# Chapter II

## REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

### **Best Practices in Quality Assurance in Selected Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines in the Light of the Malcolm Baldrige Framework**

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) defines “quality” as the continuity and integrity of the learning environment with the vision, purpose and goals of the organization , demonstrated by excellent results in learning and service, as well as the creation of a successful culture. Three quality viewpoints are defined in this definition: quality as a 'job fitness' used by other organizations to measure and accredit by translating the institution's intent, mission and goals into its learning results, programs and systems; quality as 'exceptional' means distinguishing, meeting exceptionally high standards, or compliance.

The Industrial Revolution 4.0 is an attempt to change the transformation by incorporating digital technology and all assembly lines into a system in which all manufacturing processes operate on computers and on the Internet. Quality management is applied in higher education institutions in order to ensure professional education. However, the definition of quality in HEIs differs based on which context it is in. Students may describe consistency in terms of their learning environment — services and faculties; for parents, it can mean their children's employability following graduation; for the faculty, it can mean the personnel growth initiatives offered by the HEIs; for employers, it can mean the abilities of students entering the workplace. HEI quality assurance therefore needs to be able to manage the experiences of all stakeholders — students, faculty and staff, community and industry, and the institution itself.

In the education sector, the origin of the concept of Quality Assurance was not discovered, but rather imported from the business sector into the HE in the 1980s, and because QA is in the business sector. In the field of education and, in particular, in higher education institutions, the central role in HEI policy is defined. Quality is not a new term and has been used over the centuries and across the millennia and through different cultures. In order to demonstrate that they can be regarded as two definitions on a continuum and that both are needed as continuing processes, both Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement are separated from each other. Quality management, on the other hand, is an integrative measure for the identification of the system for acceptance of existing quality requirements and for the management of the performance standard. One of the six goals of collaboration in the 1999 Bologna Declaration is the implementation of European quality assurance collaboration with a view to establishing comparable standards and methodologies. At the core of the establishment of the European Higher Education Area has been the standard of higher education. An additional layer has arisen in the case of European higher education, which can be referred to as a supra-structure consisting of all institutions and actors, including those representing national authorities, with the goal of building a unity that connects the European higher education systems. In other institutions, they tend to use the word Total Quality Management (TQM) even though the term quality has also been used. TQM 's position has never been well understood in higher education institutions. In several different countries, its use has been a primary issue, with numerous higher levels of concern. For a long time, curriculum services have been in place. Institutions are using the TQM instrument to do so gradually. The internationalization of the HEI resulted in a growing need for transparency and openness , which in turn contributed to the need to build a quality culture when tackling the challenge of globalized higher education. Third party QA reports include independent, objective, external opinions. The efficiency, meaning, consistency and fulfillment of requirements and standards are included in the different dimensions of HEI quality; but no particular quality management mechanism can resolve all aspects of quality, such that decisions are assessed on the quality form.

With HEI recognition, the Philippine External Quality Audit Framework starts and follows a process of quality management, implementation, review, and enhancement. That is followed by the PDCA or Plan-do-check-act loop, or simply the process of Deming. It refers to the willingness of the HEI to (1) transform goals, objectives and expectations (VMG) into expected learning outcomes; (2) establish the right learning environment; (3) evaluate the performance measures and priorities set out in the appraisal system; and (4) strengthen procedures and processes. The period continues as the HEI starts to develop into a prosperous organization. With the assistance of foreign organizations, including CHED and other accreditation bodies, QA is carried out at all HEIs. Similar types of HEIs have clear requirements for the qualifications and associated capacities of their graduates, their programs, staff preparation, learning instruments and support structures, and the nature of their contacts and outreach efforts (CHED Section 9 Memorandum Order No. 46, s. 2012). It offers a very comprehensive overview of the current state of quality assurance in the Philippines, as this is essential for the production of quality-assured qualifications. This is a rundown on "what is" in the Philippines today in the QA atmosphere. As the country's public and private HEIs today are encouraged to work together to develop the Philippine QA ecosystem of higher education today by contributing to a 'QA community led by the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network and its ASEAN Quality Reference Model,' It should be remembered in this respect that CHED typically does not consider consistency as dependent on a degree of modest expectations based on learning results, but rather explicitly addresses outstanding expectations, i.e. those that follow exceedingly high standards. Conferring the administrative duty of CHED to set and implement minimum criteria [RA 7722] now with QA performance specifications that contradict what it does in determining the supposed minimum program standards. In the area of 'exceptional expectations that meet extremely high requirements, do they really have minimal or administrative pressure?' This could be due to the fact that what is done at the bachelor's level already seems to adhere to Level 7 on the PQF. The Philippines has uniform programmatic accreditation for higher educational quality improvement, such as: The Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools and Universities (PAASCU); the Philippine Association of Accreditation Commissions of Colleges and Universities (PACUCOA); the Association of Christian Schools Colleges and Universities (ACSCU-AAI); and Accrediting Agency of Chartered Colleges and Universities in the Philippines, Inc. (AACUP).

The researchers used the Malcolm Baldrige Framework as the basis for the best practices for the quality assurance of HEI for this study. In 1987, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Management Act was signed into law with the intention of enhancing the productivity of US businesses. The Baldrige award program

was then established to recognize and reward role model organizations and sharing common practices, and for evaluating candidates for awards.

**Problem Formulation**

The objective of this study was to identify the extent of implementation of the seven requirements defined on the Malcolm Baldrige Framework (MBF). It also studied the different degree programs and the level of accreditation standards provided by the accrediting agencies.

**Materials and Methods**

Using the Malcolm Baldrige Framework, the researchers used the quantitative approach to classify best practices in selected HEIs in the Philippines. A sample questionnaire using the parameters of the system was used to assess the degree to which QA best practices are being applied in terms of: leadership, strategy, customers, measurement, analysis, and knowledge management, workforce, operations, and results. This work was limited to the best practices that higher learning institutions in the Philippines could have established.

**Discussion**

Remarkably, quality managers, curriculum managers, deans and presidents of colleges and universities have a vital role to play in improving the organization in compliance with the highest practices or criteria of the MBF. Collaborative efforts and teamwork are often needed to accomplish each goal, whether this task is merely a routine assignment or a requirement of accreditation. Institutional leadership has played a crucial role in expressing commitment to quality assurance in the majority of HEIs where senior management is involved in QA systems in one way or another. Leaders led by their workers in the creation of both a quality culture and QA processes are essential to implementation.

In spite of the interaction between the best practice in QA and the degree in accreditation, there has been no important relationship at all. This ensures that whatever degree the institution has of accreditation, if those best practices are to be used as its tools to strengthen its quality assurance, then the operation of the institution is effective.

The MBF serves as an organizational structure and a blueprint for the development of the organization. A good organization can also be reflected in the continuity of the performance attained by the students in the board of directors. In addition, the QA loop itself poses another challenge: the creation of a quality community. In order to improve overall productivity and facilitate continuing results, all partners within the company need to have input into what success entails and adopt the management model. As this study has used the MBF as its tool and reference, it is most likely that the colleges and universities under study have strongly adopted the areas and best practices defined in the MBF while some of them are being adopted, there is still a need to improve them by continuous cooperation, preparation, and fostering the motivation of the workers to increase productivity.

**Conclusion**

Quality assurance is always linked to institutional effectiveness. In this study, the best practices in QA have been brought out and applied by most colleges and universities under study in terms of leadership; financial business; and produce and process results; customer-focused; and workforce-focused have been highly implemented in these respective institutions of higher learning. The best practices mentioned in this study are criteria or considerations in order to perform such task with excellence and efficiency. Some areas were implemented but this does not mean that QA has not been practiced. The level of accreditation and the degree programs have no significant relationships in the extent of implementation in the QA. In brief, the QA best practices have been fully implemented in these eight (8) colleges and universities in the private HEI’s. The researchers recommend to continuously implement and improve the organization by following the MBF's best practices indicators, CHED's QA standards, accrediting agencies' minimum requirements and other international standards for organizational performance enhancement and sustainability.

#### Strengths

The study emphasizes the importance of utilizing the benefits of digitalization to boost employee performance to achieve quality assurance which then contributes to better executions of accreditation tasks.

#### Weakness

The study did not develop a system that caters to the accreditation process but rather only used a website to partially contribute to accreditation requirements.

#### COMPARISON TO THE PROPOSED STUDY

The study did not create a system to accommodate other accreditation documents unlike in the proposed study where it will handle uploading and storing the said documents for easy retention and retrieval at the accreditors’ convenience.

### **Viewing the Top Philippine Universities Through the Photographs on their Official Websites**

**Introduction**

2.2This paper aims to understand how the top four Philippine HEIs visually represent themselves in their official websites, more specifically on how they negotiated their identity building in relation to and in contrast with each other in terms of their teaching, research, extension, internationalization, campus and facilities, and student life, as well as their overall positioning.

To do this, images were gathered from the home and secondary pages of the websites of the Philippines’ top four higher educational institutions (HEIs) and examined using semiotic analysis. The university rankings used is based on the Quacquarelli Symonds Asian University Rankings, which for the past several years, have consistently identified the University of the Philippines System (UPS), together with Ateneo De Manila University (ADMU), De La Salle University (DLSU), and University of Santo Tomas (UST) as the top four Philippine HEIs. UPS is composed of eight autonomous units with the University of the Philippines Diliman (UPD) as its flagship unit.

Thus, to more or less balance the sizes, structure, and the comprehensive nature of the four subject Philippine HEIs, UPD was selected, instead of UPS, as one of the subject institutions of this paper. The four subject Philippine HEIs of this paper are, therefore, UPD, ADMU, DLSU, and UST.

The semiotic technique used by this paper is based on the schematization done by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) involving four levels of visual analyses, namely the studies of visuals as: 1) denotative systems, 2) stylistic-semiotic systems, 3) connotative systems, and 4) ideological representations. This paper primarily relied on the first three levels of semiotics in order to understand how each of these four Philippine HEIs represented themselves and positioned themselves in relation with the other top Philippine HEIs. The results for Level 4 or what are the ideological representations found in these photographs are discussed in another research paper authored by the same research group.

The goal of this study is to examine closely the representation in the institutions’ webpages in the growing visualization, spatialisation, mediatisation, and branding of the top four Philippine HEIs. This will also highlight the role of images in constructing the desires or aspirations of students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders with the hope of attracting new consumers and retaining the existing ones. Results of the study will be highly significant to HEIs stakeholders in particular in the sense that these will: illuminate how campus imagery reproduces particular imagined communities and imagined selves within the context of Philippine higher education; underscore the importance of critical media literacy among them – students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders of Philippine HEIs’ websites; and lead them in creating a social imaginary guided by the idea that imagination is a social practice constructing imagined worlds and imagined selves leading towards acceptance and belonging of Philippine higher education through visualization of the top four Philippine HEI.

**Methodology**

The subject Philippine HEIs of this paper are UPD, ADMU, DLSU, and UST. UPD is located in the Diliman area of Quezon City, Metro Manila. As the flagship unit of UPS, it traces its history back to the founding of UPS in 1908 by the American colonial government. UPD was established in 1939, when UPS decided to set up a new campus in Quezon City. In 2008, the whole UPS was declared as the national research university of the Philippines. Presently, UPD has a little over 1,500 academic staff and almost 25,000 students. ADMU is located in Quezon City, Metro Manila. It was founded in 1859 by Spanish Jesuit priests at the old walled city of Manila. Presently, ADMU has a little over 1,000 academic staff and almost 11,000 students. Although ADMU is producing a significant volume of research output, it did not officially declare itself to be a research university. DLSU is located in Manila. It was founded by Irish-American Brothers of the Christian Schools in 1911. In 2011 DLSU declared itself to be a research university. Presently, DLSU has about 800 academic staff and 12,000 students. UST was founded by Spanish Dominican priests in 1611 in the old walled city of Manila. Presently, UST has almost 2,000 academic staff at almost 30,000 students.Although UST is also producing a significant volume of research output, it also did not officially declare itself to be a research university. All of these four subject Philippine HEIs are comprehensive universities. One of these is owned by the state, while three are owned by religious orders. Although all of these four subject Philippine HEIs are producing significant volumes of research output, only two are officially known to be research universities.

To gather data, the authors of this paper visited the official websites of these four top Philippine HEIs (<https://upd.edu.ph/>, https://ateneo.edu/, https://www.dlsu.edu.ph/, and http://ust.edu.ph/) during the last week of November 2020 and harvested all the photographs including captions that were found on their homepages. From the homepages, the authors also clicked into the secondary pages and harvested all the photographs including the captions. All in all the authors were able to gather 57 photographs from UPD, 43 from ADMU, 125 from DLSU, and 59 from UST, or a total of 284 photographs.

As already mentioned, the theoretical framework of this research is based on the schematization done by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) involving four levels of visual analyses, based on their literature review of published research on the analysis of images and photographs. The four levels of visual analyses identified by Rodriguez and Dimitrova are the studies of visuals as: 1) denotative systems, 2) stylistic-semiotic systems, 3) connotative systems, and 4) ideological representations.

**Results and Discussions**

University of the Philippines Diliman. Based on the 57 photographs gathered from its website, UPD positions itself as an educational institution dedicated to the nation. Backed by its history and tradition, it teaches and molds its students to be critical citizens and leaders of the Philippines. This is evident in the visual representations on UPD’s website where teaching and campus and facilities (with 27 photographs each) are strongly represented in the images gathered from its website. In their online real estate, UPD was able to highlight the key resource in developing their students - their faculty who are given recognition for accomplishments in their fields and important personalities such as their administrators. These images are close shots and provide a sense of intimacy between the subject and the viewer. The Oblation statue, the iconic nationalistic symbol of the university, and the sablay, the official academic costume of UPS reflecting indigenous Filipino culture, were also recurring themes in its website highlighting the importance of these symbols in their teaching. The UPD website also emphasizes the available learning and research spaces for students and faculty. It is able to answer one of the main concerns of students in choosing a university - access to facilities.

With 22 photos, the student life area came in third followed by the research area with 11 photos. UPD’s attention to their culture and tradition can be seen in the student life images gathered from their website. These photographs featured student activities with several images dating back to the earlier years of the university. In contrast to images of the UPD faculty and administrators, these images are generally long shots of students in activities conveying a perspective that the university is not student centered. The images on research pertain to researchers and faculty members who received national and international recognition for their work and facade shots of the buildings dedicated for this use.

On the other hand, the least represented visually are UPD’s extension and internationalization programs. Although UPD has existing international linkages and accepts international students, these engagements are not visually represented on their website.

Ateneo de Manila University. For ADMU, the visual representation of its campus and facilities (15 photographs) is the strongest. These photographs use wide, aerial, low angle, and long shots showcase the university’s surrounding environment. Its website is able to display its top notch facilities and spell the mark of Ateneo education that strives for both academic competence and value formation through a deliberate progression of learning. The second most visually represented is the area of teaching (13 photographs) which depicts the tools of the trade such as laboratory, production studio and laptops as well as photographs pertaining to the Ignatian values portrayed through images of statues and chapels. Ignatian values espouse total formation of each individual to eventually create impact to their communities. These images depict the institution’s commitment to hone its graduates to become transformative leaders.

The areas of internationalization and student life are represented with five photographs each. ADMU’s images of internationalization are long and wide shots of student interactions. The photographs on student life portrays images of student participation in innovative academic instruction as well organizations and co-curricular opportunities. These visuals made use of top shot, close-up shot, and medium shots.

The two least visually represented in ADMU’s website are its research (2 photographs) and extension (3 photographs) areas. This calls for the university’s website to evidently represent its programs of pursuing scholarly investigation and its mission of forming men and women with and for others.

De La Salle University. The 125 photographs from the DLSU website shows strong self representation in the teaching (88 photographs) and student life (85 photographs) areas. These images show how the university is promoting dynamic and innovative teaching and learning practices and providing a well-equipped avenue for students holistic learning opportunities. The photographs show images of collaborative effort among its stakeholders who are committed to furthering the Lasallian mission, the holistic approach of teaching and learning, and the innovative teaching with the strategic use of digital technologies.

The third most visually represented is the university’s campus and facilities with 68 photographs. These images showcase its different campuses and world class facilities available for students and faculty research activities including laboratories, classrooms, open spaces, learning commons, libraries. On the other hand, 50 photographs from the DLSU website pertain to its research areas which show research facilities, with both students and teachers doing research inside university facilities, on the field, and in conferences. These manifested the high value that DLSU places on research.

The weakest representations are in the extension (11 photographs) and internationalization (14 photographs) areas. While there are pieces of evidence pertaining to extension and internationalization, the photographs available on the website are not sufficient to support the initiatives of the university under these categories.

University of Santo Tomas. Majority of the photographs from the UST website pertains to the student life highlighting the emphasis that the university puts in this area. These 36 photos highlight university traditions, student activities, and cultural events and performances on its official website. There is a dominance of students in the collected photographs and absence of teachers, thus portraying the UST learners as active agents of learning. The second most visually represented in the UST website is its campus and facilities where images of the architecture in its campus are given prominence including structures which were declared by the National Museum of the Philippines as National Cultural Treasures. These photographs were taken using long and lower angle shots which make the structures look bigger compared to its normal size and give them symbolic power over the viewer. Vertical lines were also emphasized in the photographs. These images portray the prestige and stability of the university as well as its colonial experiences, historical and religious significance, and notable resistance to the various challenges and issues during colonization and at this present time. UST's beautiful heritage campus attracts students and makes it a context of their various activities. UST is now owned by Filipino Dominicans and this serves its historical connection to colonization.

The third and fourth most visually represented UST’s website are its extension and teaching areas with nine and eight photographs, respectively. Extension photos focus on UST’s COVID-19 response and highlight the involvement of the stakeholders (faculty, alumni, and students) in these endeavors. The website also features a collage of activities which features UST’s community development program. For teaching, there were no photographs that directly depict academic scenes, classroom interactions, or laboratory work from the UST website. However, it features images that showcase religious and spiritual formation events highlighting the central role of religion in the teaching and formation of students in the university.

For the UST website, the least visually represented are the areas of internationalization with four photos and research with three photos. Internationalization is depicted through images that feature diplomatic corps including images of ambassadors delivering speeches or interacting with UST officials. Research on the other hand is portrayed through photographs of its research building and Discurso de Apertura, an academic lecture which was first delivered in 1866 and is a symbol of research conversation and exchange of ideas between distinguished academic leaders and starting researchers. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Catholic identity of the institution is emphasized in these photographs. The research complex was named after St. Thomas Aquinas, patron saint of the university and of Catholic schools. The academic lecture was also held at the university parish church despite its academic nature.

**Conclusion**

Through the analyses of gathered photographs from the websites of the top four Philippine HEIs, this paper was able to establish that UPD has strongest self representation in teaching, and campus and facilities; ADMU in campus and facilities, and teaching; DLSU in teaching and student life; and UST in student life, and campus and facilities. This paper was also able to establish that UPD has weakest self representation in extension and internationalization; ADMU in research and extension; DLSU in extension and internationalization; and UST in research and internationalization.

For the top four universities in the Philippines, the areas of teaching and campus and facilities are on average the most visually represented in their websites. The website as an online real estate is utilized by the four universities to communicate with their various stakeholders. Teaching may be portrayed directly (DLSU and ADMU) and indirectly (UPD and UST) but remains the central focus of all the universities. It reflects how in the Philippines universities and colleges are considered for their abilities to educate and develop students as functioning citizens of the country.

Meanwhile, the images on campus and facilities gathered from the websites of the four HEIs emphasize the spaces available for learning and research in their institutions. More than being an area that is easiest to portray because these are concrete objects, campus and facilities are also used to communicate that these HEIs have the resources to fulfill their brand promise to educate an individual and secure a better future. These images are also used to reflect the storied history of the HEI (DLSU and UST) and convey that these institutions have proven that they are reliable universities wherein you can entrust your or your child’s education. The emphasis on their history also projects how these institutions are prestigious and play significant roles in the history of the Philippines and in driving its development through education as well as in active participation in society.

Research and extension ranked lowest among the six areas. The underrepresentation of images pertaining to research supports the idea that the four Philippine top HEIs are still teaching universities or in transition to research universities.

While ADMU and UST have significant research accomplishments, they have not declared themselves as research universities. On the other hand, while UPD and DLSU have proclaimed themselves as research universities, they are not fully considered as one. Thus, it can be said that there is still no real research university in the Philippines.

Meanwhile, the lack of focus on research of these top HEIs also affects their extension programs, since extension is dependent on research and real extension services need to rely on the result of research activities. Structured partnerships with the community to establish formal research and innovation efforts have not been practiced in the country, resulting in short term community extension engagements and disparity between discovery and applied research.

Internationalization being in the mid rank displays that the four HEIs recognize the need to respond earnestly to “a rapidly changing globalized world and be mindful of global competitiveness” (CHED, 2012) to sustain the institution’s relevance. Similarly, portraying a vibrant student life is also given emphasis on all the websites of the subject universities. Based on the photographs gathered we can sense the importance that these universities afford in promoting the fun of student life which also reflects that these HEIs are seeking higher or sustainable enrollment.

#### Strengths

The study has proven that online presence contributed to compliance requirements from accrediting bodies. The viewing of photos of facilities in the website proved to be beneficial for both accreditors and the university.

#### Weakness

The study only had photos of facilities of the university which is only a small part of the accreditation process.

#### COMPARISON TO THE PROPOSED STUDY

The study did not create a system to accommodate other accreditation documents unlike in the proposed study where it will handle uploading and storing the said documents for easy retention and retrieval at the accreditors’ convenience.

### **Professional public accreditation of educational programs in the education quality assessment system**

2.3The policies of many countries aim to develop a high-quality education system. It is possible only by creating a complex of independent quality assessment based on state standards and requirements as well as on public organizations and independent experts. The latter build their professional activity upon keeping the interests of employers and the academic community. Accreditation has become an important direction in the assessment of the quality of educational services in most countries. In the United States and European countries, the system of public accreditation of educational programs or educational institutions began to take shape in the second half of the 20th century, while Russia has just stepped on the path of developing this line of activity.

Although legal prerequisites for the implementation of professional public accreditation of educational programs were laid down in Russian regulations as far back as the 1990s (for example, according to the legislation that was in force at the time, educational institutions could be publicly accredited by various authorities, both Russian and international, if such accreditation did not incur extra costs for the state, while state authorities were responsible for assisting in public accreditation (Article 37 of the 1992 Law on Education); Article 4 of the Law on Higher and Postgraduate Professional Education (Federal Law of August 22, 1996, No. 125-FZ) established that "the structure of higher and postgraduate professional education is a combination of: ... public and state-public associations (creative unions, professional associations, societies, scientific and methodological councils, and other associations)" and contained other provisions which implied that public accreditation could serve as a means of assessing the quality of higher education). This concept did not gain traction in education quality assessment. There are many possible reasons for this, ranging from the lack of interest from higher education institutions to the lack of support and recognition from public authorities. Nevertheless, the groundwork for the formation and development of this progressive institution was laid by Federal Law of December 29, 2012, No. 273-FZ on education in the Russian Federation.

This regulatory act established the rights of employers and their associations in the field of education, including the right to participate in public accreditation or professional public accreditation, which, in turn, could be used in the state accreditation of educational organizations. However, the professional community and educational institutions have not developed regulations yet, which raises reasonable doubts about the objectivity and effectiveness of this tool in education quality assessment. Therefore, the role of the examined instrument in education quality control generates a wide discussion in scientific literature and academic circles.

On the one side, it is possible to resolve the known problem of contradictions between the knowledge of graduates and the requirements of employers through the use of the phenomenon under study, and on the other side, there are numerous unresolved issues related to the differentiation of this type of education quality assessment from other procedures, as well as to setting the criteria for professional assessment of education, determining the indicators and methods to assess the extent of employer's participation in the assessment of educational programs.

**Methodology**

Following the aim of the study – to examine professional public accreditation (from now on PPA) of educational programs as a means of ensuring that higher education remains relevant to the current socio-economic public needs – the following research methods were used.

Within the framework of the institutional approach, PPA was regarded as a particular legal institution in the system of Russian Law, which has particular specifics and cooperates with other institutions that regulate the implementation of educational quality assessment.

According to Article 96 (4) of the Federal Law of December 29, 2012, No. 273-FZ on education in the Russian Federation, "professional public accreditation of professional educational programs involves recognizing that the quality of education and the competence of the graduates of an educational program of a specific organization implementing educational activities meet the requirements of professional standards and requirements of the labour market to the professionals, workers, and employees of the corresponding specialization".

Within the framework of the systems approach, we determined that PPA of educational programs is a system comprising a significant number of interdependent elements and itself being an element of the education quality assessment system interconnected with other types of accreditation. Thus, we analyzed the significant aspects of state accreditation and public accreditation to determine their similarities, differences, and points of contact in the system of education quality assessment.

The analysis allowed us to identify the essential aspects of the system of PPA of educational programs: subjects, objects, purpose, content, and result. The subjects of PPA of educational programs include educational institutions on the one side, and accreditors on the other side. Considering that the subject of this study is PPA of higher education programs, the mandatory issue is an educational organization implementing bachelor's (academic), specialist's, and master's programs. An accrediting or other organization included in the list of organizations conducting PPA of higher education programs can act as an accreditor. By the Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of November 29, 2018 No. 1439 on amendments to several acts of the Government of the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation is responsible for compiling and maintaining a list of such organizations as well as for making it publicly available on the Internet via the official website of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation.

The official website of the Automated Information System for the Monitoring of Professional Public Accreditation of Educational Programs https://accredpoa.ru/ has a list of 102 accreditors.

Secondary professional education and higher education programs and the related supplementary vocational education programs are the object of PPA. The primary purpose of professional public accreditation is to conduct an independent objective assessment of the quality of education under the accredited educational program based on indicators ignored during state accreditation and based on the analysis of demand for graduates in the labour market, compliance of their skills with the requirements of employers, and best practices and significant achievements of the educational institution. Professional public accreditation of educational programs is voluntary. It begins upon application by an organization implementing educational activities to a public organization implementing professional public accreditation. Organizations conducting professional public accreditation of educational programs are at liberty to determine the procedure, including the choice of forms and methods for assessing educational programs. Due to the lack of clear regulations, accreditation can be conducted either on-site or off-site, based on information provided by the accredited educational organization and publicly available on the Internet and in other mass media.

**Results**

PPA of educational programs is one of the new directions for assessing the quality of education in the Russian Federation. The above-referenced Federal Law provides its legal framework; it establishes the possibility of conducting the following types of accreditation: state accreditation, public accreditation of organizations implementing educational activities, and professional public accreditation of educational programs.

The Law also defines education system management, which includes, among other things, independent assessment of the quality of education and public professional accreditation. That said, professional public accreditation of educational programs and public accreditation of organizations have independent importance and are not included in the system of standards for an independent assessment of the quality of education. Subordinate laws and regulations of the government and federal executive authorities do not provide legal content for PPA. Consequently, it leads to a crucial problem to differentiate different types of accreditation available in the Russian Federation. Relying on the current legislation, the authors of this article undertake comparison of the different types of accreditation.

Based on the obtained data, we can conclude that state accreditation is sufficiently regulated both at the legislative level and at the level of laws and regulations of federal executive authorities. As for other procedures, only their general framework is outlined in legislation, and they are mainly regulated by the acts of organizations that conduct these types of accreditation. Such broad dispositiveness in determining the procedures that affect education quality assessment is an adverse factor for the development of these types of accreditation, preventing their active implementation in education quality assessment.

When conducting accreditation, accreditors rely upon the Basic Principles of Professional Public Accreditation of Professional Education Programs developed by the Presidential National Council for Professional Qualifications on April 20, 2015. According to the Basic Principles, the primary criteria for the successful completion of professional public accreditation include:

* compliance of the professional qualifications of graduates with the requirements for an independent assessment of professional qualifications;
* compliance of the planned learning outcomes of the assessed program with professional standards;
* compliance of the curriculum, work programs, etc. with the planned learning outcomes of the assessed educational program;
* adequate level of material, technical, educational, methodological, and other resources that affect the quality of educational services;
* demand for the professional education program and the employment rate of graduates under the assessed educational program;
* the practical orientation of the topics of graduation theses, practical training programs, the participation of the employer in the formation of the significant documents under the assessed educational program.

In addition to the above, accreditors can introduce additional criteria developed within their organization. For example, the National Association for Territorial Self-Government sets additional standards for the teaching staff, students, and research programs of an educational organization when assessing educational programs in the field of Law – in addition to the general requirements outlined in the Basic Principles of Professional Public Accreditation. As part of its methodology, this accreditor also conducts an additional assessment of the level of interaction of the educational organization with professional and business communities; the efficiency and rationality of the educational organization's management system and the level of its cooperation with other educational organizations, including international ones.

The Expert Center of the Association of Lawyers of Russia sets similar criteria. However, they have additional requirements for "library and information resources". The Kaliningrad Chamber of Commerce and Industry, apart from the essential criteria, establishes an additional requirement for the quality management of the educational program.

The Association of Classical Universities of Russia also assesses the "socio-cultural environment", which should create appropriate conditions for the comprehensive personal development of students, including their professional, creative, and physical abilities. This accreditor requires the socio-cultural environment of the educational institution to be equipped with the permanent museum and library resources, and it determines whether university has a well-developed system for ensuring the quality of services provided and the reliability, completeness, relevance, and availability of information supplied by university about the assessed educational program and educational institution.

It is also important to note that professional public accreditation is a voluntary procedure conducted at the expense of the educational organization and does not provide any rights or benefits from the state. However, its results can be:

* considered during state accreditation (Article 96(8) of the Federal Law on Education in the Russian Federation);
* used by employers and their associations when ranking educational programs accredited by them and organizations implementing educational activities (Article 96(5) of the Federal Law on Education in the Russian Federation);
* considered in the process of allocating admission quotas funded through budgetary appropriations (Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation of July 15, 2013 No. 560 on approval of the procedure of allocating admission quotas for citizens by profession, speciality, and field of study under state-accredited secondary vocational and higher education programs funded through budgetary appropriations of the federal budget);
* used in inter-university and international cooperation and to strengthen the image of the organization implementing educational activities.

**Discussion**

According to Fitch K. «as early as the 1950s, there was an ambiguous attitude to the significance of higher education as preparation for a career». Later this attitude gradually faded away. PPA of educational programs implies the assessments of the major consumers of educational services, primarily employers, for whom the result of educational activities is essential, not the process itself. However, the result is usually outside the scope of assessment of state accreditation. The opinions and demands of parents and students are also crucial for the public assessment of the quality of education. Thus, PPA of educational programs is to combine expectations of employers and capacities of education institutions when developing competencies of graduates. This means that criteria developed for PPA will not coincide with the provisions applied to state accreditation.

The accreditation of educational programs is voluntary and self-regulating, which leads to a crucial problem of public notice of the accreditation results.

The question of whether it is appropriate to publish information about educational organizations that participated in professional public accreditation but did not pass it due to non-compliance with the established criteria is quite complex. On the one hand, disclosure of such information is necessary to protect the interests of applicants, students, and employers. However, considering the ability of accreditors to set their criteria for the successful completion of professional public accreditation and the subjectivity of expert assessment, distribution of information about the failure to pass PPA may create additional risks for the reputation of higher education institutions.

Furthermore, taking into account the fact that successful completion of professional public accreditation can give universities additional opportunities in the allocation of admission quotas, and thus affect the distribution of budget appropriations, the state should carefully control the procedure of assessing educational programs. Therefore, some authors highlight the necessity to integrate the state and public accreditation.

Thus, the priority task of PPA of educational programs is to create conditions for an objective assessment of the competence of university graduates who have completed the program submitted for accreditation, harmonization of interests between labour and education. This goal should also be closely related to the specific demand for graduates from higher education institutions by the economic entities that a particular educational institution focuses. The following points are particularly crucial for PPA of educational programs in the higher education system. First, achieving the necessary level of education in a specific professional field. Second, the practical implementation of professional accreditation open for all interested parties. Third, sufficiently high awareness of legal entities and the population about the quality of educational programs implemented by a particular university, creating conditions for a mutually acceptable level of cooperation between universities and institutes on the one side and organizations engaged in economic activities on the other side. Fourth, providing real assistance in creating a system that would guarantee a high level of education at a university. At the same time, it must meet national and global standards for higher education. Fifth, making it possible to determine the most top quality higher education programs in a competitive environment. Sixth, defining the prerequisites that would facilitate the orientation of higher education institutions towards the most advanced educational programs.

With these goals in mind, the following significant approaches are implemented in the PPA of educational programs. First of all, voluntary participation, i.e. a university or institute itself should determine whether it is appropriate to undergo this procedure and which educational programs are to be assessed. PPA of educational programs should be as open for interested parties as possible, and the final results of accreditation should be publicly available for employers, students, applicants, and their legal representatives. However, this openness is limited. According to the Law, proprietary information and trade secrets are strictly confidential, and educational programs pertaining to protected intellectual property.

One of the essential requirements is that there should be comparable procedures for an objective assessment of the quality of education and competence of students under a specific educational program regardless of university. Establishing uniform procedures would make it possible to build an objective hierarchy of the quality of educational programs.

Priority should be the quality assessment of programs by representatives of organizations devoid of departmental or university’s affiliation to avoid the subjectivity of assessment and increase its credibility. In the assessment of educational programs, it is necessary to distinguish between the quality of an educational document and its impact on the competence of graduates in specific activities after graduation.

It is essential to use a systems approach to the assessment of all educational programs to achieve more reliable results. Another prerequisite is the competence of the persons conducting the assessment, methodological readiness for accreditation examination, information security, and unbiased approach.

The entire process of PPA of educational programs takes several months. It includes various steps: submission of a written application for this type of accreditation; inspection of documents defining the procedure; self-examination of university based on methods proposed by the accreditor; in-office assessment of educational programs by the accreditor. During PPA of an educational program, representatives of the expert community make field trips to take the necessary measurements, conduct interviews, and arrange meetings with interested parties. The next step involves preparing a conclusion of the expert commission based on the undertaken accreditation. Finally, the accreditor must decide according to local regulations. The accreditor has the right to issue a certificate confirming the compliance of educational programs with legal requirements.

The analysis of the current legislation enables highlighting several stages of the check. At the preliminary stage, educational programs are examined extramurally to determine the extent of their compliance with the aspects of the project-based approach and to check whether they are oriented towards achieving high results in the learning process. At the first stage, direct representatives of economic entities and other parties sharing their interests assess the works of graduates under a specific educational program. At the second stage, representatives of legal entities and experts visit the higher educational institution to conduct an on-site examination of educational programs. They check whether the information provided in the self-assessment report correlates with professional standards and objective requirements of the economic environment. At the same time, experts develop the necessary recommendations for improving programs and the level of professionals produced by university. During the second stage, it is required to achieve close coordination between representatives of university and experts. The primary aspects of being assessed are the specific results of the implementation of educational programs and the sections of the self-assessment report that aroused the interest of experts. During their visit to the educational institution, representatives of the expert group meet with the managers of the educational institution and the persons responsible for developing specific educational programs. The experts thoroughly analyze the management of educational programs, discuss the use of advanced methods with the teaching staff, and carefully examine the curricula, educational programs, and teaching guidelines. During the second stage, experts should have access to all educational facilities and equipment, including computer classrooms. At this stage, it is established explicitly whether the content of educational programs corresponds to the actual educational process and how the content meets the interests of representatives of economic entities. It may be difficult for experts to provide a quantitative assessment of criteria due to primarily descriptive factors. Finally, experts often use different rating systems, and the difference between these rating scales does not fully reflect the views of experts conducting the assessment, which negatively affects the results of the study. It is possible to avoid the ambiguity of expert approaches by using a standardized procedure, because assessment criteria would not be related to the specific content of educational programs. This reduces the subjectivity of expert assessment, which has a positive impact on the results of the entire procedure. Expert opinions on the examination of educational programs can contribute to their improvement and structuring.

PPA conducted by authorized organizations results into, «first, removing risks for universities no to comply with international quality standards for higher education; second, it ensures the improvement of educational program structure; third, it contributes to development of the expert pool in higher education. The preparation for accreditation by international standards and rules, its information support, and a long-term experience of self-assessment, are a powerful incentive for development of all participants of the educational process.

Based on the results of accreditation, a higher education institution creates prerequisites for further improvement of techniques and methods that affect the development of educational programs. Another critical effect of accreditation is the actual dissemination of advanced approaches in academic circles, allowing higher education institutions to meet the demand of legal entities for highly skilled professionals for commercial production in the context of market transformations. Considering that results of PPA of educational programs to analyze the effectiveness and efficiency of their practical implementation, this type of accreditation allows us to draw certain conclusions about the extent to which the developed educational programs meet the goals and objectives that higher education institutions pursue when training professionals necessary for the national economy at the present stage.

**Conclusion**

Having examined the institute of PPA of educational programs that is forming in the Russian legal system, we can draw the following important conclusions. Being one of the new types of accreditation provided for by Russian legislation, PPA of educational programs is actively developing, gaining a vital position in the system of education quality assessment and actively increasing the number of participants and the quality of examinations. Within the framework of PPA of educational programs, new assessment criteria being developed – such that would be important and necessary under current conditions with allowance for the interests of employers, the requirements of students, and the capabilities of educational institutions.\

PPA of educational programs serves to assess the demand for the main direction of development of the educational program and its connection with real-life conditions in the labour market. It also aims to determine whether a professional with specific competencies would meet the demands of the market and the economy. We should note that documents regulating the implementation of educational programs should fully correspond to the competencies gained by university graduates. The level of satisfaction of representatives of business organizations and graduates of higher education institutions with the results of educational programs is an essential component. The teaching materials used by the teaching staff as well as the logistical conditions for the implementation of educational technologies directly influence the quality of educational programs. Another important aspect is the availability of financial and information resources, which affects the compliance of educational programs with the requirements established in the realities of economic activity.

On a positive note, we should note that as a result of this procedure, employers can form a competency model of a graduate following the needs of the market without implementing resource-intensive measures like training and retraining of personnel, and to order the training of specialists with the necessary qualifications.

For applicants and their legal representatives, PPA serves as a source of information, since it allows for a more reliable and objective assessment of the quality and demand for educational services provided by educational organizations. As a rule, the main goal of pursuing higher education is the professional fulfilment of the future graduate. In this connection, obtaining reliable information about the compliance of educational programs with the expectations of employers also performs an essential predictive function. This function allows applicants and their parents to evaluate the prospects for employment under the programs of specific universities to avoid spending time and money on non-demanded educational services.

For higher education institutions, participation in an independent assessment of the correspondence between the process and results of education allows them to more objectively assess and improve their competitiveness and reputation, determine the significant directions for the development of educational activities, and rationally allocate in-house resources.

A university or institute that has successfully passed PPA of educational programs has the right to present the results of the assessment of educational programs during state accreditation and, most importantly, during the distribution of admission quotas. Universities can also publish information about the completion of PPA of educational programs on their official website.

At the same time, considering the importance of the goals and objectives of independent assessment of the quality of educational services, its procedure should become as transparent and unified as possible, taking into account the specific aspects of the assessed field of study or specialty.

#### Strengths

The study has proven that online presence contributed to compliance requirements from accrediting bodies. The viewing of photos of facilities in the website proved to be beneficial for both accreditors and the university.

#### Weakness

The study only had photos of facilities of the university which is only a small part of the accreditation process.

#### COMPARISON TO THE PROPOSED STUDY

The study did not create a system to accommodate other accreditation documents unlike in the proposed study where it will handle uploading and storing the said documents for easy retention and retrieval at the accreditors’ convenience.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### **Revisiting Accreditation in the Philippines**

2.4For a skeptic, education is a huge business. Every day, we see advertisements in the tri-media (TV, radio, print) depicting happy young men and women donning their corporate attires and savouring the fruits of securing a bright future: an air-conditioned work station, a fulfilled family life, and a jam-packed Friday night with friends. These ads, apparently of educational institutions, suggest the best things about themselves.

The concept of “quality learning” is a stale unique selling proposition (USP) employed by higher education institutions (HEI). We know it; students choose a school based on personal preferences. The constant rape of this marketing strategy has resulted to an overwhelming mass appeal. Notwithstanding the staleness, the incorporation of the concept of quality to the art of educational advertising remains a perfect catch-all of everything true and beautiful.

Quality assurance is the dilemma of 2,247 higher education institutions in the Philippines today. You can just imagine how the concept of quality is continually rehashed through various promotional campaigns. Our relaxed system allows for a variety of options, and since higher education is highly valued in the country, none of these thousand-strong schools will admit mediocrity.

Quality assurance process in higher education has been present since the 1950’s. This process, called accreditation, focuses on the assessment of programs using external peer reviewers. The first agencies that conducted accreditation—the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities (PAASCU), the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities - Commission on Accreditation (PACUCOA), and the Association of Christian Schools, Colleges, and Universities, Inc. (ACSCU-AAI)—mainly catered to private schools. Collectively, they comprise the Federation of Accrediting Agencies of the Philippines (FAAP). On the other hand, accreditation of state colleges and universities started in 1987 when the Accrediting Agency of Chartered Colleges and Universities of the Philippines (AACCUP) was established. The Association of Local Colleges and Universities – Commission on Accreditation (ALCUCOA) followed, to service institutions chartered by local governments (e.g. Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila).

**Recognition vs. Accreditation**

The Philippines is one of the countries that distinguish “recognition” from “accreditation” in the context of higher education. An HEI is recognized when it is allowed by the government to confer college degrees. Conversely, the process of accreditation takes place when an HEI taps an external body to check if it adheres to a set of universally accepted standards.

There are three reasons why schools opt to undergo accreditation. It can be (1) a basis for government subsidy, scholarships, and grants; (2) a basis to claim a certain level of prestige; and (3) a basis to determine the areas that are needed to improve on.

In countries such as India and France, the two terms are used interchangeably. Since accreditation is a mandatory practice sanctioned by law, unaccredited institutions are not recognized by the government. In the United States, while individual states (e.g. California) are given the liberty to recognize a college, the federal government discourages students from enrolling to an unaccredited institution. Graduates of these schools are usually barred from applying to government and private offices, and cannot use their credentials when they decide to pursue further studies to an accredited university.

**How is accreditation conducted?**

Accreditation can be an assessment of a program or the whole institution. Before a school program gets accredited for lowest level, it needs to have a candidate status. A candidate has undergone preliminary survey visits and has become certified as capable of acquiring accredited status within two years.

Below are the different levels of accreditation as defined by the CHEd-issued Revised Policies and Guidelines on Voluntary Accreditation in Aid of Quality and Excellence in Higher Education:

**Level 1 Accredited Status** – Programs have been granted initial accreditation after a formal survey by the accrediting agency and duly certified by the accreditation federation/network, effective for a period of three years.

**Level 2 Re-accredited Status** – Programs which have been re-accredited by the accrediting agency and duly certified by the accreditation federation/network, effective for a period of three or five years based on the appraisal of the accrediting agency.

**Level 3 Re-accredited Status** – Programs which have been re-accredited and have met additional criteria/guidelines set by the federation/network for this level.

**Level 4 Accredited Status** – Programs which are highly respected as very high quality academic programs in the Philippines and with prestige and authority comparable to similar programs in excellent foreign universities.

**Issues and Concerns**

Similar to the procedures conducted by many quality assurance bodies, an institution wishing to be accredited undertakes a self-study of its organizational and program profile. It is then followed by an on-site review by a team of experts. But no matter how systematic and rigid the process of accreditation is, there have been criticisms over the years. There is the question of comparability among the accreditation statuses awarded by the different agencies, as well as the function of accreditation to improve institutional quality.

Perhaps the most important issue is using accreditation to improve institutional quality. The specific exercise of accreditation in the Philippines is largely based on evaluation of inputs to quality (facilities, faculty, policy, etc.) rather than of outputs (employability of graduates, service to society, extent to which the institution’s mandate and vision are being met), which are ultimately more important, though more difficult to measure (Ordoñez, 2007).

**Conclusion**

The private nature of accreditation is keenly protected by the accrediting agencies. There is no single document that explicitly emphasizes quality of instruction; rather the standards are in the various guidelines in the form of memoranda. This allows for more leeway that is widely exploited by spurious HEIs. Only 18% (or 1 out of 5) of our colleges have been visited by accreditors.

The Philippines is experiencing the momentum of mass higher education that is inversely matched by a waning quality of learning (Corpus, 2003). CHED has to be more functional in the surveillance of the accrediting system. It may consider shifting from pure voluntary accreditation to prescribed accreditation, since accredited institutions eye government subsidy. An HEI which has reached Level III or IV are bound to be demoted if it does not maintain the quality expected of it.

The lens of scrutiny being used in Level 4 accreditation has to be fully disclosed for public consumption. As laid down in the Policies on Voluntary Accreditation in Aid of Quality and Excellence in Higher Education issued by the CHEd, a Level 4-accredited program exemplifies outstanding research, teaching strategies at internationally acknowledged levels, global linkages, and contributions to society. As regards research, there are only four universities that actively submit research in international scientific journals. A UNESCO-sponsored study has even found that most faculty members in Philippine schools consider their master’s thesis as their only research output. As regards global linkages, a few HEIs have been admitted to two of the most selective international university networks (One school is a member of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU); only three schools were elected to the ASEAN University Network).

Quality is context-bound and multifaceted. One cannot easily set parameters to define it. Nevertheless, quality assurance is still possible by asserting firm standards in which every educational institution will be subjected, since evaluation and standards always go hand-in-hand. When standards are not attuned to the times, conforming to these would be antagonistic to the whole purpose of doing it.

#### Strengths

The literature exploits the issue of the universities in the Philippines not being able to be visited properly by the accreditors.

#### Weakness

The literature concludes that only 1 out of 5 universities have been able to have a successful visitation done by the accreditors.

#### Comparison to the proposed system

The proposed system would hopefully contribute to the successful accreditation process by alleviating the need for visitation for document inspection purposes.

### **Travel: Department of Tourism accreditation goes digital with new online system**

2.6 MANILA, PHILIPPIINES– Tourism enterprises can now apply online for accreditation with the Department of Tourism (DOT) with the launch of its Online Accreditation System.

**Tourism Secretary Bernadette Romulo-Puyat** said the system, accessible through a website, promises to ease and speed up accreditation requests from local tourism establishments.

She said the new system will facilitate accreditation requests, contactless transactions, and hazard-free government services under the new normal. Target users are accommodation establishments (AEs), travel and tour agencies, tourist transport operators, tourism frontliners, meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) facilities and organizers, health and wellness services, and other tourism-related enterprises like restaurants.

“This system fulfills President Duterte’s call for the streamlining and automation of services in the Ease of Doing Business Act signed in 2018 and the Bayanihan to Heal As One Act, which directs government offices to expedite delivery of services in view of Covid-19”, said Secretary Puyat in her opening remarks.

The Tourism Act of 2009 (RA 9593) mandates the DOT to ensure the harmonious implementation of the standards and procedures for the accreditation of tourism enterprises nationwide. The accreditation portal is an upgraded version that provides for the creation of business accounts, email verification, real-time application status notification and an upcoming online payment system.

“This is a strong reflection of the DOT’s own advocacy towards the adoption or shifting to e-commerce and contactless transactions as recommended protocols in the new normal. Now more than ever, the digitalization of our accreditation system proves timely as we roll out new health and safety guidelines for the new normal for primary and secondary tourism enterprises,“ added Puyat. Once accredited, tourism enterprises are certified as having complied with the minimum standards for the operation of tourism facilities and services.

As of Sept. 15, a total of 10,042 tourism enterprises were accredited nationwide, or an increase of 32.36 percent from the figure in 2019. “Through the new system, we hope to ease the burden of local businesses, including the MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) who collectively form the backbone of the tourism industry,” the tourism chief said. A total of 6,045 hotels, resorts and other accommodation establishments were issued Provisional/Certificates of Authority to Operate (PCAOs/CAOs) during the community quarantine, in compliance with the DOT guidelines.

#### Strengths

The literature shows that digitization of operations have gained positive outcomes and thus should be adapted by organizations

#### Weakness

The weakness of the literature is the information dissemination to constituents outside NCR who are still using the traditional manual way.

#### Comparison to the proposed system

The literature is in line with the goal of the proposed system.

### **Virtual accreditation visits for pharmacy programs in light of the COVID-19 pandemic: Team members' perspective**

2.6 Accreditation agencies are essential for continued quality assurance of educational programs. The amount of time and manpower to evaluate health professional programs can be both laborious and costly. Nonetheless, education standardization is necessary to ensure achievement of learning outcomes, the success and longevity of educational programs and the institutions offering them, and the wellbeing of subsequent patients which benefit from competent health professionals. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many health professions education providers, including pharmacy, to take their learning and teaching activities online, and we believe this same virtual transition model may be a windfall to reduce cost and time burdens on accreditation agencies while maintaining high standards of qualifications.

Through experiences with both national and international virtual accreditation visits during the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe a model shift from onsite to virtual accreditation visits (VAVs) may become the new “normal” and a benefit to all of those involved. This wisdom of experience article aims to provide personal observations, ideas, and commentary from a group of United States and international accreditation team members to address virtual quality assurance issues and challenges in a post-pandemic world. Using the “What? So What? Now What?” reflective model, this manuscript will also discuss positive and negative effects that reviewers face, changes to their practices, perceptions, and potential opportunities.

During 2020, many schools and colleges of pharmacy around the world were asked to cease face-to-face campus instruction and immediately withdraw students from experiential training sites and hospitals due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Immediately, there was an urgency-driven conversion of pharmacy curricula to an online distance learning format. To maintain the quality of education and to achieve the required outcomes, educators and preceptors were called upon to become innovative and creative. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, accrediting bodies lost the ability to conduct onsite accreditation reviews due to rapid institutional closures, travel restrictions, and social distancing mandates. The initial response by some regulators was to postpone the scheduled accreditation site visits to later dates. Very few responded by quickly shifting to VAVs as they believed that pandemic-imposed restrictions would be short-lived. It was not until later in the process that accrediting bodies started to slowly embrace VAVs.

The difference between an onsite visit and VAVs in theory seems simple enough. Instead of packing, traveling to a destination, spending the night in a hotel, and reporting each day to the college undergoing a review, one simply awakes from their own bed, reports to a room in their home, and signs on to their computer or laptop. As we all learned from 2020, working from home in your sweatpants is a perk for many. However, VAVs are not without challenges. The Table outlines six different observations experienced by team members and indicates the arbitrary relevance for each condition, national or international. These include observations relating to travel, time zone differences, computer technology, communication/cultural immersion, virtual site walk throughs, and variability among reviews.

Table 1

Observations from team members on virtual accreditation visits.

| What? (descriptive level from  observations) | Nationally  experienced | Internationally  experienced | So What? (assumptions, conclusions,  beliefs) | Now What? (actions) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| TRAVEL   * Reduced expenses for travel and board of the team. | X | XX | VAVs cost less money and may be an  economical choice for international or  interim accreditation visits. | Additional funds can be used to develop  other services or incentives to benefit  quality of team members. |
| BIOLOGICAL CLOCK   * Time zone differences. | X | XX | Potentially affect team members'  cognition and level of participation. | Select reviewers within a certain  distance of site to ensure similar time  zones. |
| COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY   * Technology for communication is dependent upon individual accreditation team member's resources | X | X | Variances in software may be outdated  or require additional support. Delays in  team members' participation due to  technology issues may affect quality of  review. | Additional funds from minimized travel  may be used to ensure equitable  technology resources. |
| COMMUNICATION and  CULTURAL IMMERSION   * Accreditation team members meet team and site members virtually | X | XX | Relationship building and  communication during VAVs may be  hindered. | Develop virtual forums, games, or meet  and greet sessions to promote  interpersonal dynamics |
| VIRTUAL SITE WALK THROUGH   * Accreditation team members review site virtually through videos | X | X | Professionally developed videos may  not accurately reflect reality of site and  pose ethical considerations. | Propose VAVs include a live component  walkthrough with time for Q/A to  ensure accuracy and accountability for  virtual tours/videos. |
| VARIABILITY   * Variability in visit format, onsite, fully virtual, or hybrid | X | X | Quality assurance standards are similar,  but the effectiveness of their verification  might be negatively affected by the visit  format. Virtual visits might be  inadvertently biased toward institutions  with more robust electronic learning  infrastructure making them more  comfortable engaging in a virtual visit  and enhances their ability to provide  evidence electronically. | Alert programs and institutions to the  importance of having all  documentation electronically available,  accessible, and securely sharable.  Provide awareness/training activities  on who will conduct VAVs and  expectations |

Q/A = question and answer; VAV = virtual accreditation visit.

a X indicates the arbitrary importance experiences in setting by team members conducting either a national or international accreditation site review

The team members felt one of the most important differences with VAV when compared to onsite visits centered on technology and connectivity. This is common with VAVs involving reviewers form different countries or sites in different countries than the accreditation team, where differences in computer communication software platforms (Zoom [Zoom Video Communications], Skype [Skype Technologies], Go-to-Meeting [LogMeIn], Microsoft Teams [Microsoft, Corp.], etc.), connection stability and speed, devices, and time zone make the process cumbersome. For example, for one international site visit in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) the nine-hour time zone difference required a domestic wake alarm for two o'clock in the morning to attend simultaneous meetings. Yet for some, this might be a small price to pay for comfort and to sleep in your own bed.

Another challenge faced with VAVs is meeting people online is simply not the same as in person. Soft skills and body language interpretation are often blunted on a screen. When participating in question/answer sessions, mute buttons, hand raising toggles, and chat box windows are not the same and introduce barriers in communication. Another difference experienced by the team was the inability to physically walk through the college site under review. The VAV team had to solely rely on what was presented to the team through videos. The dimensional loss from three to two on a computer screen has the potential to lose important details and gloss over areas not wanting to be highlighted by the schools. This may or may not paint an accurate picture of the school under review.

Nonetheless, VAVs continue to be an option for accreditation reviews and with the continued mutation of COVID-19, it is unlikely we will completely return to the way accreditation onsite visits were conducted in the past. Using experiences gained from this emergency-driven online VAV, we can develop our knowledge and theories of future VAVs.

**Analysis/interpretation: so what?**

After participation in both national and international VAVs over the past year, our team identified several challenges for consideration. For the most part, the challenges associated between national and international VAVs are similar but with slightly different levels of importance as experienced by the team. (See Table 1) These differences included travel, time zone, and communication/cultural immersion.

With the lack of travel, one barrier to consider is the lack of accompanying acclimation to time zone differences, especially for international accreditation reviews. This requires reviewers to engage in meetings outside the normal working hours or inconvenient times. This could potentially affect team members cognition and level of participation due to sleep deprivation. Additionally, team members may still try and conduct regular work during the business day and not be fully engaged in their accreditation review duties.

Other challenges are the inability to inspect the physical facilities and the lack of face-to-face social interaction between the stakeholders and the visiting accreditation team members. In the absence of onsite presence, team members will not be able to experience the culture of the school and/or country. This is especially true for international visits. As such, team members might need to undergo psychological adaptation in terms of VAVs. This includes any apprehension of adequacy of interpersonal interaction provided by virtual meetings, confidentiality of the process, and willingness to give more control over to institutions for visit pro- ceedings. During traditional on-site visits, interpersonal skills are not only important for the reviewers' and institution members' in- teractions, but also for the deliberation and discussions among members of the visit team itself. Another similar issue with some members of national and international VAV teams is the notion that virtual meetings might not be as engaging as onsite meetings. This requires awareness and training within the accreditation bodies, among accreditation teams, and in the academic community.4 Other areas concerning accreditation teams, albeit to variable extents, is the evaluation of programs that quickly adapted to an online distance learning (ODL) model. As faculty had to quickly pivot from live to virtual education due to COVID-19, the site team may need to adjust their expectations of the site, faculty workload, and faculty development as this transition greatly affects a multitude of factors.

It is undisputed that ODL directly affects course design, content, delivery, and student assessment.6 Effects also extend to other pharmacy accreditation standards such as faculty online skills, online training, professional development programs, and teaching load calculations. Accreditation teams are mainly concerned with the quality assurance of education. However, in a remote learning environment, accreditation teams are concerned with student services and support, students' orientation programs, training, and equitable access to technology and support. Of paramount importance is mental and social support for students and faculty in online learning environments.7 ODL also broadens the definition of the academic campus, resulting in the need to enhance learning resources and information technology support to include content creation facilities and tools, online communication and instruction platforms, and online assessment procedures. ODL also expands the definition of education crisis management. All these aspects might be quite challenging to accreditation reviewers. More specific to pharmacy, accreditation teams may need to require the addition of tele-health, drive-thru vaccinations/virus testing, and tele-pharmacy to clinical rotation(s) or ask for a standalone tele-pharmacy rotation in advanced pharmacy practice experiences to accommodate emerging health care practices that have gained momentum as result of COVID-19 and are becoming a part of the new normal.

Accreditation teams had to adapt to the distance nature of VAVs and were required to review programs that quickly put in place nontraditional and online equivalents of normal in-person instruction to address the COVID-19 restrictions. As the primary responsibility for evaluating the quality of academic programs lies with the accrediting organization, the effectiveness of VAVs could be hard to predict and the efficacy of evaluations and reports from the VAV teams in comparison to previously assessed curricula may be difficult to reconcile. Moving forward, this is something accrediting bodies must consider.

**Conclusions: now what?**

Through our experiences with VAVs, we question issues central to the educational quality assurance process: the readiness of virtual teams to participate in a non-traditional review setting (VAVs), the accreditation review of programs that have significant virtual components due to the rapid conversion from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the availability of robust standards to rely on in the era of digital education. To facilitate the process of a streamlined quality assurance program for a post-COVID-19 world, accreditation bodies and team members around the globe should share their experiences and best practices during this pandemic, especially those who have integrated ODL in its accreditation standards and have already transitioned to VAVs or blended reviews.

When designing and preparing teams for VAVs in the future, we have identified key areas for consideration (Table 1). VAVs have advantages and present potential opportunities as they would have a reduced cost benefit since they require no travel or hotel accommodations. Additionally, a blended or hybrid VAV format could allow institutions and accrediting bodies to organize shorter onsite visits that would increase the efficiency of the accreditation process. Also, they would allow flexibility in choosing the reviewers from any country without travel and visa limitations. VAVs can potentially provide extended coverages to places and times where and when travel is not possible. Additionally, expenses saved from travel have the potential to fund other worthy causes which might have been put on hold due to tighter budgets. These funds could be used for virtual accreditation training modules or used to ensure equitable technology resources by purchasing reliable technology equipment for team members. VAVs also open the opportunities for new work dynamics as the experience gained from organizing and engaging in VAVs might present practices that can be adopted as norms in the future. Other areas for consideration include development of virtual interactive sessions to facilitate interpersonal dynamics and comradery among reviewers. When considering the site facilities, another consideration would be the inclusion of live questions/answers facilities tours be used to ensure accountability among schools. Finally, one question remains, how and/or should we compare previous onsite visits to VAVs or a hybrid VAV?

It is our hope that these observations may facilitate conversations with accrediting bodies to permanently add or include a hybrid version of VAVs to their armamentarium of tools for accreditation visits. However, an alternative to VAVs can be to simply continue postponing all visits until circumstances allow onsite visits. Accreditation bodies could defer visits for currently accredited programs with minor or no changes to their curricula, and instead arrange for virtual review of initial accreditations or programs with major curricular changes. With the ease of pandemic restrictions, a blended or hybrid model can be adopted, with some reviewers on site and others working remotely, or a hybrid model, with some tasks done online and other tasks done onsite. In a blended setup, members of the accreditation teams participating from distance will feel more assured as they rely on those colleagues who are onsite for input, clarifications, and feedback. In a blended or hybrid model, accreditation teams would review the self-study and enclosed documents from their desks then could hold virtual meetings with the institution and each other to resolve ambiguities and gain clarifications efficiently and effectively.

Even after considering perspectives from team members who participated in VAVs, an underlying question remains, how much of the activities of accreditation visits need to focus on the quality assurance of the ODL mode of delivery, which was overwhelmingly adopted by all pharmacy programs? Also, do the accreditation teams need to consider it a temporary shift in focus, or a more transformational change in instructions? A follow-up question then emerges: do accrediting bodies have sufficient coverage of ODL in their standards and quality criteria for review teams to rely on for their evaluation, and do reviewers have sufficient training to evaluate the ODL mode of delivery? The answers to these questions were variable and depended heavily on the set of the quality assurance standards used. For example, the standards of the Commission for Academic Accreditation of the UAE include a specific annex for e-learning which has been used by accreditation teams to audit the readiness of higher education institutions for ODL delivery and guided institutions in their transition into ODL and efficacy demonstration. Other accrediting bodies considered ODL just one of the instruction methods used in the programs' delivery and relied on institutions to provide evidence for its effectiveness and comparability to face-to-face instruction.

Nonetheless, no matter what form accreditation visits assume in a post-COVID world, that format should be able to verify the standards and assess the effectiveness of the program to the same level of the fully onsite review. It is clear as we march later into the pandemic, that there is a global trend to transform education into hybrid-learning models that mix face-to-face instruction and training with ODL activities.

**Implications**

Higher education institutions, accreditation bodies, and government entities will use their experience during COVID-19 to transform and improve their future practices. Although the current situation is dynamic and unpredictable, by making the most of the current social distancing mandates, new guidelines should be placed to better suit VAVs. Even if there is a full return to in-person education, these guidelines will be present and improved to serve those who cannot attend in-person due to illness, pregnancy, travel, convenience, war, etc. Striving for better online education practices is the intention of all involved in professional education and accreditation. Another intention is to utilize better methods to educate students online while maintaining the quality provided by face- to-face education. The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed people's views on life and reminded us that life is ever changing. The same transformation is true for health care and professional education. It is crucial for educators and accreditation bodies to evolve as we enter these unprecedented times.

#### Strengths

The literature proves that utilizing online platforms reduces accreditation process burdens and actually increases its success.

#### Weakness

The weakness of the literature is the capability of the constituents to actually adapt the process as not every organization has the technical infrastructure to support such processes.

#### Comparison to the proposed system

The literature mentions the proposed outcome of this study which is to boost accreditation efforts especially document inspections through online systems.