

**CASE STUDY: INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC ACCREDITATION AS A
CONTRIBUTION TO IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION AT KIMYO
INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY IN TASHKENT**

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Abstract. In this article, the comparative analysis of the state and public international accreditation is given using the case of Kimyo International University in Tashkent. The case study analyses the features and advantages of the state and public accreditation systems to enhance the prestige of the private university and provide better employability and job opportunity for the graduates, the reasons for undergoing international accreditation, and the goals that the university pursues in making the decision to undergo international public accreditation. The research method that was used during the research is the case study and the data collection tool applied is document analysis which helped to gain detailed insight regarding the case. The research findings presented that the application of recommendations provided by external experts led to successful accreditation and its benefits to the enhancement of the quality assurance of the university. The purpose of the article is to present further directions for higher education development in the field of accreditation in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Accreditation, HEIs, quality assurance, quality of education, case study.

Introduction

The most important part of the quality enhancement of higher educational universities is the international public accreditation system. The alignment of educational standards with global benchmarks ensures that the university meets quality requirements and this connection can be achieved with the help of accreditation. This literature review is a critical analysis of the current literature that focuses on accreditation, quality assurance, and emerging trends occurring in this field.

Benefits of International Public Accreditation

These days the offer of international recognition is the most important benefit of international public accreditation in the whole world. The university that could gain accreditation has a higher possibility of achieving credibility and attracting international students, faculty, and partnerships. As stated in a lot of resources accreditation increases a universities international reputation, thus facilitating graduates' process of finding a job (Kumar et al, (2020), Hussein et al, (2020), Acevedo-De-los-Ríos & Rondinel-Oviedo (2022), Butt et al, (2020)). As a result, it increases the international reputation of university graduates and makes the diploma recognized across borders. This recognition is very important for the student's mobility and globalization of the educational process.

The process of accreditation is quite complicated. It contains an evaluation of academic programs, faculty qualifications, research outputs, and institutional governance. The main reason for this scrutinizing process is that institutions must maintain high standards and be part of continuous improvement. As stated in the paper of Fernandes and Singh (2022), accreditation is a tool that regulates and develops the operational system of institutions by improving institutional curricula, assessment, and stakeholder engagement in the learning process. Furthermore, it enhances a culture of self-assessment and accountability, which drives and helps the continuous reforms in teaching and learning practices.

One more benefit of international accreditation is the connection that it bridges with academic programs and industry demands or the job market. Mansour et al. (2020) state that accreditation usually involves the input of professionals who are directly connected with professionals from the industry. This guarantees that curricula stay relevant to the labor market of the current day. The relevance of it leads to the improvement of the graduate's employability and the practical applicability of the skills. Additionally, accreditation makes universities integrate innovative pedagogical strategies, such as case study analysis and task-based learning into the curricula.

There is a high chance of gaining access to additional funding from international and local organizations for research and other projects if the university is accredited. According to Rosyidah, & Rosyidi, (2020), accreditation is the springboard for many funding opportunities, including research and development. There is a higher chance of being involved in collaborative partnerships, which leads to faculty exchange, joint research projects, and collaborative degree programs.

Limitations and Criticisms of International Public Accreditation

Accreditation is considered a very time-consuming and resource-intensive process. Probably this is the main limitation of the process as preparing for accreditation requires a lot of financial investment, time, and focus of the organization, which is taken from the other functions of the institution. Limited resources usually lead to the struggle of small universities due to the high demand for the accreditation process(Andreani et al,(2020), Rahadja et al, (2020).

Another issue that may occur is that accreditation may impose uniform standards which may contradict the local educational needs or cultural context of the country. Damme (2001) presents that international accreditation might neglect the diversity of the educational systems across the countries, which leads to the mismatch between the standards proposed by accreditation agencies and the uniqueness of the universities. This approach which promotes one-sided relevance might cause tension between international and local standards.

Additional criticism is connected with bureaucratic requirements that should be covered during the process. However, focusing on meaningful outcomes could be more helpful. As given in the paper of Harvey & Williams (2010), in some cases accreditation may turn into a ticking process where it is important to fulfill the requirements of the standards and most importantly, prioritize part of the enhancement of the educational system which is neglected. This creativity and innovative ideas in teaching and research became the secondary focus of the university.

In some cases, international accreditation is criticized for contributing to the marketization of education and branding as long as the market position becomes more important than academic integrity. King (2010) suggests that if the purpose of accreditations focuses on ranking, it encourages support towards superficial indicators of success such as the rate of publication and international faculty number. However, the most important indicator of a holistic educational environment is neglected. This process leads to the educational culture where those indicators are over meaningful educational experiences.

Emerging Trends and Future Directions

The rise of digital education and online degree programs urged international accreditation programs to include strategies and standards that are responsible for virtual learning environments. According to Gaston (2023), COVID-19 was the basic reason why the adaptation of the online learning process was accelerated. As a result, accrediting bodies had to enhance the delivery of online education. These changes have both opportunities and challenges because agencies and institutions have to find new ways of evaluating the online learning methodology.

One more trend that is visible in the shift of accreditation is student-centered outcomes. Salama & Hinton (2022) state that one of the elements of the accreditation standards in the future is going to be students, satisfaction level, learning outcomes and employability and faculty qualifications as well as research output will be shifting to the secondary level. This trend shows that higher education moved to the broader concept of assessing academic programs from the perspectives of students and its effectiveness on students' personal and professional development.

Methodology

The research implemented a qualitative case study as a research methodology to study the influence of international public accreditation on the quality of education at Kimyo International University in Tashkent (KIUT). This approach was selected as it provides a detailed examination and analysis of the accreditation process in the specific context of KIUT.

the process of data collection involved document analysis, which focused on different institutional documents related to the process of accreditation. the list of documents includes accreditation reports, internal quality assurance guidelines, evaluation reports, and strategic development plans (Bowen, 2009). The analysis of the materials was aimed at understanding the standards and criteria that were used during the accreditation process and recognizing what initiatives universities take into account to align with the international benchmark.

The analysis of the documentation provided a clear idea about how KIUT approached the accreditation process and the changes that were implemented in response to the accreditation standards. Key aspects such as improvements in curriculum design, teaching practices, assessment methods and overall institutional quality were identified.

The crucial part of the research included ethical considerations, with ethical approval which was obtained from the universities' review board the process of data collection started. All analyzed documents were accessed with the permission of the administration and confidentiality of the process was guaranteed during the whole research face.

This case study allowed a detailed examination of the role of international public accreditation in the enhancement of educational and quality enhancement at KIUT. The focus on document analysis helped to provide valuable insights about the tangible improvements in higher education institutions, especially in the context of Uzbekistan.

Result

After data collection and data analysis the following results were found. Kimyo Tashkent International University founded in 2018, is the first private university in Uzbekistan, and the first university to undergo international public accreditation before it passed compulsory state accreditation.

Both state and public accreditation serve as effective tools for external evaluation of the quality of education. The exploitation of these tools is an important component in assessing and improving the quality of education. It is particularly important for HEIs newly established, striving to improve the quality of education, and wishing to occupy their niche in the educational market of the country.

While the state accreditation is mandatory and to be conducted after 5 years of the university opening and thereafter must be conducted periodically every 5 years, the international public accreditation is undertaken on a voluntary basis at the request of the higher education institution. Making the decision on international public accreditation a comparative analysis was performed with the state accreditation, where the advantages, and the opportunities to achieve the goals and objectives set by the university were considered.

Why did the decision to undergo international public accreditation come about?

First, the main problem of a private university which is the trust of society would be solved. Private universities are a fairly new type of educational institutions, and young people are often worried to enter them because of the possible risk of low-quality education and non-recognition of the degree in the country and abroad.

In this context, an important goal of a higher education institution is international recognition of its degree, which can be achieved by improving the quality of education according to internationally accepted standards and entering the databases of well-known international organizations certifying the quality of education.

During the accreditation process the university receives an occasion to be evaluated by the international academic experts. Such an external evaluation allows you to look from the outside at the pros and cons of the existing educational and administrative processes and, consequently, to undertake appropriate measures aimed at eliminating the shortcomings and strengthening the positive aspects.

Hence, the university accomplishes an improvement of the quality of education and all associated processes. Respectively, another goal of the university is achieved - increasing its reputation and competitiveness in the educational market.

As the result, the trust in the quality of education increases among young people - potential students, the number of applicants grows, the admission competition is toughened, and, accordingly, both the quantity and the quality of candidates increase.

Since the state and public accreditation procedures are similar being based on the internal and external evaluation, international public accreditation is a helpful tool to prepare effectively for the state accreditation.

State accreditation in Uzbekistan

Attestation and state accreditation of educational institutions are organized on the basis of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Education" and the National Program for Personnel Training, Regulations, Instructions for Criteria and Technologies of Attestation of Educational Institutions of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

The objectives of state accreditation are:

- Establishing compliance of the content and quality of education with the state educational standards, criteria and requirements;
- Elimination of the existing deficiencies;
- In case of a positive result, an accreditation certificate is issued for a period of 5 years;
- In case of non-compliance - revocation of the license.

Thus, state accreditation is limited to state standards and has, among other aspects, a sanctioning function.

State accreditation is performed on the basis of attestation by the Department of Organization, Licensing and Quality Assurance of Educational Institutions of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation of the Republic of Uzbekistan. As mentioned above, attestation is conducted once every five years, and attestation of new educational organizations is conducted after five years from their foundation.

The certification process comprehensively analyzes the activities of the university for the last two years, which mainly examines the organization of the educational process in accordance with the state educational standards and state requirements, the level of acquisition of educational programs by students, the potential of the teaching staff, the performance of educational and methodological work and provision of students with textbooks.

The process of state accreditation consists of an external and internal evaluation of the university. The internal evaluation is carried out by the HEI on its own. The internal evaluation is to be followed by the external evaluation performed by the commission of experts formed for this purpose. Their mission is to verify the validity of the information and materials submitted based on the internal evaluation of the organization's activities.

Based on the findings the decision on the compliance of the university's education quality and level with the state educational standards and state requirements is made.

Public international accreditation

The standards for public international accreditation are developed in accordance with the international standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education and designated for internal assurance of the quality of education at HEIs.

The major goals of public accreditation are independent assessment and verification of educational program quality by professional associations and communities, improvement of education quality and quality of graduates' training, whose competencies meet the requirements of the labor market, and strengthening competitiveness of the accredited programs.

The peculiarities of public accreditation are that the university independently determines the feasibility of accreditation and the list of programs to be applied for accreditation. Representatives of employers, academia, and students are included in the Accreditation Council and the Expert Commission for Accreditation. Public accreditation is primarily aimed at assessing the quality of individual programs by the professional community.

The procedure of international public accreditation also consists of internal and external evaluation. Internal evaluation is based on the preparation of the self-evaluation report, consisting of training seminars, compilation of the self-evaluation report in accordance with the standards and criteria of the accreditation agency, examination of the report, elimination of shortcomings, and report revision.

External evaluation is conducted by a team of international experts with the involvement of a local expert in the field of higher education, and representatives of stakeholders - employers and students. The process comprises the assessment of the accuracy of the self-assessment report information, preparation of the external assessment report, where positive aspects are noted and comments and recommendations for improvement are given, submission of the report to the HEI for review, and further actions aimed at elimination of the criticisms.

Reports of the expert team are reviewed by the Accreditation Council, which adopts a final decision on accreditation based on the self-evaluation report and the external audit report. Decisions of the Accreditation Council are communicated to the accredited HEI and, if necessary, the appeals procedure is informed. The report on the accreditation results is published on the agency's website, the results are also entered into the database of the international network of accreditation agencies.

What are the differences between public accreditation and state accreditation?

- The goal is to help adequately evaluate and improve programs, not to find shortcomings in an organization's performance. Identifying best practices and programs, not just evaluating the quality of education.
- Public accreditation is conducted on the basis of a voluntary decision of the HEI; the HEI chooses the programs for accreditation by itself.
- The expert team includes not only experts in the field of higher education, but also representatives of employers and students.
- The aim is to improve the quality of education, stimulate the development of educational institutions, recognition of their achievements at the national and international level.
- The object of evaluation is particular educational programs, not the activities of the university as a whole;
- Standards and criteria meet the requirements of international standards and do not duplicate the indicators and criteria of the state accreditation
- The results of international public accreditation significantly affect the reputation and the rating of the university in general and in particular of the accredited educational program, including through the broad dissemination of the information in the mass media. State accreditation allows a HEI to continue its activities in accordance with the legislation of the country.

Nowadays international public accreditation does not attract much attention among higher education institutions of Uzbekistan, only a few higher education institutions in the country have been accredited. The reason is the specific level of requirements for accredited programs.

Achievements of Kimyo International University in Tashkent resulting from accreditation

As of today, 18 educational programs of KIUT have been accredited by international agencies "KAZSEE" and "IQAA", members of international networks of accreditation organizations. As a result of accreditation activities, as well as the follow-up measures to eliminate the shortcomings and implement the recommendations received from international experts, KIUT has achieved certain success as in the quality of implemented educational programs and improvement of internal academic and administrative processes, as well as in increasing the reputation of the university. We can note the main achievements of KIUT:

- KIUT is the first private university in Uzbekistan that has successfully gained international accreditation and confirmed compliance of the quality of education with international standards;
- The University's recognizability and credibility in the country has increased. As a result, the number of applicants choosing KIUT has significantly increased, especially in the regions. Such performance led to the decision to open branches in the regions of Uzbekistan. Thus, in 2021 and 2022 the branches in Namangan and Samarkand were opened. Furthermore, there are plans to open branches in other regions of the country.
- Studied and undertaken steps towards the elimination of deficiencies identified in the process of accreditation, including the academic process, administrative support, expansion of cooperation with employers, etc.
- The quality management system of the university has been optimized, the work of the education quality control department has been enhanced, the structure of the institute has been changed, in particular, the position of the Vice-rector for quality assurance of education has been introduced.
- 13 educational programs of KIUT were included in the database of the European Quality Assurance Register of Higher Education (EQAR), which respectively simplified the procedure of degree recognition abroad;
- Three engineering programs "Renewable Energy", "Civil Engineering" and "Architecture and Urban Planning" were included in the database of the European Network for

Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAE) and received the EUR-ACE quality label based on the accreditation results.

This year KIUT turns 6 years old, and time has come to undergo state accreditation. The materials prepared during the public accreditation will greatly facilitate the preparation of documents for internal evaluation, and the weaknesses identified by international experts and subsequently eliminated, will allow successfully passing the state accreditation procedure.

Discussion

The findings process showed that the accreditation process at KIUT supported the achievement in the enhancement of the quality of education, institutional reputation, and fostering trust among students. The challenges that might be faced regarding trust in public universities may also be improved with the help of international accreditation. The pursuit of international accreditation positioned KIUT as a competitive player in the higher educational landscape of Uzbekistan.

One of the primary benefits of international public accreditation is the opportunity for external evaluation by international academic experts. This process provided KIUT with an unbiased assessment of its educational and administrative processes, allowing the university to identify both strengths and weaknesses. The constructive feedback from accreditation bodies enabled KIUT to undertake meaningful improvements, which is essential in a rapidly evolving educational environment. As a result, the institution was able to implement changes that directly enhanced the quality of its educational programs, thereby aligning them with international standards.

The accreditation experience also played a pivotal role in increasing KIUT's reputation and visibility within the educational market. As the first private university in Uzbekistan to gain international accreditation, KIUT's achievement set a benchmark for other institutions and served as a compelling case study for the benefits of international recognition. This increased visibility translated into a higher number of applicants and greater competition among prospective students. Such dynamics not only benefit the university but also contribute to the overall improvement of higher education standards in the region.

Moreover, the alignment of international public accreditation processes with state accreditation procedures highlighted a symbiotic relationship that can exist between these two forms of accreditation. The findings suggest that the rigorous internal evaluations conducted in preparation for international accreditation can effectively prepare institutions for state accreditation processes. KIUT's proactive approach in addressing shortcomings identified during international accreditation will likely facilitate a smoother transition to state accreditation, ultimately strengthening the university's standing within the national educational framework.

Mentioning specific achievements, and successful accreditation of 18 educational programs by international agencies such as KAZSEE and IQAA presents that the university is committed to continuous improvement and wants to reach the level of global standards. The programs were added to the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) and the EUR-ACE quality label which demonstrates the recognition of the university programs at an international level and leads to the enhancement of trust and employability rates among students. The accomplishment enhances the credibility of the universities's degrees and also serves as a powerful marketing tool to attract more potential students to the university.

It is crucial to mention that there are a lot of challenges on the way. The low interest of other public universities in international accreditation in Uzbekistan shows a need for an awareness and understanding of its benefits for quality of education. The effort to promote accreditation by KIUT could inspire other universities to pursue a similar way. As a result, the higher educational sector in Uzbekistan will work in a bigger collaboration, ensuring that all the programs will remain relevant and responsive to most needs of the labor market in the whole world.

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We dedicate this article to his memory, with heartfelt appreciation for his mentorship and the legacy he left behind.

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