

## **Session 3-3**

### **Benefits from both American and Taiwanese External QA Processes: The Case of Ming Chuan University**

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#### **Abstract**

During 2005-2011, Ming Chuan University underwent the accreditation processes of both MSCHE (Middle States Commission on Higher Education) and HEEACT (Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan); the former is a regional accreditor in the USA while the latter is a national accreditor in Taiwan. Although the two accreditation bodies share a similar mission to advance higher education, due to the difference of higher education systems in their respective society, they have rather different accreditation beliefs in terms of their roles in the accreditation process. As a result, the timelines, procedures, and the reviewers' attitudes also differ.

Based on biographical analyses and in-depth interviews of the leaders and administrative managers, this article recounts MCU's experiences in both accreditation processes. Because the accreditations took place simultaneously, differences between them may be manifested. A comparison of both accrediting bodies is undertaken, not only regarding the differences and impacts of their evaluation criteria and procedures, but also the beliefs and contextual forces behind them. Moreover, how these two processes benefited MCU and how MCU adapted to cope with the rather distinct styles of each accrediting body are discussed.

## **Introduction**

To distinguish itself from other private higher educational institutions in Taiwan, Ming Chuan University (MCU) has established strategies to achieve its vision of becoming an international university. This vision is closer to becoming a reality, as MCU was granted accreditation status by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), a regional institutional accreditor in the USA, in November of 2010.

The process of attaining MSCHE accreditation started in 2005. As an institutional accreditation (as opposed to accreditation for specific programs), a university-wide effort was required. At times, it seemed cross-cultural and language barriers might be insurmountable. However, the effort proved fruitful after five years of improving institutional effectiveness and educational quality. MCU staff and administration learned much throughout the process; the university has become a more accountable organization and has gained an unprecedented high-level reputation.

While undergoing the MSCHE accreditation process, MCU also executed the accreditation process of the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT), a national accreditor. This accreditation process—unlike the MSCHE process, which is voluntary—is mandated by Taiwan’s Ministry of Education. While MSCHE examines an institution as a whole, HEEACT examines academic programs within an institution. At MCU, forty-nine programs underwent the HEEACT accreditation process; the site visit took place at October 2008. MCU obtained an excellent result in this accreditation process: Except for one doctoral program rated as “under observation,” all the other forty eight programs were accredited. This result was rated at 4<sup>th</sup> best among 53 comprehensive universities that underwent a similar accreditation cycle during the period of 2006-2009 (<http://www.week.mcu.edu.tw/oldweek/738/focus.htm>).

Uniquely, MCU underwent the accreditation processes of both the MSCHE and the HEEACT during the same period (2005–2011) and benefited from both. Although the two accreditation bodies share the same goals of quality assurance (QA) and improving higher education, influenced by the contextual forces of their own cultures, they have differing practice in terms of timelines, procedure and other elements, which can be traced back to their different core philosophical concepts of promoting QA in higher education (HE).

Based on biographical analyses and in-depth interviews of the leaders and administrative managers of MCU, specifically the ones with experiences in both accreditations, this research has two purposes. First, a comparison of the MSCHE and the HEEACT as accrediting bodies is undertaken, specifically in terms of their

evaluation criteria, the design of their accrediting processes, and their accreditation procedures. The comparisons will focus not only on the factual differences but also on the beliefs and contextual forces behind the procedures. Secondly, MCU was transformed through these accreditation processes. It is of interest to explore how these two processes benefited MCU and how MCU adapted to cope with the rather distinct styles of each accrediting body.

This research takes advantage of MCU's experiences in both accreditations during the same period of time, allowing MCU administrators to have direct observation of the difference in how these accreditors operated, and the impact on themselves and on MCU as an institution. This comparison is made with full awareness of the focus on different levels, i.e. MSCHE at the institutional level, HEEACT at program level. In the following section, the two accrediting bodies and the accreditations they provide will be introduced. Then, MCU's experience in these two accreditations, regarding timelines and procedures during 2005-2011, will be specified.

### **MSCHE accreditation: initiation and process**

As a private university in Taiwan, Ming Chuan University (MCU) inevitably stands on the battle line for adequate enrollment among a reduced domestic pool, and strives for an overcomer's spot on the survival side of HE battlefield. Dating before the government's policy initiatives on HEI internalization, MCU has a long history of promoting internationalization under the leadership of President Emeritus Teh-Ming Pao and President Chuan Lee. Graduates have been required to take English as a Foreign Language courses since MCU founded in 1957. An International College program was established in 2000, with English-only instruction and recruiting students from all over the world. To further promote this niche, President Lee recruited Dr. Robert Yien as Vice President, preparing to reach the goal of being accredited by a U.S. agency, as he believes that MCU will benefit from America's HEI experience (p. 5, Lee, 2010). Dr. Yien, a Taiwanese native who served as academic vice president at a state university in Michigan of the U.S., had years of U.S. HEI accreditation experience. Following some enquiry on which of the six regional accrediting agencies could accept international accreditation applications, MSCHE was selected as the best suited body, as its background and mission most closely aligned with MCU's situation (p.23, Yien, 2011).

Founded in 1919, MSCHE is a voluntary, non-governmental, membership association, accrediting degree-granting colleges and universities in the Middle States region of the USA and several locations internationally. It is one of six regional accrediting bodies recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. The

MSCHE accreditation runs the full course of three phases: meeting eligibility requirements, applicant self-assessment process, and self-study process. MCU initiated the accreditation process with a workshop on institutional accreditation for members of its extended administrative council in October 2005. In phase one, MCU was reviewed through documentation and a three-day site visit dated August 2006 by a representative of MSCHE on its eligibility in 22 requirements. A positive visit and some specific suggestion from the representative, along with the results that the 22 requirements were met, encouraged the top management of MCU that the MSCHE accreditation was achievable; thus, they made an official announcement on university's decision to proceed. During phase two, MCU conducted a self-assessment process to get a further gripe on the university's status in the fourteen standards of MSCHE accreditation. A task force, led by Dr. Yien, was formed to include ten liaisons, one from each of the ten MCU schools. They served as communicative messengers to prepare and promote the efforts for the self-assessment report. The Applicant Self-Assessment Document was submitted and a site visit took place in September 2008. With the approval of the documentation and positive feedback from the site visit, MCU was awarded candidacy for accreditation and recommended to send representatives to the MSCHE Self-Study Institute in November 2008.

The last and most important phase is the Self-Study process. A Steering Committee was formed and six working groups were created to conduct in-depth analyses on all aspects of the university according to the research questions proposed and the handbook of Standards for Accreditation (MSCHE, 2006). An intensive meeting schedule was pursued for working groups to report their analytical results, while the Steering Committee reviewed the results and further implemented reform as necessary. In January 2010, a two-day retreat summoned fifty-three relevant faculty and staff to review the drafted results to the research questions and elevate the momentum of preparation for the final stage of submitting the document and hosting the site visit. During this phase of preparing the Self-Study Report, MSCHE offered assistance on several occasions. In April 2009, two consultants visited and gave insightful advice for moving along with the self-study process. Also, the final site visit team Chair conducted an advance visit in June 2010 to get the picture of MCU's progress, also offering advice and suggestions. The Self-Study Report was submitted and the Self-Study site visit team, consisting of five members, conducted a three-day visit in September 2010. During the Exit Interview, the Team Chair revealed that the university had met all fourteen standards and conveyed praise to the university leadership and the concerted MCU endeavor in the Self-Study process. The official accreditation notice, dated November 19, 2010, stated: "to grant accreditation and to commend the institution on the quality of the Self-Study process and report".

### **HEEACT accreditation: government policy and process**

Compared to the nearly 100-year history of the MSCHE, the HEEACT was only established in 2005. HEEACT was born of a symposium held by the Taiwan Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2002 to discuss and develop an organization to evaluate HEIs. Although founded as an independent legal body, HEEACT was actually established and is led by the official MOE in Taiwan. While U.S. accreditation reflects the fundamental features of U.S. higher education, such as decentralization, diversity, and complexity (Eaton, 2011), Hawkins (2008) characterized the accreditation process in Taiwan as “basically a centralized approach with some decentralization gestures (p. 19).” The legislation of University evaluation, established in January 2007, specifically states that MOE is the planning body of University evaluation affairs (article No.2), and should conduct meta-evaluation through external agencies (article No.7).

Since its establishment, HEEACT completed its first cycle of program accreditation during 2006-2009. All of the general universities (not including vocational universities/colleges), numbering 78 institutions, with nearly 3000 programs, were mandated to participate in the first cycle of program accreditation. Each program was required to submit a self-evaluation report and to host a two-day site visit review by an accrediting team of five members. If passed, the program was granted a five-year accreditation. The second cycle of program accreditation was scheduled to start in 2012; however, due to the negative responses from the first cycle of program accreditation, the second cycle was called to halt in July 2012 and altered to an ongoing self-evaluation process, mainly conducted by HEIs themselves. The new reform of QA policy and process is still unfolding. In addition to program accreditation, HEEACT also conducted institutional accreditation in 2011, during which 71 universities were mandated to participate. MCU was exempted from the 2011 institutional accreditation due to its MSCHE accreditation status.

MCU’s Self-Evaluation Reports for HEEACT program accreditation were submitted in August 2008, and site visits were conducted in November 2008. This timing coincided with the start-up of self-study for MSCHE accreditation, as the Applicant Self-Study Assessment Visit had just taken place in September that year and MCU was awarded candidacy for accreditation on November 21, 2008. Dr. Yien (p.34, 2011) recalls that since the university was informed of the HEEACT accreditation schedule around mid-2007, everyone concentrated on the preparation for the first evaluation visit of the academic programs. Weekly meetings were scheduled both on institutional level as well as on program level; dress rehearsals of all 48 programs were conducted multiple times in institutional-level meetings, while

program faculty and staff joined in to discuss and prepare documentation and for the site visit.

This research draws from this natural setting of concurrent contrasts wherein MCU and its members experienced both accreditations during the same period. Although MCU was exposed to MSCHE accreditation prior to HEEACT accreditation, during the MSCHE Self-Assessment Phase, MCU focused mainly on HEEACT program accreditation. It was only at the closure of HEEACT program-level accreditation that MCU moved on to MSCHE's essential phase of Self-Study. This research contrasts the differences between the two accreditations from insiders' points of view and recounts the benefits MCU has gained from both accreditations.

### **Research Methods**

To recount MCU's experience in both accreditation processes, this research employs an exploratory approach through in-depth interviews with key members of MCU's accreditations to gather rich qualitative data that can be useful in providing insights. To be sure that the interviewees are key informants; they were selected based on the criterion that each one should have deep involvement in both accreditations due to role or/and position one played during the processes. For the HEEACT accreditation, three of the interviewees were top executive officers (on the administrative side), five were Chairs (on the academic side), and two were faculty; for MSCHE accreditation, all of the ten interviewees assumed roles in the Self-Study process, either as members of the steering committee, or leaders or members of one of the working groups. In the interviews, the researcher first described the semi-coincidence of the two accreditations and reminded interviewees of their roles during the process. Then, two main questions were discussed in open-ended interviews which lasted from 40 to 90 minutes. First, what are the differences between HEEACT and MSCHE accreditations? Second, what are the impacts of these two accreditations on the development of MCU?

All the interviews were transcribed and analyzed through the technique of thematic categorization (Holliday, 2002) with close reference to the literature.

In addition to interview data, two manuscripts were used to support the documentation of the accreditation process. One is written by Chuan Lee, MCU's president since 1999: *Ming Chuan University Striving To Become The First Americanized University in Asia*, published in 2010. The other is written by Robert S. P. Yien, a Vice President of MCU: *The Making of the First U.S.-Accredited University in Asia*, published in 2011. The former recounts MCU's strategies to thrive in the world of higher education; the latter details MCU's process of attaining MSCHE-accredited status. It is also worth noting the roles this researcher played

during these two accreditation processes, for any effect on the analysis of the interview data. During the HEEACT accreditation, this researcher served as Chair of the Psychology program, and for the MSCHE accreditation, was first a steering committee member and leader of a working group, then assumed the position of executive director of Research and Development during the Self-Study phase.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the interviews provide a pathway to portray one university's development through accreditation and how it is impacted by the different features of accreditation. Some aspects were observed universally; however, more were observed individually from different angles, so that, jointly, "the hidden elephant" was revealed. The following discussion presents the observations from the analyzed interview results.

### *Differences between HEEACT and MSCHE Accreditations*

The differences between these two accreditations were identified as resulting from the distinctive philosophies behind them: HEEACT operates more in the spirit of controlling, while MSCHE in collaborating. Under these philosophies, HEEACT emphasized the outcome, while MSCHE on both process and outcome; i.e., the former looks at the results (if you meet the criteria) and current status of the program, the latter at how you meet the criteria and the sustainable aspect of university operations. Four differences were identified as listed in Table 1.

#### 1. The timeline

The timeline for HEEACT accreditation illustrates the philosophy of "one size fits all" while MSCHE holds the philosophy of "fit as needed." Depending on the progress of individual institutions, MSCHE has no predefined timeline in which to achieve the accreditation. The schedule for HEEACT accreditation was much tighter, in that all general HEIs and their academic programs had to go through the accreditation within a set of same period of time. Although the timing of submitting Self-Evaluation Report and Site Visit varied across four years, it is only because the HEEACT did not have enough capacity to handle all universities at once. In the spirit of control, it's only if all universities are evaluated at the same time that a fair judgment can be made.

#### 2. The procedure

As the timeline considers HEIs' own needs, so do the procedures of MSCHE accreditation. The three-phase design, as opposed to one-phase design of HEEACT,

provides HEIs a progressive schedule during which to reflect and improve themselves; while the Self-Study phase might be most beneficial, the Self-Assessment phase leverages the readiness for Self-Study. Another aspect that manifests MSCHE's spirit in collaboration and assistance is its consultation mechanisms such as invitation to attend Self-Study Institute, Consultant Site Visit and Team Chair's Advance Visit.

### 3. Use of research questions (criteria)

In the Self-Study phase, MSCHE encourages HEIs to develop their own research questions according to the requirements of the 14 standards with the supervision of consultants. For HEEACT accreditation, the handbook states that the preparation of documentation considers the needs of the institutional development plan and program development strategy and makes reference to criteria (p.6, HEEACT, 2008). However, to the best of this researcher's knowledge, no universities altered or created their own criteria. One of the reasons is the atmosphere of controlling and judging within the HEEACT accreditation. The other is the brevity of the standards' descriptions in the handbook; the criteria virtually equals the content of the standards, unlike the MSCHE handbook (MSCHE, 2006), wherein the description is more complete. When all HEIs use the same criteria, the effect of institutional isomorphism is likely to occur, and the special features that different types of universities (i.e., research, teaching, community-oriented) may present becomes blurred.

### 4. Evaluators' attitude

The contrast of reviewers' attitude is one of the differences mentioned by almost all the informants. The HEEACT and MSCHE evaluators' attitudes were characterized, respectively, as demanding vs. understanding, criticizing vs. facilitating, subjective vs. objective, and to decide your fate vs. to learn from your school. MSCHE evaluators were focused on the confirmation of the reports and document, while HEEACT evaluators sometimes made "*unreasonable demands that might not be relevant (Interviewee 1).*" One informant contrasted the lens applied by evaluators: HEEACT as a microscope emphasizing details, wherein one might easily lose track of the whole picture and true character of a program, with MSCHE, on the other hand, as telescope focusing on the vision, the integrated whole and development of the university (*Interviewee 6*). It should be noted not all HEEACT evaluators were perceived in a less respectful manner, but the contrasting pattern seems observable. The distinct different attitude might result from differing training processes and the use of outcomes by the government. Tseng (2009) lists twenty-three controversial issues of evaluator's ethics in evaluation practice and calls for a renewal of planned training to enhance evaluators' competence.

*“Accreditation should be a process of mutual respect; when you (as HEIs) are not respected, the learning spirit of accreditation is demolished (Interviewee 1).”*

**Table 1: Differences between MSCHE and HEEACT accreditations**

	MSCHE	HEEACT
Timeline	Fit as needed	One size fits all
Procedure	Three-phase design	One-phase design
Use of research questions (criteria)	Altered as needed	Uniform criteria
Evaluators’ attitude	Generally respectful & facilitating	Generally demanding & persnickety

## **Conclusion**

In battling the reduced birth rate crisis, HEIs in Taiwan, especially private ones, need to draw on their strength strategically and sharpen their competitive edge. Accreditation is a mean of transformation, provided HEIs can fully take advantage of what the external agencies have to offer, that is, develop a sense of ownership in the accreditation and commit to the transformation of the HEI inside out. Combining the endeavors of being accredited by both HEEACT and MSCHE, MCU has transformed itself; the outcomes are visible from its enhanced reputation and ranking on key performance indices such as excellent teaching awards among HEIs. Learning from MSCHE’s history of accreditation experience, MCU has acquired and established the mechanisms and continuous cultivation of QA culture that should secure its sustainable development.

This research drew on MCU’s unique experience of being accredited by HEEACT and MSCHE during the same period of time, which allowed members of MCU to contrast the differences from their roles in the processes. It is found that HEEACT and MSCHE accreditations varied in timeline, procedures, use of research questions, and evaluators’ attitude. And because of the different characteristics of these accreditation agencies, as well as the voluntary/involuntary status of entering the process, these two accreditations appear to have produced difference degrees of ownership and peace, and in turn, affected the end purpose of structural renewal and establishment of QA culture.

Upon request of the stakeholders, the second cycle of HEEACT academic program accreditation, though started in 2012, was halted to change the process toward one of emphasizing self-evaluation. As every country must develop its own accreditation and QA system, one that best suits their culture and societal context promotes HEIs to be accountable and their quality improved. This is not an easy quest

as it needs to reflect the practical experience of HEIs. This research hopefully has made the contrast that different QA bodies have varied accreditation style, and in turn might have made a difference in HEI's development.

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