

Quality Assurance in Mongolian Higher Education

Narantuya Otgonbayar¹, Khurelnyam Samdan², Altangerel Balgan³

¹University of the Humanities, Mongolia, 0009-0001-5350-4961, narantuya@haumanities.mn

²University of the Humanities, Mongolia, 0009-0008-1725-0168, khurelnyam@humanities.mn

³National University of Mongolia, Mongolia, 0000-0001-6120-6684, altangerel.b@num.edu.mn

Abstract: *Quality assurance can be a driver for higher education institutions to achieve excellence in their activity. However, ensuring that the quality of higher education programs meets local and international standards simultaneously has become a great challenge in many countries. Globalization in higher education has resulted in a growing demand for quality education, in turn it causes challenges and obstacles to overcome.*

The aim of this paper is to present a general view on main aspects of quality assurance in Mongolian higher education. It provides an overview of curriculum accreditation of universities as well as university ranking process as a mechanism to ensure quality in higher education. From the study, although the quality assurance in Mongolian higher education is getting more consistent with the global standards, there are some weak areas that need to be addressed. From the study, it is concluded that the government involvement should be reduced in quality assessment process, and it should facilitate fair competition between universities.

Keywords: *quality assurance, higher education, accreditation, university ranking*

INTRODUCTION

Countries around the world are rapidly transitioning to a knowledge-based society and economy. Knowledge and creative human capital have been considered more important than natural resources and physical capital for economic growth. Economic competitiveness requires a flexible and adaptable education system that facilitates systematic collaboration and problem identification at the macro level. Creating such a system definitely depends on sustainable governance. Free choice, decentralized management and trust in professional teams such as lecturers and education leaders enable education systems to be more flexible. Supporting a more competitive economy requires lecturers and learners to set broad goals and work together in a safe and active learning environment where everyone can participate and use different methods to achieve those goals.

Educational institutions in Asia, particularly the countries with transition economies, like Mongolia, are facing similar challenges to increase their economic competitiveness and growth. This study aimed to review the current situation of the quality assurance in Mongolian higher education, covering two areas like curriculum accreditation and university ranking.

Comparing economic competitiveness involves creating a complex measurement of institutions, policies and structures, using sub-indices that reflect differences across countries. The Economic Competitiveness Index is based on the following ideas (Porter et al., 2004):

- Economic development can be analyzed in terms of the macroeconomic environment, the quality of public institutions, and technology.
- The significance of the factors determining economic competitiveness varies across countries, whether they play a primary role or a secondary role in innovation.

Based on these commonly-used factors to determine economic competitiveness and the knowledge economy indicators, three main areas of focus are considered when explaining economic growth.

- education and training (human capital)
- application of information and communication technology
- innovation and technology (Chen & Dahlman, 2004; Porter et al., 2004).

The reforms implemented in higher education field under the influence of globalization aim at improving the competitiveness of national higher education. It is clear from the fact that education plays a special role in improving the competitiveness of a country's economy.

Quality assurance in higher education became one important step for improving the quality of higher education. Even though quality assurance has been widespread since the 1980s, as the most important reforms in higher education worldwide, it did not take much time to develop due to the support of

international and regional quality assurance organizations. According to the experts, the Global Competitiveness Strategy includes strategies, such as creating “World-Class” universities, merging universities, prioritizing quality assurance, internationalization of universities, expanding cross-border higher education, and building regional alliances. While government funding for higher education has been declining in most countries over the past few decades, targeted investment strategies to develop “world-class” universities are underway. Merging universities is often associated with the goal of achieving world-class university status. Quality is regulated through accreditation and internationally recognized assessments, which aims to elevate the status of educational institutions, attract talent and the world’s best scholars. Economic competition has accelerated the transformation of universities around the world to become international. Through this process of internationalization, universities manage to attract the top international scholars and students, increase their research capacity, and create opportunities to enhance their reputation. Cross-border higher education, also known as transnational or borderless higher education, is increasingly being used as a means to develop higher education institutions into hubs for international students and scholars. By creating alliances that share the same goals and resources across the nations and regions, the policy that promotes high-quality education and research by increasing mobility between higher education systems is being implemented.

Current status of quality assurance in Mongolian higher education

Within the framework of higher education reforms in Mongolia, many forms of quality monitoring have emerged, including the National Council for Education Accreditation, which is responsible for implementing the accreditation of higher education institutions and programs. The Mongolian National Council for Education Accreditation (MNCEA), which was established in 1998 by the State Administrative Organization for Education, created a legal framework for it to operate as a self-funded, non-profit organization based on the experience of the United States in conducting external quality assurance activities with public participation.

The introduction of external quality assurance in Mongolia began in 1998, first with institutional accreditation of universities, and then with accreditation of curricula. The accessibility of external quality assurance reports and the results are important resources for increasing the public trust in higher education. All parties of Mongolia’s higher education system are trying to align the higher education quality assurance to international standards. The scope of quality assurance is defined by the structure and size of the higher education system. In Mongolia, the government, namely state organizations and implementing agencies, intervenes the quality assurance process even though the authorized body, the MNCEA, claims some level of independency from the government. In 2007, the MNCEA made amendments in the “Preliminary requirements for the accreditation of higher education institutions and vocational education and training institutions” and the “Criteria for institutional accreditation” in regard with strengthening of internal quality audit and establishment of quality management mechanisms at higher education institution in order to systemize and foster continuous quality improvement. Following these directives, some large universities (University of the Humanities, the School of Economics of the National University of Mongolia, the School of Computer Technology and Management of the Mongolian University of Science and Technology) initiated internal quality assurance activities, conducting self-assessments against the criteria and performance indicators of respective international quality assurance and accreditation organizations (UNESCO report, 2010). Although the number of higher education institutions as well as the number of students have dramatically increased for last few years, low-cost and low-quality academic programs still need to be addressed. Over 40% of graduates each year are unemployed, which indicates either the programs are not relevant to the labor market or graduates’ skills do not meet labor market requirements. Therefore, improvement of the national quality assurance is a big challenge of the Mongolian higher education system, and this will surely enable to encourage the institutional and curriculum review process as well as employability of graduates. Quality assurance assessment is being implemented in the three levels in Mongolia, the quality assurance system level, quality assurance agency level and higher education institutional level.

At the system level, some amendments were made in the Law on Education and the Law on Higher Education with the purpose of improving quality assurance and accreditation process. At the agency level, the twinning project between an international quality assurance agency, ASIIN and MNCEA was

conducted in 2016-2018. As a result, new standards and procedures for institutional and curriculum accreditation were developed more aligned with international standards. At the higher education institutional level, higher educational institutions started to establish their own quality assurance units, contributing towards the complex and coherent quality assurance system. However, the political instability and the high turnover rate of the state officials in charge often hinder the effective implementation of these efforts and positive outcomes. For Mongolian higher education institutions, internal and external assessment methods are used. Internal assessment supports self-assessment for universities to review and measure their performance and quality indicators themselves, while external assessment involves monitoring and audit by other authorized organizations.

Accreditation process in Mongolia

Accreditation is an important process in higher education worldwide, assessing and certifying the quality of educational programs offered by universities. The MNCEA started implementing curriculum accreditation on a voluntary basis in 2004. Curriculum accreditation is conducted every 5 years. The Mongolian government grants scholarships to students who study in-demand majors at accredited universities. Therefore, there is a need for universities to have their in-demand majors accredited.

The main objectives of university curriculum accreditation are assuring the quality of education, promoting continuous improvement, increasing public trust, and facilitating credit transfer.

Accreditation ensures that educational programs meet accepted standards and provide high-quality education that equips students with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed. It also encourages institutions to evaluate their programs whether they remain up-to-date and relevant. Moreover, accreditation serves as a quality measurement to prospective students, employers, and the public. Accredited programs are more likely to be accepted by other institutions, allowing students to easily transfer their credits and continue their studies elsewhere.

To qualify for accreditation, university curricula must meet detailed criteria, which typically include curriculum planning, teaching, facility and technology, management and organization, student-oriented services, faculty, and quality assurance.

University ranking in Mongolia

The first effort with the purpose of ranking the Mongolian universities was made in 2023. The Order "The Quality Assessment of Higher Education" by the Minister of Education and Science approved the criteria for higher education institutions and their curricula, as well as the criteria for determining the effectiveness of universities in implementing sustainable development goals. In accordance with these criteria, the Education Evaluation Center organized a quality assessment of curricula in cooperation with professional organizations.

The officials claimed that quality assessment, organized in collaboration with the Times Higher Education, would not only provide higher education institutions with valuable data and evidence to use for factual decision-making, but would also enable them to make rational decisions at the national and university levels, such as developing policies, programs, and new initiatives, properly and efficiently allocating resources, and improving strategic planning.

The first university ranking was planned based on some provisions of the "Vision 2050" policy document, the Law on Higher Education, and the Medium-Term Development Plan for the Education Sector. They include:

- ◇ The national ranking of higher education institutions will be released every two years in collaboration with an internationally recognized authorities based on the electronic database
- ◇ Increase the number of higher education institutions that meet the international standards, improve their quality, and establish national research universities with internationally ranked and recognized programs
- ◇ State-owned universities will transition to a system of independent governance, and rankings for educational institutions will be established
- ◇ Universities will be developed regionally, and research universities will financially be supported by the state.

61 state-owned and private universities operating in the 2022-2023 academic year got involved in the quality assessment. The assessment was conducted in 3 areas. The first indicator was *Higher education institutions*, which was evaluated based on 13 sets of criteria with 273 sub-indicators. The second area, the *Higher education curricula*, was assessed using 15 sets of criteria with 391 detailed indicators. The final area was to define the impact on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. To assess it, 17 sets of criteria with 256 indicators were used.

The data collection process for the quality assessment of higher education institutions was organized in two phases: collecting data according to key indicators and carrying out satisfaction surveys. The outcomes of this quality assessment process were planned as following:

- Ranking of higher education institutions nationwide was established based on performance, quality, and criteria.
- By organizing quality assessment of higher education, educational institutions can implement evidence-based planning and actions, conduct self-assessment and benchmarking, and operate a detailed analysis dashboard to foster continuous improvement.
- Each educational institution will make a valuable contribution to identifying areas for improvement in ensuring the quality, accessibility, and equity of education, and to establishing a system for monitoring and evaluating its performance, based on evidence.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative research approach and was sketched in descriptive research design. We used 20 curriculum accreditation reports in 2019-2024 from different universities and analyzed each criterion of the document. For the study, we also used the report on the national university ranking, released in 2023 by the Ministry of Education. It was the first ever experience to rank Mongolian universities based on international standards in collaboration with the “Times Higher Education”.

RESULTS

Curriculum accreditation is still viewed as an indicator of the performance of the department and faculty rather than a mechanism for curriculum improvement, as a result some reports have been written as an analysis of the performance of the curriculum implementing units.

The results of the study indicate that there are some problems such as lack of participation of stakeholders (employers, graduates, etc.) in the development and improvement of the curriculum, surveys are taken from stakeholders to just meet the accreditation criteria, poor coordination between courses, work load of lecturers and the insufficient financial support for student research. There is also a common problem that universities use internal quality assurance as a tool to meet the accreditation criteria rather than a sophisticated system. Student satisfaction is higher for private universities compared to state-owned universities, especially students of private universities are happy with lecturers' communication and skill, learning environment and student service. The workload of lecturers at private universities is much more overwhelming though. It might be due to the fear of private universities to lose their students as students prefer to choose state-owned universities because of low-tuition fee, university reputation, government grants, scholarships, and so on. There is a common tendency among the public that state-owned universities are better quality. For state-owned universities, lecturer satisfaction is higher than student satisfaction. It might be related to light workload, more chances for teacher exchange programs or cooperation with professional organizations on projects, flexible working hours, professional development programs, and research supports to lecturers of state-owned universities. From the findings of the study, it can be seen that there are lot of advantages for state-owned universities because they are financially more powerful than private ones. In brief, private universities have to make more effort to survive. One surprising result was learning environment and facility at state-owned universities scored low.

For ranking, employers, parents, guardians, lecturers, students, and alumni participated in the evaluation and gave satisfaction ratings on the quality of education, activities, lecturers' skills and knowledge, learning environment and service quality of universities. When ranking universities by quality of education, research, funding for research, foreign relations, and learning environment, the Mongolian National University topped the list with 83.5 percent, followed by the National University of Medical Sciences, the

University of Science and Technology, and the Mongolian National University of Education. The top indicator, 94%, was training at the National University of Mongolia. The universities in the survey got the lowest scores in foreign relations, the top of which was 50% at the National University of Medical Sciences. From the survey, universities have many joint programs with other universities abroad, but the results were not good enough. It might be due to students not meeting the requirements of the host universities, lack of foreign language skills, and poor financial resources. Other non-sufficient result was research work of the universities, especially it was poor for private universities. The number of research articles published in Scopus-indexed or Web of science journals was taken into account for this indicator, but the publication fee can be costly compared to the salary of lecturers, so it may be more about finances than skills.

As this big-scale work has been done for the first time, there might have been mistakes. Yet, by implementing a performance-based quality management system in the higher education sector, some positive outcomes have been achieved. For example, performance indicators in the higher education sector will become complete, accurate and reliable, and statistical data platforms will be updated. In addition, support will be provided to the best departments, lecturers, and universities, and a competitive funding system for higher education will be established. This will also help students choose quality majors and courses. Educational institutions will be provided with the basic preparation to be ranked according to internationally recognized standards. Moreover, the rankings of higher education institutions serve as a basis for providing support, loans, and scholarships to students of the institution as specified by relevant laws. Last but not least, establishing the university ranking may encourage quality education and the lifelong learning system.

Finally, experts believe that in the future, it will lead to create higher education institutions that meet international standards, improve quality, and create conditions for an internationally ranked and recognized national research university.

CONCLUSION

The quality assessment of higher education in Mongolia is being implemented in the areas of institutional and program evaluation, which is fully consistent with the global trend in modern educational management. In general, there has been a strong trend to implement a combined system such as using summative and formative assessment as well as carrying out institutional and program accreditation in quality assessment.

It can be concluded that it is necessary to implement a policy of reducing government funding for state-owned universities and diversifying their income sources. In this way, an environment for fair competition will possibly be created.

As higher education institutions become an essential factor for determining the economic competitiveness of countries in the global market, there is a need to further improve the quality assessment system and mechanisms in the higher education sector of Mongolia. As in other Central Asian countries, the quality assessment system in Mongolia is relatively dependent on the government. Thus, the government involvement should be reduced in quality assessment. The government should treat universities equally without discriminating them in terms of ownership (state-owned or private), increase the involvement of the external organizations in assessment and ranking process, improve the quality of higher education by creating fair competition and enlarge the participation of private universities in policy and decision-making process.

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