



Academic Accreditation and Ways of Applying It in Universities (Review article)

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Introduction

Many systems and governments have directed their focus toward improving and developing the educational system, as it is the true measure of a nation's civilization in the present time. It is the sole option in a rapidly changing world through which we can shape the future we want, predicting a generation capable of interacting with the realities and changes of the era and solving problems. This is how a civilization is built for a nation blessed by God with knowledge and faith, competing with advanced countries in fields such as medicine, industry, engineering, and the sciences based on creativity and innovation.

Therefore, it was necessary to shift the perspective on education from a traditional view based on memorization and understanding to a broader, more comprehensive concept based on awareness of the changes and developments that society faces, and the ability to deal with and optimally employ these changes. This can only be achieved by building an educational system that raises the level of individuals, led by creative leadership that utilizes all resources and energies to serve students and improve their scientific and practical performance.

Thus, the quality of this education is the real criterion that efforts should be focused on achieving, as it is the means for reaching the level of advanced countries. The UNESCO report of 2005 stated that improving the quality of education helps achieve a wide range of economic and social development goals. Higher education institutions have become the nucleus for economic and civilizational development and the progress of nations.

Due to the increase in higher education institutions and the intense competition between private and public sector institutions, as well as open education institutions, it has become essential to regulate and improve the quality of higher education according to global academic standards. The entry of many developed and developing countries into higher education has called for the development of diverse and high-quality higher education programs capable of ensuring the quality of their outcomes and aligning them with the requirements of the labor market and ever-changing needs. There is no doubt that achieving alignment with market needs will inevitably lead to the application of quality standards within the global competition to attract outstanding talent. This can only be accomplished through the implementation of academic accreditation standards in universities and educational institutions in general.

First: The Historical Development of the Concept of Academic Accreditation The first signs of accreditation in higher education institutions began in the United States (Carol et al., 2003), specifically in 1885, when the first association of schools and colleges was established (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002), attracting hundreds of colleges to voluntarily work with these associations in New England. These associations had a widespread influence, and their decisions



affected funding decisions, financial aid from government or local agencies, the recognition of certificates issued by educational institutions, hiring of graduates, guiding students to colleges and universities, and licensing for professions requiring practical training after graduation.

Later, in 1992, responsibility for accreditation in the United Kingdom was entrusted to the higher education funding councils in England and Wales. These councils evaluate the quality of education in higher education institutions, and the concept spread to most countries around the world, including European countries, Japan, and some Arab countries.

In the 1990s, the term "accreditation" began to be used in Arabic writings due to the widespread use of quality concepts, which seemed to align with and interlock in terms of content and procedures. Thus, accreditation is a process through which an educational institution undergoes an evaluation through a set of procedures, providing a comprehensive educational overview of the institution, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and ultimately determining the efficiency and eligibility of the institution to fulfill its responsibilities.

Academic accreditation can be defined as the practices carried out by an external body, an accrediting agency, that helps an educational institution achieve academic accreditation through a process of evaluation and improvement of its educational objectives. Accreditation in higher education refers to a system of integrated components aimed at inspecting and evaluating, especially external evaluation of the quality level of education applied in higher education institutions, to determine the ability of these institutions to achieve quality improvement and assurance. This task is carried out by institutions or agencies created specifically for this purpose and is usually non-governmental or at least guaranteed to be neutral and non-profit. (Ameen, 2011: 12-13)

Academic accreditation for educational programs and institutions is the best option to ensure that education is moving in the right direction and achieving its objectives effectively (Ameen, 286, 2012).

Several definitions of the concept of academic accreditation can be summarized:

- It has been defined as a driving tool and a distinctive characteristic that leads to the formal approval of the institution or programs evaluated by a pre-established legitimate agency meeting agreed-upon standards, ultimately granting the institution or college accreditation from the responsible authorities (Damme, 2004, 129).
- It is defined as the process by which the educational organization, programs, and specialized educational units evaluate their educational services, achieve fair evaluation by experts, and accomplish their goals in light of the standards of the accrediting agency (Hussein, 171, 2005).
- According to Yong, it is defined as a voluntary, non-governmental activity performed by academic accreditation associations established by U.S. higher education institutions to encourage and assist these institutions in evaluating and improving their educational program quality, granting public recognition to those institutions and programs that meet or exceed the minimum standards of educational competence (Yong, 2005).
- According to Makhaymer (2005), academic accreditation refers to a set of activities, procedures, standards, and criteria used to examine and evaluate educational and research institutions to verify that they meet the academic, organizational, and administrative conditions necessary to achieve the institutions' vision, mission, and objectives in the fields

of education, research, knowledge development, and community service in alignment with globally recognized standards (Al-Maliki, 2010: 14-15).

Second: The Difference Between Accreditation, Qualification, Licensing, and Recognition

There is a distinction between accreditation and other terms such as qualification, licensing, and recognition. The differences between these terms are clarified as follows (Al-Najjar & Jawad, 2013: 141-142):

1. **Accreditation:** Accreditation refers to the organized process used to determine the extent to which agreed-upon educational objectives are achieved. It focuses on the final outcomes, which are reflected in the students' performance.
2. **Qualification:** This is a process through which agencies or non-governmental organizations grant specialized knowledge to individuals who meet specific predetermined criteria. It is also the process of granting authorization from global organizations and agencies to any institution that meets the standards set by them.
3. **Licensing:** Licensing is the process through which non-governmental agencies grant authorization to individuals or organizations that meet specific standards and requirements. There are two types of licensing: institutional licensing, which is granted to institutions, and personal licensing, which is granted to individuals.
4. **Recognition:** Recognition is the process by which an individual or institution obtains an academic degree in a country as a basis for entering the labor market at a general level. At a specific level, it focuses on renewing learning experiences at a particular university.

Third: The Importance of Academic Accreditation

The U.S. Council for Higher Education Accreditation has emphasized the importance of accreditation in the following aspects (Ameen, 2012):

1. **Legitimacy and Legal Status:** Accreditation gives legitimacy and legal recognition to accredited institutions and programs, allowing them the opportunity to receive federal grants and loans to finance these institutions and programs. Accredited institutions have better chances of obtaining these grants compared to non-accredited institutions.
2. **Private Sector Support:** Accredited institutions are more likely to receive support from private institutions, grants, and funding for research and studies they conduct.
3. **Protection of Rights:** Accreditation ensures the protection of the rights of students and faculty members, holding violators accountable. Accredited institutions are typically more transparent in their dealings than non-accredited ones.
4. **International Recognition:** Accredited institutions are internationally recognized, making it easier to obtain licenses, participate in conferences, and compete for opportunities such as admissions and transfers to other universities worldwide.
5. **Effective Resource Management:** Accredited institutions and programs are effective in managing resources, which helps them achieve high-quality objectives.

Fourth: Objectives of Academic Accreditation

The main goal of accreditation for higher education institutions is to maintain quality standards while balancing the autonomy of the institution with the service of community interests, striving for integration between these two dimensions to spread knowledge. This requires periodic

adjustments to accreditation guidelines as a means of evaluation, leading to self-development and the reformulation of policies to align with future needs and changes.

The U.S. Department of Education has defined the objectives of academic accreditation as follows (Ameen, 2011: 293):

1. **Helping New Students:** Assisting new students in enrolling in higher education institutions that offer acceptable programs.
2. **Facilitating Student Transfers:** Helping higher education institutions define acceptable criteria for transferring students from one institution to another.
3. **Optimal Investment of Funding:** Assisting in determining suitable institutions or educational programs for investing in public and private funding.
4. **Protection from External and Internal Pressures:** Protecting higher education institutions from external and internal pressures.
5. **Self-Improvement for Low-Performing Institutions:** Encouraging institutions with poor performance to develop self-improvement goals and raise standards in higher education institutions.
6. **Eligibility for Government Grants:** Ensuring eligibility for government assistance as a funding source among other financial resources.

Fifth: Types of Academic Accreditation

Researchers have identified three types of academic accreditation, which can be classified as follows (Al-Sayed & Al-Hilali, 2009: 218):

1. **Institutional (General) Accreditation:** This is the process of evaluating the quality of an institution's educational level. It involves granting the institution recognition for meeting the required conditions and specifications, provided that this is done according to predefined standards. As defined by Majid (2008), it refers to accrediting the institution as a whole according to specific criteria related to the adequacy of facilities and resources, including staff, academic and student support services, curricula, student achievement levels, faculty, and other components of the educational institution.
2. **Specialized (Programmatic) Accreditation:** This type of accreditation is usually granted to specialized academic programs after the institution has obtained initial licensing or general accreditation. It is only granted after at least one year following the graduation of the first batch of students, to ensure a comprehensive evaluation and accurate examination of all aspects of the academic programs, including faculty qualifications, research activities, student performance (both monthly and final exam records), and the availability of educational resources.
3. **Professional Accreditation:** This refers to the recognition of the manner in which a profession is practiced according to standards set by specialized bodies at the local, regional, and international levels, such as the requirement to obtain a teaching license.

Al-Ajmi (2003) added that having a legal license based on a solid technical foundation allows individuals to practice their profession, providing the best way to assess the level of individuals with whom one interacts. This also prevents unqualified individuals from entering the field, ensuring the quality of educational processes and services. Additionally, Al-Ajmi (2003) pointed out the close relationship between institutional (academic) accreditation and professional accreditation, as both aim to achieve quality and excellence and meet international standards.

There is overlap and integration between the two, as institutional accreditation means that the institution is capable of achieving its goals with the necessary quality in all its specialized academic programs. Therefore, institutional academic accreditation is essential and precedes the application of professional accreditation.

Sixth: General Conditions Required for a University or College Seeking Accreditation

The following are general conditions that must be met by a university or college seeking accreditation (Al-Sayed & Al-Hilali, 2009: 216):

1. The institution must have a mission statement suitable for its level as a higher education institution, with educational goals that align with its mission.
2. The institution must possess the appropriate resources and facilities to achieve its mission and educational objectives.
3. The institution must have a system for documenting student work related to educational objectives, demonstrating that it is fulfilling its mission.
4. The institution must show its ability to continue achieving its mission and goals.

Seventh: Requirements for Academic Accreditation

The key requirements for academic accreditation are as follows (Al-Maliki, 2010: 29-30):

1. The educational institution must define its educational and pedagogical objectives in alignment with the needs of the society it serves, ensuring these objectives are suitable for academic accreditation.
2. The institution must have a Board of Trustees that acts as an independent body for setting general policies, including representatives from public interests and educational institution leaders.
3. The institution must have a dean or executive head responsible for the educational institution, along with sufficient staff and administrators to manage institutional affairs.
4. The evaluation methods used for academic accreditation must be contemporary.
5. The institution must have the resources necessary to ensure that the objectives of academic accreditation can be achieved.
6. The institution must have a sufficient number of qualified teaching staff.
7. Academic accreditation must include obtaining feedback on the evaluation processes.
8. The institution must have a research program and support mechanisms that cover all university functions, in addition to offering a community service program.

Eighth: Functions of Academic Accreditation

The functions of accreditation in higher education institutions are as follows (Al-Hilali & Al-Sayed, 2009: 343):

1. Ensuring that the institute or program meets specified quality standards.
2. Assisting students and parents in identifying institutions that meet their aspirations.
3. Facilitating the transfer of students from one institution to another and between universities.
4. Assisting private and government entities in identifying institutions and programs that are suitable for investment.
5. Protecting the institution from internal and external pressures.
6. Setting self-improvement goals for underperforming programs.

7. Involving all faculty members, staff, and administrators in the institutional planning and evaluation process.
8. Establishing standards for granting degrees and licenses that allow individuals to practice the profession, and evaluating the courses offered for obtaining these qualifications.

Ninth: Phases of Academic Accreditation

The process of accrediting higher education institutions involves sequential steps, as follows (Al-Maliki, 2010: 36-37):

1. The institution seeking accreditation must prepare a detailed and comprehensive study of its current status in accordance with the requirements of the accrediting body. This study should be supported by all necessary documentation in the form of appendices, tables, and data to validate the study. The self-study should also include future plans for the near and medium term and development plans, as positive indicators of the institution's effectiveness in self-improvement. This study is submitted to the accrediting body to serve as the basis for the evaluation process.
2. The educational institution submits a request to the accreditation and quality authority expressing its desire to undergo the accreditation process.
3. The institution must provide the accreditation authority with a copy of the feasibility study conducted when the institution was established to guide the performance evaluation and facilitate the accreditation decision.
4. The institution must supply the necessary documents for the accreditation decision.
5. A team from the accrediting body is assigned to evaluate the self-study and the attached documents, and to decide on the institution's eligibility for the accreditation process.
6. The accrediting body forms a committee or several specialized committees to conduct a site visit to verify the validity of the self-study provided. Field interviews with faculty, administrators, and graduates are conducted to directly assess the institution's current status and evaluate the level of the educational institution.
7. The accrediting body reviews all reports, observations, and recommendations from the institution and the site visit committees and makes its decision based on the institution's compliance with the required standards or references.
8. If the institution is found to meet the desired quality standards, accreditation is granted. If there are areas of deficiency, the institution is given a time frame to address the unmet accreditation requirements, after which the accrediting body revisits the institution until accreditation is granted.

Tenth: Foundations and Principles of Academic Accreditation

There are several principles and foundations upon which academic accreditation is based in any educational institution (Al-Maliki, 2010: 26):

1. Awareness of the concept of academic accreditation and its standards at all administrative and academic levels, so that everyone can contribute convincingly to the success of the accreditation process.
2. A clear and defined vision, mission, and objectives, formulated by all staff, with both short- and long-term future directions.

3. Availability of effective leadership capable of fostering the concept and culture of academic accreditation among all staff and identifying the necessary material and human resources for successful implementation.
4. The design of academic programs, curricula, and teaching methods based on the requirements of academic accreditation.
5. Emphasis on teamwork, not individual efforts, ensuring cooperation and integration between faculties, departments, and administrative and academic bodies.
6. A well-defined action plan for implementing academic accreditation, including the basic steps and required material and human resources.

Eleventh: Obstacles to Implementing Academic Accreditation

Educational organizations in developing countries face several obstacles when implementing academic accreditation, including (Al-Najjar & Jawad, 2013: 143):

1. A shortage of foreign experts to conduct the evaluation process.
2. Limited knowledge of foreign languages, hindering the evaluation process.
3. The lack of sufficient information in self-studies.
4. The absence of neutral external evaluators.
5. Problems related to the promotional nature and fragility of reports.
6. Limited financial resources required for conducting the evaluation and hiring foreign experts.

Twelfth: Key Standards for Academic Accreditation

Academic accreditation standards are specific outcomes determined by the educational institution, derived from local or global external references, and include three sub-standards:

- **Content Standards:** These describe what students should know and be able to do.
- **Performance Standards:** These indicate the extent to which performance aligns with the set standards.
- **Proficiency Standards:** These describe the level of performance expected.

Academic standards refer to strict goals for education and learning but do not prescribe a specific curriculum. They are general written statements outlining performance expectations. The standard in accreditation is a statement of the expected level set by an authorized or recognized body regarding a specific goal or target to achieve the desired level of quality or excellence (Ameen, 2012: 315-318).

Thirteenth: Importance of Academic Accreditation Standards

The importance of studying academic accreditation lies in the following (Ameen, 2011: 317):

1. **Facilitating Administrative Tasks:** Standards serve as a foundation for procedural work and allow for the establishment of expected and agreed-upon performance levels across all institutional dimensions.
2. **Enabling Comparison and Evaluation:** Standards provide a basis for assessing quality in a specific field of knowledge, enabling comparison across different contexts, especially when an institution applies for academic accreditation.
3. **Promoting a Quality Culture:** Ideally, staff and stakeholders in an institution perform better in an environment built on standards, with more opportunities for development when staff understand that their work will be evaluated against pre-set standards, supported by a rewards system based on achievements.

4. **Ensuring Continuity of Experience:** Efforts are collectively directed towards achieving the standards across all academic programs and levels.
5. **Ensuring Transparency and Accountability:** Standards guarantee transparency in institutional dealings and external accountability.

Fourteenth: Benefits of Implementing Academic Accreditation Standards

Implementing academic accreditation standards in educational institutions and universities can achieve the following benefits (Majid, 2008: 274):

For Citizens:

- Ensures the presence of external evaluation for educational institutions or programs, confirming their alignment with general trends and policies in higher education or professional fields.
- Improves professional services available to the public, as accredited programs adjust their requirements according to changes in knowledge fields and practices.
- Identifies institutions and programs that voluntarily engage in specific activities to improve their educational services and enhance their professional programs, ensuring these improvements are successful.

For Students:

- Facilitates the transfer of academic units between institutions or the acceptance of students in graduate programs through general credit transfer agreements, provided the student's performance is satisfactory and the transferred courses are compatible with the institution the student is transferring to.
- Enhances the reputation of the institution or program in response to public interest and appreciation for such accreditation.

Thirdly, Regarding Higher Education Institutions:

- Accreditation is a catalyst for self-assessment and improvement of the institution's system and programs.
- It applies the accepted standards of accreditation bodies for higher education institutions, which helps prevent external violations that could harm the institution's level or the quality of its programs.
- It enhances the reputation of the accredited institution or program in response to public interest and recognition of such accreditation.

Fourthly, Regarding Professions:

- It provides an opportunity for practitioners to participate in setting the requirements and conditions for entering the profession.
- It contributes to the unity of the profession by bringing together practitioners, educators, and students in a single activity aimed at improving professional preparation and practices.

Fifteen: Mechanism for Obtaining Accreditation Certification The process for obtaining accreditation certification for an academic program by international organizations depends on a set of rules that must be studied and considered when applying for the certification. These include (Al-Jalabi, 2011, 88):

1. The college submits a request to obtain accreditation for the academic program, approved by the college council, along with sufficient descriptive data about the program by filling out a special form.

2. The request for accreditation will be rejected if the accreditation team in the international organization determines that the program does not meet the required conditions. In this case, the college may not reapply until the period set by the international organization has passed, at least from the date the request was rejected.
3. The organization will officially contact the college if the program meets the qualifications for accreditation, indicating acceptance of the request within a month from the date of submission. The college will be encouraged to begin filling out the related accreditation forms as outlined in the accreditation guide.
4. The college is required to pay the accreditation fees for the program as determined by the accrediting body.
5. The organization will inform the college of the evaluation results within 60 days of completing the evaluation process, via registered mail, including one of the following cases:
 - Accreditation is granted if the academic program at the college meets the quality standards for the program's design, courses, teaching, and learning.
 - Accreditation is withheld if the program fails to meet certain standards related to the program's quality, design, courses, and teaching, which are essential to the accreditation process.
 - The organization will notify the college of the final result, highlighting areas of strength and areas needing improvement, confirming the organization's readiness to provide guidance to help the college meet the accreditation standards set by the organization.

Sixteen: Academic Accreditation Procedures The procedures for accreditation include several steps (Al-Hilali, Al-Shurbini, Al-Sayed, Ahmed Al-Bahi, 2009: 344):

1. **Defining Standards:** The accrediting body collaborates with educational institutions to develop standards by which these institutions are evaluated.
2. **Self-Study:** The institution or program applying for accreditation conducts a self-assessment to evaluate its performance in light of the standards set by the accrediting body.
3. **On-Site Evaluation:** A team chosen by the accrediting body conducts a site visit to determine whether the institution meets the accrediting body's standards.
4. **Publication:** Once the accrediting body is satisfied that the institution meets the required standards, it grants accreditation and lists the institution or program in an official registry of accredited institutions, which is then published.
5. **Monitoring:** The accrediting body monitors the accredited institution or program to ensure ongoing compliance with the required standards throughout the accreditation period.
6. **Reevaluation:** The accrediting body periodically reevaluates the institution or program to determine whether it continues to meet the standards. This is currently done in U.S. universities every seven years, with plans to shorten the period to five years.

Seventeen: Guarantees for Achieving Academic Accreditation and Quality in Education There are several guarantees for achieving academic accreditation, including (Al-Najjar, Abdul Wahab, 2010):

- **Student Learning Centrality in Accreditation Activities:** This requires teacher preparation institutions to adopt academic quality as one of their core values and define how they will achieve their mission related to student learning.
- **Documenting Student Learning:** This requires institutions to develop a method to document student learning throughout their studies to obtain a degree. The method should align with the institution's academic performance standards and can include:
 1. Defining clear learning outcomes that specify content and performance levels.
 2. Collecting evidence of goal achievement using appropriate assessment tools.
 3. Issuing an overall judgment about the meaning and value of the evidence.

Eighteen: Some International Models in Academic Accreditation There are many international academic accreditation models that have developed in universities worldwide. Efforts have been made by some countries individually or by regions collectively, whether in European, Asian, Arab countries, or the United States. Below are some of the theoretical or applied frameworks for these models in foreign countries (Al-Hilali and Al-Sayed, 2009: 347-351).

The French Model of Academic Accreditation: In France, accreditation represents a European model for improving higher education quality. In 1985, a national committee was formed, directly reporting to the President of the Republic, and thus independent of any government body. This committee evaluates performance and quality control in higher education. The evaluation process includes a general review of the educational institution and its programs, focusing on teaching methods, research activities, management systems, and the learning environment. The evaluation is usually conducted at the institution's request, although the committee can also evaluate any institution it chooses. The committee visits each institution approximately every eight years and publishes the evaluation results in a report, which is sent to the relevant ministries. This evaluation plays a crucial role in determining annual budgets for higher education institutions (Brennan, 1998).

The Japanese Model of Academic Accreditation: Japanese universities are accredited by the Japanese University Accreditation Council, which grants accreditation to universities applying for it for the first time. Re-accreditation is granted after five years. Universities must be operational for four years before they can join the council. The accreditation and re-accreditation processes are similar in terms of procedures, with the main difference being that universities cannot become members of the accreditation body until after receiving their first accreditation.

The U.S. Model of Academic Accreditation: American universities, both public and private, enjoy significant autonomy, and government influence is limited compared to other countries. These institutions bear the responsibility for organizing themselves and ensuring adequate resources for efficient operation, to maintain public trust and prevent students from switching to competing institutions. The United States was the first to consider the balance between "freedom and quality," allowing the spread of both public and private educational institutions, while also establishing mechanisms for monitoring the quality of their performance and accrediting those that meet the required standards. The academic accreditation system in the United States takes two forms:

1. **Institutional Accreditation:** Carried out by regional councils associated with higher education institutions themselves.

2. **Program Accreditation:** Conducted by specialized committees, such as the Engineering and Technology Accreditation Board and the Medical Education Accreditation Council.

The **Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)** was established in 1996. It recognizes institutions every 10 years based on reports submitted every 5 years. Accreditation work is voluntary and involves several tasks (Al-Hilali and Al-Sayed, 2009: 366).

1. Review of self-assessment processes by peer reviewers.
2. Conduct a field visit to the educational institution once a year.
3. Work on attracting new volunteers interested in higher education to join the organization.

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