

PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY-INDICATORS MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY ON ACCREDITATION MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Accreditation is one mechanism of educational institution to inform itself on the quality of programs it provides. While the attitude towards accreditation is seemingly the primary issue circulating accreditation (Arcelo, as cited in Conchada & Tiongco, 2015), managing evidences can also be considered a corresponding issue that needs to be look into as it may reflect how an institution facilitates, gathers, and makes use of indicators of quality not only for the sole purpose of accreditation but for the purpose of informing the institution of what actions it needs to take to further uplift the quality it provides. Hence, this paper aims to explore the root causes of the challenges in preparing evidences for accreditation. Moreover, this paper aims to establish principles of managing evidences of quality and use it as a basis for proposing basic guidelines to address the problems and challenges cited in this paper. Thematic analysis was used to extract, sort, and group significant statements to form themes or patterns of information (Braun & Clarke, 2006) from the participants' experiences, challenges encountered, and recommendations for accreditation. Based on the findings, challenges on managing evidences of quality are rooted consistency and control problems. Consistency problem refers to the inability of the school to maintain a standard procedure of evidence collection while controlling problem refers to those that directly impairs actualizing the evidence collection. To address problems of consistency and control in managing evidences of quality, management-driven principle of evidence collection, transparency communication, and task delegation should be encapsulated in the process of gathering, preparing, and presenting evidences of quality.

Key words: accreditation, educational administration, case study, thematic analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Accreditation is one mechanism of educational institution to inform itself on the quality of programs it provides. As a quality assurance mechanism, accreditation was started by American universities and secondary school to check whether they adhere to the set standards of quality as pre-defined by a governing or accrediting body (AdvancED, 2015). In the Philippines, different accrediting bodies serve as an external quality assurance checker to various types of institution (Conchada & Tiongco, 2015) as the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) encourages different higher education institutions to be of quality which is over and above the minimum required (Ruiz & Junio-Sabio, 2012). Thus, accreditation has become central to higher education institutions and voluntarily submitting to it connotes an indication of quality attainment.

While the attitude towards accreditation is seemingly the primary issue circulating accreditation (Arcelo, as cited in Conchada & Tiongco, 2015), managing evidences can also be considered a corresponding issue that needs to be look into as it may reflect how an institution facilitates, gathers, and makes use of indicators of quality not only for the sole purpose of accreditation but for the purpose of informing the institution of what actions it needs to take to further uplift the quality it provides. This entails a closer look into how evidences of quality are managed by an institution and what problems are causing recurring challenges in the management of quality indicators.

Hence, this paper aims to explore the root causes of the challenges in preparing evidences for accreditation. Moreover, this paper aims to establish principles of managing evidences of quality and use it as a basis for proposing basic guidelines to address the problems and challenges cited in this paper. This paper posits that recurring challenges in the preparation of evidences for quality assurance system, like accreditation, is caused by a problem rooted on the system of how evidences of quality are managed in the institution. That is, the problem which causes the recurring challenges in gathering evidences of quality is systemic in nature and therefore is caused not by a single

person but by the system of how the institution, in particular in terms of quality indicators, is managed. Moreover, this would imply that if left unchecked, management of quality indicators may fail to inform the institution of what is needed to be improved or enhanced as gap or problem in operationalizing gathering of evidences of quality may divert the focus of the institution from providing genuinely high quality of education to just preparing evidences for accreditation.

The succeeding sections would set the context and explain the method of how the data was gathered as a basis for the discussion of this paper. On the latter part, analysis of the root causes of the challenges experienced in evidence preparation for accreditation, established principles on managing quality-indicators, and proposed guidelines in accreditation evidences management is discussed.

Context

The study was conducted in Far Eastern University-Institute of Education (FEU-IE) in the Philippines which offers both undergraduate and graduate education programs. FEU-IE has been accredited level 4 for its undergraduate education programs while it was able to pass the level 2 accreditation for its graduate education programs. Areas reviewed by the accrediting team included FEU-IE's goals and objectives, faculty, curriculum and instruction, research, students, library, administration, and other resources. Despite several accreditation visits, recurring challenges are still faced by the institution in terms of preparing evidences of quality.

Methodology

This paper makes use of qualitative approach to research. Specifically, case study design was used to investigate the specific instance (Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2015) on the participants' experiences where they were involved in the preparation of evidences for accreditation. Through the case study, a semi-structured interview was conducted to each participant for them to share their significant experiences, as well as challenges encountered and corresponding recommendations, in the case

of FEU-IE's accreditation. Participants were five school administrators composed of one dean and four program heads, who were also faculty members, and one academic staff. To analyze the participants' responses, thematic analysis was used to extract, sort, and group significant statements to form themes or patterns of information (Braun & Clarke, 2006) from the participants' experiences, challenges encountered, and recommendations for accreditation.

Findings

This section reports information on the findings gathered from the interview to the key informants of the study. The presentation includes a narrative discussion of the data gathered. It can be noted that for each thematized aspect of accreditation preparation experience, there are corresponding challenges and recommendations which are emphasized by the participants. Likewise, it can also be inferred that management of evidences is central to all aspects of the participants' experiences.

Organizing of accreditation teams

Based on the data gathered, organization of teams that would be in-charged of managing accreditation evidences was one of the first tasks needed to be decided on by the school in terms of preparation. In the case of FEU-IE task designation was assigned by the Dean based on the perceived capabilities of the faculty members. Each area to be checked by accreditors was assigned to a faculty-lead person with other faculty members to help him/her. For example, Participant 3 was the lead person in-charge of the faculty profile and load assignments while Participant 4 took charge of the curriculum. In the process of organizing teams for accreditation, participants cited that one should be willing to provide help in the accreditation no matter what the position is in the department as consequently, such willingness would produce excitement in terms of gathering evidences and working with other teachers.

While the composition of teams that would be in-charged of area of accreditation can be picked by the Dean from the roster of faculty, participants viewed the absence of a permanent

staff in the department, who would aid in the accomplishment of tasks, as a challenge in the preparation of accreditation. Moreover, one participant cited that though there was an available staff that can help in the accomplishment of tasks, it was not enough as this staff also attended on the needs of other departments and not solely to the one which will be accredited.

As such, some participants recommend an overall committee that would address all the concerns of accreditation. That is, a separate attached office or committee that would oversee all accreditation and quality assurance system concerns. According to the participants, it will be more efficient to have a separate office or committee that will systematically guide and answer the need of the department for accreditation considering the work load of the department. Likewise, Participant 4 and Participant 6 also recommends a permanent staff to do clerical work solely for the department, like sorting out files and documentations, especially during accreditation for equal and smooth distribution of tasks as faculty and program heads also have teaching, community extension, and other administrative functions.

Preparing accreditation evidences

In terms of preparation of evidences, participants cited that the department needed to prepare evidences to support the self-rating scores on each standard specified by the accrediting body. There was also a need to prepare documents and write-ups that should be coherent with what exists in the department during the specified range of time. Participants added that during the preparation for accreditation, the compliance report which includes the result of the first accreditation visit was needed to be addressed. Consequently, participants emphasized that they have looked for accreditation evidences to be used based on the provided instrument by the accrediting body. For example, Participant 4 revisited the syllabi of the programs while Participant 5 helped in gathering evidences on the curriculum of the students as these were being asked by the instrument or checklist provided by the accrediting body.

In terms of challenges from the experiences of preparing evidences for accreditation, participants view two things which they perceive to have become a difficulty in evidence preparation. First, participants had difficulty in interpreting the quality indicators written on the instrument provided by the accrediting body. This served as a challenge as one's interpretation would be the basis of what evidence to be presented. However, the accreditors may have asked for other evidences if their interpretation of the quality indicator did not match the evidence presented as interpreted by the department. Secondly, the absence of a separate room that would house all files, including accreditation evidences, of the department became a difficulty in easy access and retrieval of needed evidences and documents as the department is sharing the room with other departments.

Considering the aforementioned challenges, participants recommend the further study of the instrument to be used during accreditation so that its interpretation and the corresponding evidences will match the standards set by the accrediting body. Likewise, participants recommend the preparation of needed documents on a regular basis for easy sorting and retrieval during the preparation period for accreditation. Lastly, some participants recommend an accreditation room or a separate room for the department that will house all evidences needed in the accreditation.

Collecting accreditation evidences from faculty

One of the tasks of the participants was to gather evidences and documents concerning the area of faculty and instruction. For the faculty area, participants gather requirements by taking information from the records submitted by the faculty in their profile. Requests of short interviews for part-time faculty and documents regarding their professional backgrounds were also conducted by the accreditation lead persons. According to the participants, regular faculty members were easier to get information from because they are in the school almost every day unlike the part-time faculty members. Observations, curriculum vitae records, and student faculty evaluation results were also used

by the participants to gather information concerning the faculty and instruction area.

Participants mentioned that a challenge on the preparation of evidences concerning faculty and instruction was how to get requirements from part-timer faculty members. This was because these faculty members were only available for about three hours a week due to their other commitment in other universities. Likewise, attendance of these faculty members during the accreditation was also perceived as challenge by the participants. Moreover, coordinating with other faculty to do accreditation related activities were also experienced and perceived as a challenge in preparing for accreditation due to other duties of faculty and pressure caused by deadlines imposed.

Regular orientation to the faculty members on accreditation requirements has been viewed by some participants as a recommendation that can correspond with the aforementioned challenge. For instance, Participant 1 thinks that regular orientation of faculty is needed to echo all accreditation-needed requirements so that the faculty will prepare it on a daily basis. Likewise, making accreditation documents as part of the requirements to be submitted by the faculty has been considered by few participants. They recommend that these documents must be part of the requirements they have to submit to the department aside from their class records and grade sheets.

Coordinating to other offices

One of the tasks by the participants in preparing for the accreditation was to coordinate and study the community services of the department. For instance, Participant 2 experienced preparing documents concerning the community activities and coordinating with the community outreach office which oversees community service and extension of the school.

Challenge in retrieving the needed papers from other offices like the community outreach office was experienced as the offices handling the needed evidences were also busy in accommodating other accreditation concerns from other departments. Likewise, tracing

specific information from the documented papers from other offices became difficult as these documented papers included underlying information which has referenced to other offices and departments as well. Participant 3 also specified that it took a lot of time just to go to different offices to collate documents and evidences while Participant 6 cited that needed documents were present but not well organize and sorted out.

Due to the cited challenges on coordination to other offices, specifically to the community outreach office, transfer of management of community service to every department has been recommended by some participants so that each department will be the one to handle the needed documents. Moreover, Participant 2 thinks it is feasible for the department to handle its own community service as it only needs to plan the community service activities, budget, and coordination to other departments and offices involved.

Collecting accreditation evidences about students

Some participants experienced profiling the number of students in the department, tabulating the result of the board examinations, and tracing the whereabouts of the graduates of the departments. The participants made use of the office's documents, social networking sites, journals, and magazines to trace the alumni of the department.

Despite cited means to get information about students, participants still experienced challenges in terms of collecting accreditation evidences from students. Specifically, outdated information from the graduate tracer studies was the experienced difficulty of some participants. Hence, Participant 6 suggests that graduating students should fill up personal and professional data form during the last days of the school year and regular updating of the database of graduate-student information to improve the tracing of alumni.

Accomplishing accreditation tasks

Some participants experienced going to school even during their free day to do accreditation task preparation. Participants also

specified that it took a lot of time just to go to different offices to collate documents and evidences. Participant 4 cited that he felt exhausted because of the intense tasks of preparing for accreditation while Participant 4 experienced working under pressure because she also had to look after the other areas to be checked since she was the program head during the time the department was preparing for the accreditation.

In relation to the experiences cited, participants experienced difficulties in focusing to many things aside from accreditation. Participants had trouble in focusing to accreditation, administrative duties, and teaching duties simultaneously. Also, participants experienced lack of focus since they were doing multiple tasks as program head and faculty. Participants are citing difficulty in preparation for the accreditation because of insufficient time to make reports, budget approval, and collect documents.

Provision for financial support for staffs and personnel is eyed by the participants concerning the challenges they experience in terms of accomplishing accreditation tasks. Particularly, Participant 1 recommends full support from the university in terms of financial support for their staffs and personnel while Participant 3 suggests a committee that would really determine the required budget for accreditation. In terms of time consideration, Participant 3 emphasized that if someone would be preparing for accreditation, s\he should be given proper time and consideration especially if s\he is also teaching. Participant 5 also recommends much longer timeframe in preparation.

Discussion

Findings from the study seem to reveal the root causes of the challenges experienced by the participants in preparing for accreditation as well as their recommendations based on their experienced context in FEU-IE.

Problems on managing evidences of quality

Findings from the responses of the participants seem to show two root and interrelated causes of the challenges experienced

by the participants in the process of preparation for accreditation. Since “a problem is a discrepancy between the current state of affairs and a desired state of affairs” (Tiernan & Morley, 2013), it should be clear that these causes are referred to as problems in this paper as these deviate from what is expected to be good attributes of managing quality indicators in the context of the institution subjected to this case study. While one of the purposes of accreditation is to assess quality of programs offered in higher education (Hegji, 2017), it can be noted that the challenges experienced by participants focus on operationalizing the collection of evidences as quality indicators. As shown in Table 1, these challenges are caused by two main-interrelated problems – consistency and control. Thus, the aforementioned challenges are caused not by the absence of evidences to prove quality but of the manner of collection.

Table 1

Problems on managing evidences of quality

Consistency Problem	Controlling Problem
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting requirements from the faculty • Collecting updated information of students • Retrieving documents or evidences from other offices • Absence of permanent staff • Absence of separate room for the department • Financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of time • Balancing accreditation, teaching, and other administrative tasks • Exhaustion due to required materials to be prepared • Interpreting accreditation instrument

Consistency problem in this paper refers to the inability of the school to maintain a standard procedure of evidence collection. This problem causes the challenges experienced by the participants in terms of collecting requirements from faculty, students, and other offices. In the absence of a standard procedure of what documents are needed to be submitted by (or

retrieved from) the faculty, students, or other offices, to the department, evidence collection becomes difficult as retrieval is being rushed. Likewise, the absence of a permanent staff, department/accreditation room, and financial support impairs operation of collection as these are structural factors that facilitate evidence collection in terms of time, space, and support needed.

Seemingly, the consistency problem that brought the challenges is caused by the very nature of accreditation which occurs not on a regular or daily basis. As accreditation visits occur in-between long period of time (3 years or more), evidence collection which is specific for accreditation purposes, becomes a set of non-programmed decision or those decisions that has no established procedure (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2000), as more likely evidence collection begins when nearing accreditation. As such, challenges in terms of evidence collection becomes difficult as there are no pre-determined specific procedures of quality-indicators collection.

In the absence of standard procedure of evidence collection, the consistency problem then causes another set of challenges as decisions made are interrelated to one another (Glasman & Nevo, 1988) and so is its consequences and outcomes. The controlling problem refers to the cause of challenges which directly impairs the act of controlling or actualizing the evidence collection. Since there is no establish procedure of evidence collection, it takes longer time to collect the needed evidences and thus further causes difficulty in balancing other tasks and exhaustion, as cited by the participants. Moreover, easier interpretation of evidences needed could have been achieved if evidences are readily available in specified sources as pool of data can be readily look into to match the quality indicator specified.

Principles of quality-indicators management

Considering the discussion made on problems in managing evidences of quality, principles to guide the recommendations made by the participants are synthesized in this paper to combine participants’ perceived solution and theoretical underpinnings based on literature.

While theoretical foundations provide reason for courses of action, a recognition of the participants' context rationality or significance and being rational of action based on one's context (Townley, 2008) is needed as one cannot disregard the first-hand experiences of the participants where the cited problems and the participants' recommendations are based on. Since consistency and control of evidence collection are the identified root causes of the challenges experienced by the participants, established principles and recommendations embed actions to address these two root causes.

Evidence collection principle.

Considering the participants' recommendations of regularly preparing evidences from faculty, students, and other offices, indicators of quality should be collected on the purpose of informing the department of the quality of the program in terms of instruction, management, and community extension. Thus, this implies change in mindset, as well as practice, in evidence collection as indicators of quality is collected not on the sole purpose of complying to the requirements of accreditation but primarily for the purpose of really providing quality service in terms of teaching and learning and program improvement. Indicators of quality, not necessarily for accreditation, should be collected regularly as these are needed in evaluating programs and basis for program development and/or enhancement. As making decisions in an organization like school requires diagnostic skills (Tiernan & Morley, 2013), information that would be provided by the quality indicators would be used as a basis in making organizational decisions in terms of making solutions based on past experiences like of those in programmed decisions (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012), and in making strategic planning with long term implications like of those in non-programmed decisions (Wheelen & Hunger, 2012). This principle mainly addresses the consistency problem of collecting evidences.

Transparency communication principle.

To carry out collection of quality-indicator evidences, concerned individuals, as well as offices and other departments, from whom the evidences would be collected, should

be informed of the rationale of why indicators are being collected. As cited by (Ahmed & Omotunde, 2012), a well communicated decision of course of action includes articulation of benefits, risks, and drawbacks to the persons affected by the action made. Thus, faculty and students should be well-informed of why evidences of quality are gathered from them. Though accreditation may be part of the articulation of the rationale, it should be given emphasis that evidences are gathered on the primary purpose of informing teaching and learning and improving the program.

Task delegation principle.

In line with the participants' recommendation of forming an official committee that would oversee the concerns of accreditation and of studying the instrument used by the accrediting body, criteria for selection of people to be involved in the task of managing evidence of quality-indicators should include wide expertise of determining what quality mean, and personal interest or stake on the institution's goal of achieving high quality. As cited by Hoy and Tarter (1993), participation on making decisions, on this case on determining what evidences should be collected and in what manner, becomes optimal if involvement of people is outside their zone of acceptance as it entails expertise and interest to the decision to be made. Additionally, in congruence also to the recommendation of participants to have a permanent staff for accreditation, clerical workload should be rightfully accomplished by a permanent clerical staff as delegation of such work to faculty does not utilize the teachers' expertise and may conflict with accomplishment of their real task which involved their expertise and interest. In principle, these actions partly address the problem of consistency in terms of lack of permanent staff to handle clerical accreditation concerns and the problem of controlling in terms of lack of time and interpretation of the accreditation instrument.

Accreditation evidences management

Synthesizing the findings and discussions made in this paper and applying the principles of quality-indicators management mentioned, the following guidelines for

management of accreditation evidences are as follows:

As to management.

The school administration should form an accreditation committee comprising of administrators, teachers, and department staffs. The said committee shall be composed of at least seven members to include a chair, vice-chair, members, and secretariat. The members shall divide the tasks of evidence collection with respect to the eight areas of accreditation in accordance to their expertise and interest. Likewise, the committee shall propose a budget to cover expenses for materials, consultants, and other necessary expenses, as endorsed by the dean and to be approved by the finance department and school administration. The accreditation committee shall be formed at least one and a half year before the date of the accreditation visit.

As to the space for accreditation.

Considering the availability of resources, the school administration shall designate an accreditation room and official room for the department. The accreditation room shall serve as a place for meeting, coordination, consolidation of materials and evidences, and storage of the soft and hard copies of the said evidences. Furthermore, an official room for the department is a necessity in order to have easy access of the evidences, schedule, faculty records, student records, and coordination.

As to the instrument for accreditation.

The designated accreditation committee should study the instrument for accreditation which includes the areas of goals and objectives, faculty, curriculum and instruction, research, students, library, administration, other resources. The said committee shall determine the evidences needed in each area, the personnel assigned in gathering evidences, the time required to gather and consolidate the evidences, and the budget needed per area.

As to the gathering of evidences.

The department shall prepare and gather evidences of quality on a daily, periodic, and semesterly basis. The department shall prepare

checklist of requirements for gathering documents and evidences of quality indicators. Furthermore, the department shall conduct a general and/or separate meeting for program head, faculty, students, and staff, before the beginning of each semester to orient and remind them on the required evidences needed for informing the quality of the programs offered. Likewise, it should be given emphasis on the meeting why this is needed to be done as mentioned in the evidence collection principle.

As to the faculty.

The faculty shall attend a general or separate meeting where rationale for the collection of evidences would be explained. Likewise, these will be the avenue for them to voice out their concerns and do negotiations on what are expected from the to produce. Ideally, the faculty members are expected to comply on the negotiated requirements to be submitted in congruence with the checklist of requirements in gathering documents and evidences of quality.

As to community service.

Management of the community service should be transferred to the program department. The department shall develop, plan, implement and manage their own community services in line with its and its members expertise and interest. This will help align the community service projects to the department's vision, mission, and program objectives. Furthermore, the gathering, preservation and retrieval of documents and evidences will be more efficient and effective as it is housed by the department itself.

Conclusion

Quality assurance system like accreditation is centered on gathering, preparing, and presenting evidences that embodies indicators of quality. Consequently, this necessitates management skills, long term planning, interpersonal abilities, human as well as financial resources, physical stamina, as well as character qualities of patience and trust. To address problems of consistency and control in managing evidences of quality, the aforementioned necessities should be encapsulated through management-driven

principle of evidence collection, transparency communication, and task delegation. Further, these principles should be transformed into actions that would inform teaching and learning and be a basis for program development, improvement, and enhancement. This paper hopes to contribute to the continuous discourse of the topic and encourages further research that would widen perspectives on the quality assurance mechanism process of learning institutions.

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