiza la calidad educativa, sino que fortalece la rendición de cuentas, la competitividad institucional y la confianza social en las universidades. Finalmente, se plantean perspectivas que apuntan a una gestión universitaria más estratégica, basada en la evidencia y alineada con estándares internacionales.

Palabras clave:

Accreditación, certificación, calidad universitaria, gestión educativa, evaluación institucional.



INTRODUCTION

In the current context of knowledge globalization, higher education institutions face the requirement to demonstrate their quality, relevance, and transparency to society. The accelerated expansion of higher education, coupled with the growing diversity of academic offerings, has generated the need to establish mechanisms that ensure coherence between institutional objectives, learning outcomes, and social expectations. In this context, accreditation and certification emerge as essential instruments to guarantee educational excellence and strengthen institutional management. These practices are aimed not only at validating compliance with pre-established standards, but also at promoting self-regulation and continuous improvement processes that contribute to the sustainable development of the university system (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021).

Accreditation, understood as a systematic and participatory external evaluation process, has the main purpose of verifying the degree of compliance with academic, organizational, and management quality criteria (Harvey & Green, 1993). This process constitutes a strategic tool for accountability, institutional transparency, and evidence-based decision-making. Certification, which is aimed at specific processes or institutional management as a whole, allows for the validation of compliance with international or national quality standards, such as the ISO series or the standards of specialized evaluation bodies. Both approaches, although distinct in scope, complement each other in the consolidation of quality assurance systems that seek to guarantee relevance and equity in access to knowledge.

Over the past few decades, accreditation systems have become a structural component of public policies in higher education. Their origin is linked to the need to ensure degree comparability, academic mobility, and the internationalization of knowledge (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

However, the accreditation process should not be conceived solely as a formal or administrative requirement. Its value lies in its ability to foster an institutional culture of quality, understood as a set of values, attitudes, and practices geared toward continuous improvement (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). In this sense, accreditation becomes a reflective process that invites universities to review their policies, structures, and results, promoting the active participation of the various stakeholders in the university community. Furthermore, by involving self-assessment and external peer review, accreditation enhances transparency and social trust, essential aspects in a context where education is considered a public good.

Quality in higher education is not a static concept, but rather a dynamic and multidimensional one. Harvey & Green (1993) define it in five dimensions: exceptionality, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation. These dimensions reflect the complexity of contemporary university systems, where quality depends not only on academic excellence but also on the institutional capacity to respond to the needs of the environment, foster equity, and ensure the social relevance of knowledge. Therefore, accreditation and certification processes must be based on a comprehensive approach that combines assessment, institutional learning, and social responsibility.

Today, the challenges of higher education transcend traditional assessment parameters. Technological transformations, the virtualization of learning, new forms of knowledge production, and the demand for digital skills require more flexible and adaptive quality assurance models (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2021). Universities are being called upon to redefine their assessment policies to incorporate criteria linked to pedagogical innovation, environmental sustainability, internationalization, and social relevance. In this scenario, accreditation ceases to be a one-time act of verification and becomes an ongoing process of organizational learning (Barnett, 1992).

Likewise, certification gains relevance as an institutional strengthening strategy. By adopting internationally recognized standards, universities are able to optimize their administrative processes, improve their governance, and strengthen the trust of their stakeholders (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This approach contributes to the professionalization of university management, promoting a vision of quality that transcends regulatory compliance and is oriented toward the creation of public value. The integration of accreditation and certification, therefore, consolidates a holistic vision of quality that encompasses both academic and administrative aspects, generating synergies between strategic management and the educational mission of universities.

Likewise, it is essential to recognize that quality assurance processes must adapt to the diversity of institutional contexts. Universities, depending on their size, mission, and academic orientation, present heterogeneous realities that require differentiated assessment approaches. In this sense, accreditation models must be flexible and respectful of university autonomy, avoiding the imposition of homogeneous standards that could limit innovation or contextual relevance (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). Quality accreditation must balance the need for comparability with the recognition of institutional diversity, promoting mutual learning and collaborative strengthening among institutions.

Finally, accreditation and certification are consolidated as strategic tools in contemporary university management. Beyond their oversight or recognition function, these processes contribute to building more transparent, sustainable, and committed universities for human development. Their impact transcends the institutional sphere, impacting the development of critical citizens, the generation of relevant knowledge, and the consolidation of more equitable educational systems. Therefore, studying the current perspectives on accreditation and certification in higher education is essential to understanding the challenges facing 21st-century universities in their dual mission of ensuring quality and responding to the social demands for knowledge.

DEVELOPMENT

Accreditation can be defined as a systematic process by which an external agency verifies that an institution or academic program meets certain pre-established quality criteria. This procedure involves self-assessment, external peer review, and the issuance of a public opinion recognizing the level of compliance achieved (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994).

Through this mechanism, institutions not only obtain formal recognition but also develop the capacity to critically reflect on their performance, their educational processes, and their academic management policies. Accreditation, therefore, is not an end in itself, but rather an opportunity to build a culture of quality sustained by evidence, participation, and institutional transparency.

Certification, on the other hand, focuses on validating specific processes—academic, administrative, or management—in accordance with international quality standards, such as the ISO 9001 series, which seek standardization, efficiency, and continuous improvement. Unlike accreditation, which has a global focus on the institution or program, certification recognizes compliance with specific technical or procedural requirements, generating added value in key areas such as administrative management, student support, research processes, and community engagement. In this sense, certification becomes a strategic component of quality assurance, promoting management practices oriented toward efficiency and transparency (Tam, 2001).

University quality management thrives on these processes, as they promote a culture of ongoing assessment and accountability. Accreditation fosters strategic planning, curriculum updating, teacher training, and the consolidation of internal quality assurance systems (Harvey, 2006). This approach encourages universities to adopt more participatory and evidence-based governance models, in which the evaluation of institutional performance is aligned with the organization's vision and mission. Furthermore, accreditation promotes internationalization by

facilitating the recognition of degrees, academic mobility, and inter-university cooperation between countries with compatible assessment systems (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Cruz-Colín et al. (2024) highlight that the culture of assessment in educational institutions is a key factor for the success of accreditation processes. Their study shows that implementing systematic self-assessment practices, indicator review, and continuous feedback strengthens institutions' capacity to ensure quality, promoting an internal understanding of accreditation standards and consolidating an institutional commitment to continuous improvement.

Duarte & Vardasca (2023) present a review of accreditation systems in higher education, highlighting that the diversity of regulatory and normative approaches reflects cultural, political, and structural differences between countries. They point out that the effectiveness of accreditation systems depends both on the clarity of the standards and on the capacity of institutions to internalize and apply them, which highlights the need for flexible strategies adapted to specific contexts.

Miranda (2025) emphasizes that research on accreditation and quality assurance has shown significant advances in assessment methodologies, but gaps persist in understanding their impact at the institutional and regional levels. Her systematic review proposes a research agenda focused on integrating accreditation practices with the improvement of teaching-learning processes and sustained institutional development.

González Bravo et al. (2022) provide a perspective on quality management and technological acceptance during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting that the interaction between managers, teachers, and technological mediators influenced the implementation of quality standards. Their findings show that adaptation to change, ongoing training, and staff management are essential to maintaining educational quality in hybrid and digital environments.

Williams & Harvey (2015) present an analysis of quality assurance frameworks in higher education, emphasizing that accreditation constitutes a central mechanism for ensuring transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement. Their approach highlights the relationship between institutional policies, national and international standards, and the need for active engagement from all institutional stakeholders.

Iqbal et al. (2025) explore how academic accreditation mediates the relationship between quality management initiatives and institutional performance. Their study of universities in the United Arab Emirates shows that accreditation not only ensures compliance with standards but also acts as a catalyst for strategic

improvement, fostering efficiency, innovation, and educational sustainability.

Lazăr et al. (2007) offer a conceptual glossary that facilitates understanding of the fundamental terms of quality assurance and accreditation. This resource is valuable for standardizing criteria, clarifying definitions, and establishing a common language for implementing educational quality policies at the institutional and national levels.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2023) provides concrete guidelines on the evidence required to meet accreditation standards. This document serves as an operational reference for institutions seeking to demonstrate compliance, reinforcing the importance of documenting processes, outcomes, and continuous improvement within an internationally recognized regulatory framework.

Manarbek & Kondybayeva (2024) analyze quality assurance practices at US universities and propose lessons applicable to Kazakhstan, highlighting the need to adapt international models to local contexts. Their work emphasizes the importance of clear policies, teacher training, efficient institutional management, and evidence-based evaluation to ensure sustainable results.

Chovriy et al. (2025) argue that the design of digital environments in higher education is crucial for the training of competent specialists. They emphasize that the integration of technological tools, virtual platforms, and digital assessment systems strengthens educational quality and facilitates compliance with accreditation standards in contemporary contexts.

Casimiro Zavale (2022) analyzes the challenges of accreditation at Eduardo Mondlane University in Mozambique, highlighting structural barriers, limited resources, and cultural resistance. His study shows that, even in contexts with limitations, the implementation of quality standards is possible through strategic planning, institutional participation, and contextual adaptation of accreditation processes.

New England Commission of Higher Education (2020) establishes the accreditation standards that guide educational quality, emphasizing areas such as institutional mission, strategic planning, human resources, and learning assessment. This document serves as a normative reference to ensure that institutions meet minimum criteria and promote the continuous improvement of their academic programs.

Alzafari & Ursin (2019) investigate the implementation of quality assurance standards in Europe, concluding that the institutional, cultural, and regulatory context significantly influences the effectiveness of accreditation. They emphasize that educational programs require adaptive approaches that integrate academic community engagement, external

assessment, and internal improvement mechanisms to achieve sustainable results.

The contributions analyzed allow us to conclude that accreditation and quality assurance in higher education are strategic and multifaceted processes that transcend the mere verification of compliance with standards. Their effectiveness depends on the integration of institutional policies, self-assessment practices, documented evidence, and the active participation of all academic stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, and students. A culture of institutional assessment becomes a key driver of continuous improvement, as it facilitates the internalization of standards and promotes a sustained commitment to educational excellence.

Furthermore, the institutional, cultural, and regulatory context significantly influences the implementation of accreditation systems, making it necessary to adapt methodologies and practices to local and regional characteristics. The incorporation of technologies, digital environments, and information management tools contributes to optimizing evaluation processes, strengthening transparency, and promoting evidence-based decision-making.

Accreditation also acts as a catalyst for institutional innovation, improving efficiency, learning quality, autonomy, and academic collaboration. Finally, ensuring the sustainability of educational quality requires ongoing training, the development of institutional competencies, and comprehensive strategies that connect the pedagogical, technological, and socio-emotional dimensions of learning, ensuring that students are prepared to face complex challenges in a globalized and dynamic environment.

From a management perspective, accreditation becomes a strategic tool for informed decision-making (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). Universities that integrate a culture of quality into their organizational structure achieve greater efficiency, credibility, and responsiveness to environmental demands. However, to avoid bureaucratization, accreditation and certification processes must focus on generating useful knowledge for institutional improvement, rather than on mere document accumulation. Consequently, evaluation should focus not only on quantitative indicators but also on the quality of pedagogical processes, the relevance of research, and effective engagement with society (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Current perspectives on quality management in higher education point toward more flexible, inclusive, and sustainable models, in which innovation, digitalization, and international cooperation play a central role. The contemporary university faces the challenge of balancing academic excellence with social responsibility and the relevance of its educational offerings (Harvey, 2006). In this sense, quality management must be oriented toward strengthening

institutional capacities to anticipate and respond to environmental changes, ensuring the relevance of knowledge and the comprehensive development of students.

One of the emerging pillars of new accreditation perspectives is the digital transformation of assessment processes. Digital platforms, learning management systems (LMS), and virtual assessment environments offer opportunities to develop more agile, collaborative, and data-driven models (ENQA, 2020). Digitization also makes it possible to integrate indicators of academic performance, scientific productivity, and student satisfaction in real time, which strengthens institutional analytical capacity and strategic decision-making.

Another key aspect is the focus on sustainability. University quality is no longer measured solely in terms of efficiency or productivity, but also in terms of their commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), educational equity, and environmental responsibility (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2021). Accredited universities must demonstrate how their management contributes to local development, social innovation, and the development of citizens committed to collective well-being.

Finally, university quality management of the future requires an integrative and participatory approach, in which faculty, students, administrators, and external stakeholders share the responsibility for maintaining and improving institutional standards. Accreditation should be conceived as a continuous institutional learning process that fosters creativity, critical reflection, and adaptation to global challenges. Only through evidence-based management, collaboration, and ethics will it be possible to consolidate higher education systems capable of ensuring excellence and relevance in a constantly changing world (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

Higher education institutions currently face the need to demonstrate their quality, relevance, and transparency to society in a context of globalization of knowledge and expansion of academic offerings. Accreditation and certification are presented as strategic tools that not only validate compliance with standards but also promote self-regulation and continuous improvement. These processes allow institutional objectives to be aligned with learning outcomes and social demands, strengthening institutional management and fostering a culture of assessment that engages administrators, faculty, and students in the continuous improvement of educational quality.

Likewise, accreditation and certification function as catalysts for innovation and professionalization in higher education. The implementation of international and national standards boosts administrative

efficiency, transparency, and academic cooperation, facilitating internationalization, student mobility, and degree comparability. The integration of technologies and digital environments strengthens evidence-based assessment and enables more agile, flexible, and adaptive quality assurance models capable of responding to technological, pedagogical, and social changes. These processes also promote the social relevance of knowledge and the sustainable development of institutions.

University quality management requires a comprehensive, participatory, and ethical approach, in which accreditation is conceived as a continuous process of institutional learning. Sustained quality depends on ongoing training, skills updating, pedagogical innovation, and collaboration among all academic stakeholders. In this way, higher education balances academic excellence with social responsibility, strengthening its mission to educate critical and engaged citizens and ensuring that its programs and processes are relevant, equitable, and capable of meeting the challenges of a globalized and dynamic environment.

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Conflicts of Interest:

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author Contribution:

Mohammad Narimani: conception and design of the study, data acquisition, analysis and interpretation, manuscript writing, critical review of content, statistical analysis, and overall supervision of the study.