Toward Contextualized Accreditation: Reconciling Universal Quality Standards with Institutional Diversity in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT:
This study suggests that a key challenge in higher education accreditation is the limited contextualization of quality standards to institutional realities. Through a scoping review of accreditation-related studies and structured interviews with academic administrators, the study develops the De Facto Accreditation Response Model (DFARM) to illustrate how universal, one-size-fits-all accreditation mandates produce compliance paradoxes, evidence deficits, and capacity gaps—particularly in resource-constrained institutions. The analysis reveals that when standards fail to account for institutional diversity in mission, resource endowment, and regional context, they force performative compliance rather than genuine quality enhancement. The study proposes contextualized accreditation as an organizing principle for policy reform, articulated through three dimensions: context-sensitive standards that reflect institutional mission and capacity, adaptive audit processes that shift from adversarial monitoring to developmental partnership, and locally-defined outcome metrics that move beyond uniform proxies to authentic measures of student competency.

Keywords: Contextualized Accreditation, Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Policy Reform

1. Introduction

Accreditation has become the primary mechanism for assuring higher education quality worldwide, providing a formal process for evaluating whether institutions meet established standards (Duarte & Vardasca, 2023). UNESCO defines it as evaluation against predetermined criteria (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007), while CHED describes it as an assessment certifying whether an institution meets appropriate standards (CHED, 2012). Across jurisdictions, these standards share a common assumption: that quality can be defined and measured through uniform criteria applied consistently across diverse institutions.

Student outcomes, defined as the knowledge, skills, and attributes students acquire by program completion, have become a central focus of accreditation standards (CHEA, 2021; PAASCU, 2021). In the Philippines, CHED's 2012 outcomes-based quality assurance (OBQA) framework shifted quality assurance toward learner competencies and employability (CHED, 2012), while accreditation systems internationally have incorporated continuous quality improvement (CQI) through the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle (Brahimi et al., 2016; ENQA et al., 2015). Collectively, these developments position accreditation not merely

as a periodic evaluation but as a mechanism for fostering continuous institutional improvement.

Yet the gap between promise and reality is stark. Empirical evidence linking accreditation to improved student outcomes remains limited (Almurayh et al., 2022). Studies document a persistent "compliance paradox" where rigid standards encourage short-term increases in activity in anticipation of audit visits rather than continuous improvement. (Roy et al., 2020; Sziegat, 2021). Faculty experience accreditation as an administrative burden that diverts time from teaching (Hail et al., 2019; Yang, 2024), while resource-constrained institutions struggle to meet infrastructure demands designed for well-funded universities (Pham et al., 2022; Aupetit, 2022). The current system, this study argues, treats institutional diversity in mission, resources, and context as a complication to be managed rather than a reality to be accommodated.

This paper reframes the accreditation crisis as a problem of contextualization. The study develops the De Facto Accreditation Response Model (DFARM), revealing that barriers commonly attributed to poor implementation, capacity gaps, episodic compliance, and documentation for procedural compliance are structural consequences of applying uniform standards to heterogeneous institutions. The study proposes contextualized accreditation as the organizing principle for policy reform, articulated across three dimensions: context-sensitive standards, adaptive audit processes, and locally-defined outcome metrics.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative multimethod design. The first phase was a scoping review that adapted the PRISMA-ScR checklist (Tricco et al., 2018), searching ProQuest and ScienceDirect, supplemented by Google Scholar. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed articles (2015–2025) that examine the relationship between accreditation and student outcomes or CQI in higher education. Data extraction used a structured, AI-assisted process with all outputs manually verified, and thematic synthesis followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second phase assessed ecological validity through structured interviews with four academic administrators from Philippine SUCs and private HEIs, using six open-ended questions aligned with the theoretical framework. Data were analyzed via deductive pattern matching to validate active mechanisms and capture barriers and enablers.

3. Results

The scoping review identified these core themes. Accreditation as a driver of institutional reforms for continuous quality improvement , including establishing permanent QA units and operationalizing PDCA cycles (Kamel, 2020; Pham et al., 2020; Bui & Yasri, 2024); accreditation as driver to curriculum refinement and assessment improvements through constructive alignment (Youssef et al., 2024); as driver to a culture of accountability and shared ownership (Singh & Kshirsagar, 2023). When structural reforms align with a quality culture, studies indicate tangible improvements in student success, including higher pass rates and improved employability (Alenezi et al., 2023; Garwe et al., 2024). However, significant barriers hinder effective CQI: administrative burden, “cosmetic adaptations” rather than deep reform, and episodic compliance (Hail et al., 2019; Aupetit, 2022; Meiklejohn et al., 2023). Sustainability remains a challenge, with improvements appearing only as temporary spikes during accreditation visits and a pervasive compliance paradox which rigid standards restrict genuine educational development (Roy et al., 2020; Sziegat, 2021; Yang, 2024).

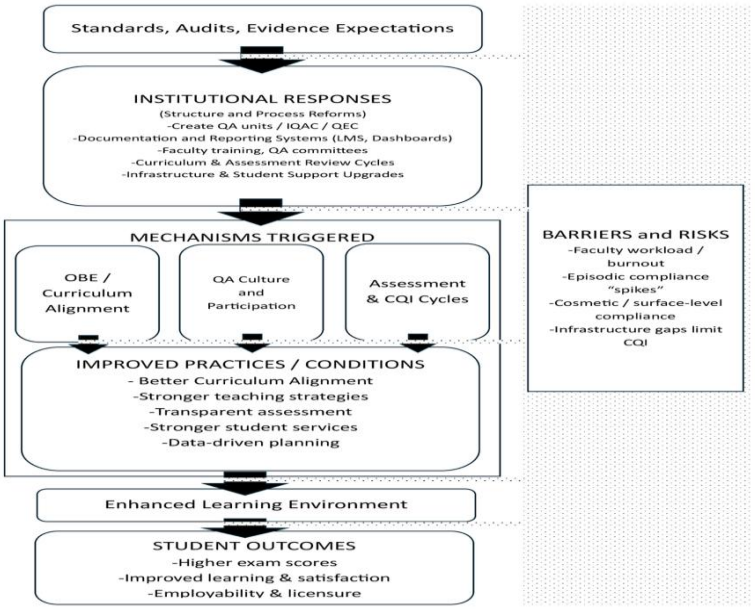

Figure 1. The De Facto Accreditation Response Model

These themes were organized into the De Facto Accreditation Response Model (DFARM). The DFARM posits that accreditation serves as an external mechanism that establishes standards, accountability expectations, and evidence requirements for HEIs. In response, institutions implement structural reforms (establishing QA units, documentation systems, and curriculum review cycles (Pham et al., 2020; Kamel, 2020; Javed & Alenezi, 2023)) which activate three quality mechanisms: (a) outcomes-based education and curriculum alignment, (b) a culture of shared responsibility, and (c) systematic CQI cycles. Through these, institutions aim to strengthen teaching and learning. However, the model identifies critical moderating factors: faculty workload, compliance fatigue, and audit-driven bursts of activity (Hail et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2020; Yang, 2024). Structured interviews with administrators validated these mechanisms. Practitioners confirmed that accreditation forced systematic documentation and curriculum alignment, but also acknowledged persistent gaps in the "Check-Act" phases of PDCA. First-time participants highlighted institutional readiness as a steep learning curve (Pham et al., 2022; Hilliger et al., 2022). Crucially, these interviews revealed that the barriers are not random implementation failures—they are predictable consequences of applying uniform standards to institutions with vastly different levels of resources, missions, and student populations.

4. Discussion

The DFARM, validated against both literature and practitioner experience, exposes a structural tension at the heart of accreditation: the system's foundational assumption of institutional uniformity collides with the reality of profound institutional diversity. This section argues that the three most commonly diagnosed dysfunctions of accreditation—the evidence deficit, the compliance paradox, and the mandate-capacity gap—are not separate problems requiring separate solutions. They are symptoms of a single underlying cause: the failure to contextualize accreditation to the institutional realities it is meant to serve.

The Problem with One-Size-Fits-All Standards

The assumption that all higher education institutions (HEIs), regardless of vision, mission, size, resource capacity, or student and faculty population, can satisfy uniform accreditation standards is structurally problematic. By overlooking institutional diversity, standardized requirements often encourage performative compliance rather than meaningful quality enhancement (Aupetit, 2022). Institutions with

limited infrastructure, constrained budgets, and teaching-oriented missions are assessed against the same expectations as well-resourced research universities, despite fundamentally different operating conditions and contexts. Consequently, requirements for extensive documentation, continuous assessment, and quality assurance systems may exceed the capacities of many institutions (Pham et al., 2022). Rather than promoting continuous improvement, these demands frequently centralize quality assurance within administrative units, reducing faculty ownership and limiting pedagogical innovation (Hilliger et al., 2022). Time is spent in documentation rather than creation; compliance rather than innovation. As a result, accreditation systems that fail to accommodate institutional contexts risk widening inequalities across the higher education sector, enabling well-resourced institutions to meet compliance expectations while forcing resource-constrained institutions to prioritize documentation over educational improvement. Small and new institutions have different priorities however because the demand and direction is accreditation, there is a challenge of addressing the context needed innovations and the compliance to accreditation requirements.

The Evidence Gap Caused by Decontextualization

Although institutions demonstrate considerable progress in strengthening quality assurance structures and processes, evidence directly linking accreditation to improved student outcomes remains limited. Reported gains are often inferred from indicators such as employability or examination performance (Alenezi et al., 2023), but these findings are inconsistent across disciplines and institutional contexts (Almurayh et al., 2022). This evidence gap stems not only from measurement challenges but also from the use of decontextualized accreditation standards. Uniform evidence requirements, such as documentation, meeting records, and standardized reports, similar areas and indicators being measured encourage institutions to demonstrate compliance with prescribed processes rather than the quality of student learning. Consequently, CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement) focuses on verifying the existence of quality assurance mechanisms rather than evaluating their educational impact. A contextualized accreditation approach would enable institutions to adopt outcome measures aligned with their missions and disciplines, such as portfolio assessment, clinical competency evaluation, or community impact documentation, thereby strengthening the connection between accreditation evidence and authentic student learning.

When Compliance Takes Priority Over Context

The DFARM highlights a compliance paradox in which rigid, externally imposed accreditation standards stimulate intensive preparation immediately before accreditation reviews but rarely produce sustained quality improvement (Roy et al., 2020). Institutional efforts often peak during accreditation cycles and diminish afterward, reflecting a system driven more by external accountability than by internal quality culture (Sziegat, 2021). The extensive documentation required for accreditation also diverts faculty time and institutional resources from teaching, learning, and other core academic functions, contributing to increased workload and compliance fatigue (Hail et al., 2019; Yang, 2024). These demands are particularly burdensome for resource-constrained institutions, where limited capacity shifts attention toward satisfying accreditation requirements rather than improving educational practice. Consequently, accreditation risks rewarding an institution's ability to demonstrate compliance through documentation rather than its effectiveness in enhancing student learning and institutional quality.

Policy Recommendations

The analysis above suggests that the current accreditation trajectory is sustainable only as a compliance exercise, not as a quality-enhancement strategy. To bridge the gap between policy intent and educational reality, this study proposes contextualized accreditation as the organizing principle for reform. Rather

than three separate strategies addressing three separate problems, contextualized accreditation offers a unified framework: every dimension of the quality assurance system—standards, processes, and outcome measures—must be calibrated to institutional context. The following three dimensions operationalize this principle.

Dimension 1: Context-Sensitive Standards

Policy frameworks should replace one-size-fits-all accreditation standards with flexible approaches that recognize institutional diversity. This requires three key reforms. First, accreditation standards should be calibrated to institutional type, ensuring that infrastructure and quality assurance expectations reflect differences in mission, size, and resource capacity. Second, institutions should be permitted to demonstrate quality through mission-aligned indicators, allowing, for example, community engagement outcomes to substitute for research productivity where appropriate. Third, governments should provide the foundational resources needed to support quality assurance, including sustained investment in digital infrastructure, faculty development, and dedicated QA personnel, rather than imposing requirements that exceed institutional capacity (Pham et al., 2022). Without addressing these foundational resource constraints, reforms to accreditation processes and outcome measures are unlikely to produce meaningful or sustainable improvements.

Dimension 2: Adaptive Audit Processes

The current adversarial audit culture must be restructured into a developmental partnership that adapts to institutional capacity. Accrediting bodies should reweight evaluation criteria so that evidence expectations prioritize trends of continuous improvement, such as PDCA cycle effectiveness, over static checklist compliance. A "Growth Scoring Mechanism" that tracks improvement since the previous accreditation cycle would reward sustained progress rather than one-time attainment and would be particularly meaningful for institutions at earlier stages of quality maturity. Site visits should devote substantial time to examining CQI implementation and engaging with institutional action plans rather than verifying document completeness. Furthermore, a mandatory pre-evaluation mentorship period, in which accreditors offer guidance rather than audit, would build trust and reduce the resistance documented in the literature, while establishing a pool of change-management consultants drawn from experienced administrators who can support resource-constrained institutions in navigating complex reforms. Broad stakeholder participation should be mandated through mechanisms such as Student Quality Assurance Councils, ensuring that quality assurance becomes a shared institutional responsibility rather than the domain of a small administrative group.

Dimension 3: Locally-Defined Outcome Metrics

To resolve the evidence deficit, the definition of "success" in accreditation must be contextually grounded. This requires moving beyond uniform, easily quantifiable proxies (pass rates, faculty-to-student ratios, resource inventories) toward authentic measures of student competency that are appropriate to each institution's mission and context. Policy should mandate the implementation of longitudinal graduate tracking systems that capture career trajectory, professional competency attainment, and community contribution over three to five years, while allowing institutions flexibility in the assessment methods used to demonstrate student learning: portfolio review and capstone evaluations for programs emphasizing critical thinking, clinical competency assessments for health professions, employer satisfaction surveys and job placement data for vocationally-oriented programs. Accreditation reports should incorporate contextually relevant outcome evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of institutional practices rather than simply document their existence. By emphasizing demonstrated student learning over procedural compliance, accreditation can shift from verifying the presence of quality assurance mechanisms to evaluating their educational

impact, making the process more meaningful and evidence-based.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the structural dysfunction of higher education accreditation through the lens of contextualization. Synthesized through the De Facto Accreditation Response Model (DFARM), the findings reveal that the most commonly diagnosed failures of accreditation, namely episodic compliance, evidence deficits, and capacity gaps, are not independent problems but interconnected symptoms of a single underlying cause: the application of uniform standards to institutionally diverse higher education systems. When accreditation treats institutional diversity as a complication rather than a design parameter, it produces a system in which well-resourced institutions can comply with relative ease, whereas resource-constrained institutions are driven toward performative documentation that diverts resources from their core educational mission. The analysis demonstrates that contextualized accreditation, implemented through context-sensitive standards, adaptive audit processes, and locally defined outcome metrics, offers a coherent policy framework for transforming accreditation from a culture of verification into one of evidence-based improvement. Future research should longitudinally examine the impact of contextualized accreditation frameworks on institutional quality improvement and student learning outcomes, with particular attention to how institutional characteristics, including resource endowment, mission orientation, and regional context, influence the effectiveness of quality assurance interventions

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8. Author Declaration

The author confirms the originality of this work and declares no conflicts of interest. The De Facto Accreditation Response Model (DFARM) was first introduced and explained in a Discussion Paper, which the author published with UP-CIDS.

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