

The Accreditation Activities of a Private HEI that Bind and Enhance the Structural/Managerial and Cultural/Psychological Elements of Quality Culture

Beulah Rose R. Torres

Silliman University, Dumaguete City, Philippines

Abstract

Accreditation is associated with quality assurance for continuous improvement. Thus, it is essential to ensure that a quality culture that gives concrete expression to quality is embedded in higher education institutions (HEIs), especially those pursuing accreditation. The landmark European University Association (EUA) approach to quality culture (QC) came up with a QC definition that pictures the two QC elements: structural/managerial and psychological/cultural, that work in synergy to nurture QC. Based on this QC approach, this study attempted to understand a Philippine private higher education institution (Pphei henceforth) quality culture through its accreditation-related activities in preparation for the on-site visit of an accrediting agency. The study specifically answered the following questions, with a single Pphei as the research site and its education managers as study participants: What are its preparatory accreditation-related activities? What are its processes and tools? A qualitative, self-study research method allowed education managers to reflect on and report their practices. The findings revealed activities, processes, and tools demonstrating shared values and quality commitment. However, the interplay between the university's structural/managerial and cultural/psychological elements of QC is strongly felt in limited departments and, therefore, must be expanded to include other units to compound the enhancement of its quality culture.

Keywords: quality culture, accreditation, university, higher education institution (HEIs), Philippines

Introduction

Due to the proliferation of higher education institutions in diverse settings catering to the multiple, sometimes volatile interests of stakeholders, quality has become a buzzword. Therefore, universities must ensure that students get their money's worth and that the quality of their program meets acceptable standards. From this perspective, the concept of quality culture is critical because, according to Rapp, president of the European Universities Association (Sursock, 2011, p. 6), quality culture "is the most effective and meaningful way that quality assurance mechanisms can ensure and improve quality levels and support a dynamic of change in universities." As a voluntary evaluation process, programmatic accreditation in the context of quality culture has not yet been examined within Philippine colleges and universities using a western model.

Although Tabora (2018), a Filipino Jesuit educator who served as president of a Philippine accrediting agency and in various Philippine universities, mentioned in his blogs the term quality culture in connection to the term quality assurance, the specific mechanics of his suggested framework are still in the making. On a broader scale, however, several studies have attempted to define QC (e.g., Berings, 2010); or classify QC types (e.g., Harvey & Stensaker, 2008) within the cultural theory framework. For example, some relate quality culture to total quality management (e.g., Hildebrandt, 1991; Jancikova, 2009). Others look at QC from a dialectical perspective, e.g., Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Johnson, 1992; Kolsaker, 2008, as cited in Berings & Grieten (2012). Bendermacher et al. (2017), on the other hand, view QC in terms of factors that promote or inhibit it. While these studies have different definitions of QC, this concept is not extensive.

This situation substantiates the claim that quality culture is not widely appreciated, except among a group of European universities. In 2002, the European University Association (EUA) launched the Quality Culture Project, primarily aimed at improving quality levels (Quality Culture in European Universities, 2006). Although the participants recognized that QC is essential in enhancing quality le-

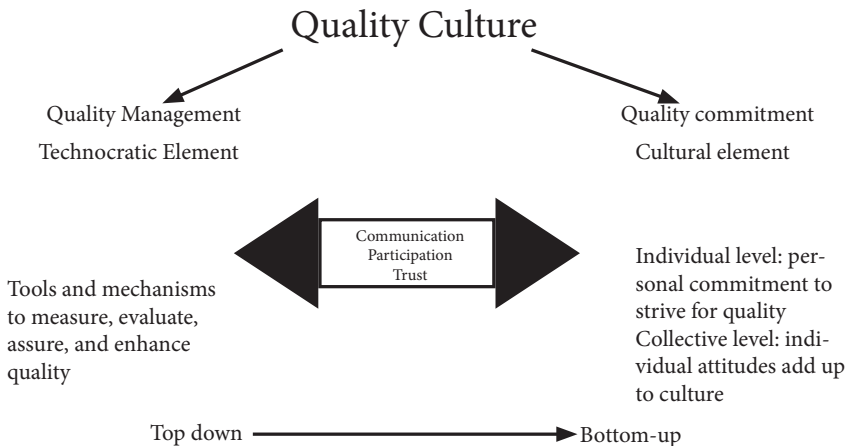
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vels, they also surmised that QC among universities was indeed ‘taken for granted.’ Nevertheless, it was during the pursuit of the EUA’s project that the participants came up with a definition of QC which, since then, became the often-quoted QC approach (e.g., by Sattler & Sonntag, 2018; Bendermacher et al., 2017) to QC, as follows:

An organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations, and commitment towards quality, and on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts (Quality Culture in European Universities, 2006, p. 10).

This approach implies that QC involves shared notions of quality between the two elements (structural/managerial and cultural /psychological) that cannot be regarded as independent from each other (Quality Culture in European Universities, 2006, p. 20). In particular, the synergy of both elements, not their autonomous actions, nurtures QC. The educational managers ‘with defined processes, for instance, coordinate and direct individual faculty efforts. Facilitating this collaborative endeavor are ‘communication,’ ‘participation,’ and ‘trust.’ The European Universities further explain that the interplay of these elements demonstrates the culture of quality of an organization and ‘requires a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches’ (Quality Culture in European Universities, 2006, p. 20). Sursock (2011) also explains that the concept of quality culture is, therefore ‘understood here as comprising two distinct sets of elements: “shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitments toward quality” and “a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating efforts.” He likewise emphasized the five (5) conditions that lead to effective quality culture: quality assurance instruments, clear accountability lines, engagement with the university community, investment through staff development, and institutional autonomy(p. 9).

Figure 1
European University Association (2006) Approach to Quality Culture



In the Philippines, QC narratives and practices are often associated with the concepts of quality assurance and accreditation (e.g., Ching, 2013; Conchada & Tiongco, 2015, Tabora, 2018), but there are no available local studies explicitly expounding on quality culture concerning accreditation, which was the focus of this study. The assumption was that by looking at this window, more quality-related events could be viewed and, therefore, may provide robust data in examining discussions about quality culture. For example, Desveaux et al. (2015) stated that accreditation can influence quality in Canada's health care context. Tabora (2018) adds that "... accreditation is the most rigorous of quality assurance activities." In other words, identifying the HEI activities leading to the readiness for accreditors' on-site visits and what the college or department managers do with their faculty may clarify one's understanding of the elements of quality culture.

The FAAP and CHED recognize three (3) accrediting bodies for Philippine private colleges and universities: PAASCU, ACSCU-ACI, and PACUCOA*. Across these three accrediting bodies, this is how accreditation occurs: The HEIs invite independent accrediting

bodies to examine the level of quality of the different aspects of their operations in specific programs. The purpose of accreditation is to grant certification that an institution's program meets acceptable educational standards. As a process, part of its requirement is to visit the programs on-site to interview the students, faculty, and stakeholders about the evaluation areas reflected in their self-survey instrument for undergraduate programs: Purposes and Objectives, Faculty, Instruction, Library, Laboratories, Physical Plant, Student Services, Administration, and School and Community (Gonzalez, 2010). The aim is to check if the program ratings of the self-survey and other documents align with what they see. The on-site visit results determine whether the HEI's quality level remains, increases, or decreases

On-site visits are part of certifying the university's quality level. After the assessment visit, the accreditors, through the FAAP, grant the university a certificate bearing the accreditation level it earned, for example, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, or Level 4 (the highest). Aside from the certificate, the agency hands in a compliance report for each area assessed. This report also referred to as the accreditors' observation summary, reflects deficiencies that reflect the areas in the university in which quality culture has to be nurtured. How the university responds to these deficiencies is another way to track quality culture. Thus, this study specifically answered the following questions about a single Pphei: What are its preparatory accreditation-related activities? What are its processes and tools?

The two elements of QC in the EUA approach fit the aims of this study. In Figure 2, the EUA's structural/managerial element frames the activities performed by the QA office and the deans' offices. At the same time, the individual and collective represent the cultural/psychological elements of the faculty working under the deans' offices.

In the context of the university in this study, the specific activities undertaken by the structural/managerial dimension are 1) the actions taken by the programs relevant to the recommendations of the accrediting agency during their most recent visit; 2) the educational managers' activities leading to the completion of the self-survey report, and 3) the production of the required exhibits. If appropriate, the QA office oversees these activities.

Looking into Pphei's activities to examine the synergy

of the elements of QC is also consistent with the social practice approach that views practices in light of what people do. Rahnema (2020), for example, quoted Saunders (2011, p. 93), who says that practices are associated with: “whatever it is that people do as a response to a policy, an intervention, opportunity or initiative . . .” for example, quoted Saunders (2011, p. 93), who says that practices are associated with: “whatever it is that people do as a response to a policy, an intervention, opportunity or initiative . . .”

However, looking at these two (2) QC elements in the big picture of how this Pphei handles accreditation is necessary. Roughly, QC emanates from the university’s Office of the President, which invites an accrediting body to examine the quality of its programs. Once this is in place, the flow of communication within the university commences. The VPAA communicates with the QA office to meet the requirements of the accrediting body. The latter corresponds with the program heads, who pass the information to their respective faculty. The frequent interplay between management offices and faculty demonstrated ‘adequate communication,’ which Bendermacher et al. (2017) say is a prerequisite to diffuse quality strategies and policies.’

Methods

Research Goal

The general aim of this study was to determine if there is synergy between the structural/managerial and cultural/psychological elements of a Pphei as a manifestation of the presence and development of QC. Hence, it was essential to determine its specific accreditation-related activities and the processes and tools to prepare for an accreditation visit.

Participants & Data Collection

To attain the objectives of this study, I focused on a group of university deans/chairpersons of Pphei, specifically their activities along with their respective faculty, in preparation for onsite

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accreditation in 2021/2022. Since the accreditation office that I head works hand in hand with these program managers and plays a substantial part in the process, I also incorporated data from my personal experience. However, I was careful that the discussion of results using office data is directly related to data collected from program managers, in addition to pertinent documents such as the accrediting agency's self-survey instrument and the accreditors' recommendations based on their previous visit. Thus, there were two sets of participants in this study: the director of the office in charge of accreditation (OA hereafter) and the university program heads (N=29) from whom data for the structural/managerial QC elements were drawn. Table 1 shows the participants and programs that will be accredited (with corresponding level of accreditation), namely: Bachelor of Arts (IV), Bachelor of Mass Communication (IV), Bachelor of Science (IV); Bachelor of Science in Psychology (IV); Bachelor of Elementary Education (IV), Bachelor of Secondary Education (IV), Nutrition and Dietetics (II), Computer Studies Program (II), Information System Program (II), Information Technology Program (II), Medical Technology Program (II), Bachelor of Science in Nursing (IV), and Grade School Program (II).

A self-study research method was used to determine the accreditation activities and processes involved. Laboskey (2004, p. 1) describes this as "a methodology for studying professional practice settings" as a way for an individual or a group of teachers to investigate and reflect on their teaching practice for continuous improvement. This method is further defined as "the study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas, as well as the 'not self'" (p. 238). Although White and Jarvis (2020) argue that this is still a developing research method and that its use is limited to teacher education practitioners across Europe, the self-study method was utilized in this study because it has the potential to benefit the learning of a group of professionals from an array of disciplines in a specific private higher education in the Philippines, who are engaged in quality-related activities. In this study, this method was used with the assumption that the reports were based on the program heads' self-reflections shared with critical friends in the same group to enhance a quality culture by supporting each other and working together.

Table 1*Study Participants*

College/ Department in which the program is lodged	Number of Participants	Position
Office in-charge of accreditation	2	Director
College of Arts and Sciences	1	Dean
Biology	1	Chairperson
English	1	Chairperson
Filipino	3	Chairperson & Faculty
Hist. Pol. Sci.	1	Chairperson
Math	1	Chairperson
Philosophy	1	Chairperson
Physics	2	Chairperson and Faculty
Psychology	1	Chairperson
Sociology	1	Chairperson
College of Mass Education	1	Dean
ICLS	1	Dean
	6	Faculty
College of Nursing	1	Dean
Grade School	1	Principal
Nutrition and Dietetics	2	Chairperson Faculty
n=29		

Table 2 shows the three (3) sets of data used to address the research questions.

Table 2
An Overview of Data Resources

Data Sources	Method of Collection	Research Question	Analysis of Data	Framework of Discussion
1. Observation summaries from the accrediting agency	Obtained from the files of the OA	Areas needing improvement among programs to be accredited	Summarized observations across the programs/thermatized/ranked	
Reports of program heads/ educational managers engaged in accreditation	Obtained through the OA meeting in which the program heads reported accreditation updates and interacted with each other	Activities and processes/tools utilized	Themitized and then, based on the Lanares grid, presented data in a table with three columns	EUA approach to quality culture
OA office director	Office journal entries	Activities and processes/tools utilized	Themitized and then based on Lanares grid, presented in a table with two columns	

The first set of data, which is part of the accrediting agency’s communication to the Pphei, that is, after its visit in 2015, was taken from the OA office files. The second set was taken during one of the OA’s regular accreditation meetings in 2019. The study participants were asked a set of questions to guide their reports. Informed consent was obtained from all participants I included in the study. Upon submitting the reports’ hard copy to the OA, the study focused only on the responses to this question: What activities have you undertaken to prepare for accreditation? The OA also answered the same question, which was the basis for collecting the 3rd data.

Analyzing of Data

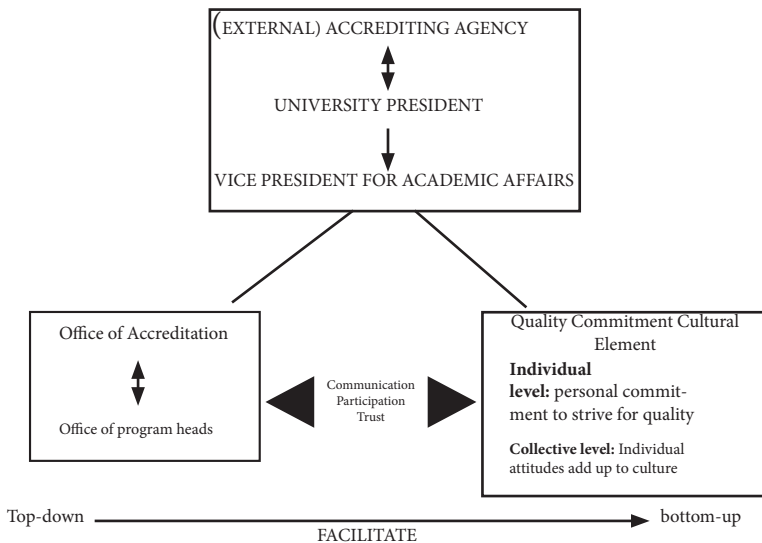
For the first set of data, the accreditors’ observations were themitized according to the parameters of the self-survey instrument

of the accrediting agency. The results were ranked according to the area that needs the most improvement. For the second set of data, the QA read the responses 3-5 times on an overall basis. Words and phrases in a sentence that answered the main research question were highlighted, as these became the unit of analysis. The grid (Lanares, 2009) was used to display the meaning units for both the description of the QA office and the collective responses of the program leadership and faculty. The meaning units in this grid demonstrate 'what they do' to prepare for accreditation. The office was careful that the meaning units retain 'the context necessary to derive meaning from the data,' as Roller and Lavrakas (2015) described.

Similar meaning units were grouped to form the categories. Then for each type, a theme was generated. The third set of data was taken from the 2019 office journal; the same method was used to process the data.

Figure 2

The Configuration of the Quality Culture of a Philippine Private Higher Education Institution (based on the EUA Approach to Quality Culture, 2006)



Inspired by the EUA approach (Figure 1), I interpreted the activities reported by the program heads based on the configuration of the elements of quality culture of the Pphei, as shown in Figure 2 above.

This study addressed the following questions about the Pphei's preparatory 'accreditation visit' activities: What are its preparatory accreditation-related activities? What are its processes and tools? These questions assume that participants' responses were related to the accreditation areas that need improvement the most: physical facilities, library services, faculty training, research development; revision of syllabi; administration; faculty hiring, and curriculum (OA office data, 2015). The focus of this study was on what the programs specifically did to address the recommendations of the accreditors was the interest of this study.

On the elements of QC in the Pphei Figure 2 shows that the elements of QC in this Pphei are observable in the interplay between the OA office and the deans' (chairs') office. These offices embody the structural/managerial dimension (represented by the following: the university president, VPAA, Office of Accreditation [OA], and Offices of the program heads); and 2) cultural/psychological dimension (represented by the individual managers of the said offices, and their respective faculty and staff involved in the accreditation activities). The collective level (see the box on the right side of Figure 2) represents the individual interchanges between the office managers and their staff and faculty. On the other hand, Table 3 shows the program heads' activities fall under seven themes: strategic planning, taking action, updating and aligning policies, capacity building, negotiating, involving stakeholders, and tracing graduates/student recruitment.

Table 3*Reported Activities of the Deans and Chairpersons, Tasks, and Leadership Roles*

Meaning Units of the reported activities conducted one year prior to the onsite visit in 2020/2021	Emergent themes showing the TASKS	Leadership Roles attached to the activity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings among faculty, coordinators, and community partners Scheduling of accreditation-related activities Writing of requests Activation/ Creation of committees, e.g. research groups Formation of groups, clusters to address for various concerns Budgeting and submission of budgetary requirements 	1. Strategic Planning	Strategist
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification and collection/ generation of documents as evidence of compliance e.g. gathering, collating, compiling (relevant accreditation-related data) Following up (the faculty and concerned offices) 	2. Taking Action (to comply)	Researcher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purchase of new books Creation/ Revision of handbooks Syllabus revision e.g. making changes according to outcomes-based-education (OBE) principles, integrating service learning in subject and or program 	3. Updating and aligning classroom policies with national/ regional policies	Analyst
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workshops for curriculum revision Workshop for research writing Faculty (trainings, seminars, conferences) then evaluating these activities; taking advanced degrees, e.g. , towards master's of doctorate degrees Renewal of Professional Membership 	4. Capacity Building	Trainer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow up the Buildings and Ground (incharge of the renovation of physical facilities) several times 	5. Negotiating with concerned units within the university	Negotiator
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community visits to be able to evaluate projects, renew Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), schedule community engagement Social orientation with partner community, signing of MOU with partner community, writing formative evaluation study, and making proper documentation 	6. Involving the stakeholders' with quality assurance	Community Servant
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consolidating data of SU graduates in a certain period Student recruitment 	7. Tracing alumni; Recruiting students for the program	Graduate Tracer (Student Recruiter)

Table 4, on the other hand, shows the activities conducted by the

director of the accreditation office and the implied leadership roles

Table 4

Tasks of the Accreditation Office and Its Corresponding Leadership Roles

Specific Tasks	ROLES of QA
Serves as a conduit between accreditors, university administration, and faculty interaction	Mediator
Sorts and classifies accreditor’s recommendations across programs	Data Sorter
Thematizes data and displays on matrix/chart for easy visualization	Researcher
Using these data, organizes information dissemination/ orientation for concerned programs about the accreditor’s comments	Organizer
Does action planning to strategize for ways to address accreditors’ concerns e.g. facilitates the revision of instrument to rate teacher performance	Strategist
Schedules follow-up sessions with programs and other units (e.g. research, extension, build-ings and grounds) in preparing for accreditation	Supervisor
Assists and guides program in-charge if needed and if necessary through face-to-face or virtual sessions	Mentor
Evaluates results of OA’s initiatives	Evaluator
Communicates results to the admin and concerned programs	Communicator

On the Processes and Tools Evident in the QC Elements’ Activi-ties

The EUA approach assumes that processes promote quality culture (Sursock, 2011, p. 9). From the participants’ responses, some methods are observable: 1) a mix of several quality instruments, two clear accountability lines, and clarifying responsibilities at all levels, 3) quality assurance is not imposed; 4) investment in people through staff development; and 5) institutional autonomy. These processes may not match the examples presented by Sursock (2011). However, they may be applicable at this Pphei and may be regarded as promoters of quality culture.

Discussion

The reported management activities (Tables 3 and 4) are expected. A column on leadership roles was added to both Table 3 and Table 4 to demonstrate that these activities can be

translated into leadership roles that are expected for goal development, professional development, or motivation (Esia-Donkoh & Baffoe, 2018). The roles that the Pphei play align with the realist view of Bendermacher et al. (2017), which states that “effective leaders are considered to be those able to fulfill multiple roles, i.e., motivator, vision setter, task masters and analyzer. (Smart, 2003; Osseo-Asare & Pieris, 2007)” In the case of this Pphei, leaders have the potential to develop a set of shared beliefs about accreditation, model the nature of quality that accreditors envision, and set the priority that the program should focus with.

However, leadership type also counts. For example, “(L)eadership styles focusing on creating a culture of collegiality and consultation are preferred over styles addressing quality issues through inspection and control” (Davies et al., 2007; Osseo-Asare et al., 2005, as cited in Bendermacher et al., 2017). Overall, whatever leadership style is adopted, Bendermacher et al. (2017) remind us that “(L)eaders play an important role in the communication climate within the organization, as they can spread messages as well as specific expectations and instructions concerning responsibilities and tasks both vertically and horizontally” (Flumerfelt & Banachowski 2011; Sahney et al. 2010; Sakthivel & Raju 2006).

From the synergy that is evident in the tasks and roles of the OA director and program heads and from the cooperation and collaboration of the faculty, it can be said that in this accreditation pursuit, “shared values, beliefs, expectations, and commitments toward quality’ are present, and may have been present long before 2019 considering the current levels of accreditation that the programs already obtained, for example, Level 2, Level 3, Level 4.

On Processes and Tools

These findings suggest that quality culture processes are observable in this Pphei. These processes include: 1) A mix of several quality instruments; 2) clear accountability lines and clarifying responsibilities at all levels; 3) quality assurance is not imposed; 4) investment in people through staff development and 5) institutional autonomy

First, although there is only one self-survey instrument which the accrediting agency requires the Pphei to answer as part of the accreditation procedure, this instrument could not be completed without employing other survey instruments (to be able to provide data and thereby complete the survey), for example, the different evaluation tools for teacher performance and service-learning activities of this Pphei.

Second, the process of accreditation has clear accountability lines. Figure 2 shows that the process starts with the senior management requesting the accrediting agency for certification. The agency's approval followed this. The president informs the VPAA, who then passes the information to the OA, which consequently connects with program heads for their program faculty to act on. The feedback loop follows the same links until it reaches the senior management, who signs the documents for on-site visit approval. Third, not all programs of this institution go through accreditation, which shows that quality assurance from an external accrediting agency, for instance, is not imposed. In this study, only 14 out of the 90 programs were involved in the 2021/2022 season accreditation. Fourth, staff development is part of this process. In Table 3, the program heads reported that training was conducted to address the accreditors' recommendations. Finally, owing to the autonomous status periodically granted to the university, activities toward accreditation are not closely managed and monitored by senior management, thereby giving middle educational managers avenues for creativity and autonomy. For example, the OA and program offices adopted strategies at their level without VPAA approval.

Conclusion

For this Pphei, quality culture looks like a shared behavior in a chain linking the top senior management to its faculty. However, the development and enhancement of QC are felt most strongly in the interplay between middle managers and faculty. The reported accreditation activities transpired for three (3) reasons: the endorsement and support of senior leadership (the president and vice president for academic affairs) and the synergy of the offices

of the QA and the program heads (management) propelled by their leadership roles, and the shared goals of both the individual and collective levels within each program's cultural environment. These findings illuminate the Pphei's strategic and dynamic quality-assured activities propelled by conditions leading to the attainment of administrative processes that may have been effective over the years, the fact that 11 out of the 14 programs have already obtained a level 4 status (the highest). More importantly, the activities demonstrate shared values, beliefs, expectations, and commitment toward quality.

The reported activities, however, show that without the involvement of other offices mentioned in Figure 3, such as research, community engagement, library, and physical facilities, it is impossible to complete the accreditors' recommendations. Thus, even if the EUA approach helps to analyze a QC, the EUA approach must be extended to include other offices that can directly address accreditors' recommendations. Organization-wide continuous improvement must be shared. QC-focused activities must expand beyond the quality-related roles of departments where QC is strongly felt.

Recommendations

What is missing in the reported preparation for accreditation is student participation and involvement through feedback, e.g., faculty-student exchange of information and experiences, as suggested by Sursock (2011). The realist review of Bendermacher et al. (2017) necessitates the direct participation of students in developing quality culture. The student role is vital because this sector can strongly validate quality culture outcomes. Moreover, what is not also shown by the data are the opposing values that underpin QC (Berings & Grieten, 2012), such as managerialism versus professionalism or collectivism versus individualism. While it is essential to recognize the dialectical nature of QC, its presence in the reported activities is missing.

Another caveat is that if the shared quality culture is not directly translated into improving teaching and learning, their preparatory activities for accreditation may be meaningless. Finally, since the epicenter of the preparatory activities for accreditation

lies in the accreditation and program offices and therefore may not 'permanently' enhance quality (EUA, 2026), collective quality behaviors and mindsets integrated multilaterally across this Pphei, and in the context of regional and global standards, should be considered by this Pphei to advance the development of quality culture further.

Limitations

Data collection did not determine the reasons for the collaborative effort to participate in the accreditation process. Thus, it could not be determined whether the synergy between the two elements of quality culture resulted from the culture of compliance anchored on quality as a core value or the fear of non-compliance, which contradicts constant and continuous improvement. Further research to address these issues is required.

*Federation of Accrediting Agencies of the Philippines (FAAP) was established in 1977 and is authorized by the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to certify the quality levels of accredited programs at the tertiary level to grant progressive deregulation and other benefits (Conchada & Tiongco, 2015).

PAASCU (Gonzales, 2010) is a 'private voluntary accreditation that provides the opportunity for an educational institution to attain standards above those prescribed as minimum requirements by the government' (What is accreditation?). PAASCU assesses an institution by matching the institution's vision, mission, and goals with the institution's actual practice in nine (9) areas: purposes and objectives, school and community, faculty, instruction, library, laboratories, physical plant, student services, and administration.

ACSCU-ACI- Association of Colleges, Schools and Universities- Accrediting Agency, Incorporated (Conchada & Tiongco, 2015)

PACUCOA - Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities Commission on Accreditation (PACUCOA) is a private accrediting agency that formally recognizes an educational institution by attesting that its academic program maintains excellent standards in its educational operations in the context of its aims and objectives

(Ching, 2013; <https://www.pacucoa.com/about>).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Data Access Statement

Supporting or supplementary data associated with this article are available on request. Please contact oi@edu.su.ph

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