

Benefits from both American and Taiwanese external QA processes:  
The case of Ming Chuan University

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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 accreditor in the USA, in November of 2010.

The process of attaining American accreditation started in 1995. To obtain 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 has proven 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 a good reputation.

While undergoing the MSCHE accreditation process, MCU also implemented the accreditation process of the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT), a local accreditor. This accreditation process—unlike the MSCHE process, which is voluntary—was mandated by Taiwan's Minister of Education.

In this rather unique situation, MCU underwent the accreditation processes of both the MSCHE and the HEEACT during the same period (2005–2011) and learned the benefits of both. The target objectives of each accreditation organization vary; the former examines an institution as a whole while the latter examines academic programs within an institution. At MCU, thirty-eight programs underwent the accreditation process. Although the two accreditation bodies share a similar mission to advance higher education, they naturally have different accreditation procedures in terms of timelines, beliefs, and actions.

MSCHE and HEEACT, though very different in every aspect, share the same goals of quality assurance and improving higher education. Founded in 1919, MSCHE is a voluntary, non-governmental, membership association. It accredits 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 (CHEA).

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 in 2002 to discuss and develop an organization to evaluate institutions of higher education. Although founded as an independent legal body, HEEACT was actually established and is led by the official Ministry of Education in Taiwan.

In this article, MCU's experiences during the accreditation processes of both an international and domestic accrediting body are recounted. The resulting changes are also detailed. Based on biographical analyses and in-depth interviews of the leaders and administrative managers, two main issues are investigated.

1. First, a comparison of the MSCHE and 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 and their impact, but also on the beliefs and contextual forces behind the procedures. Because MSCHE's accreditation is at the institutional level, HEEACT's 2011 institutional accreditation process will be the target of the comparison. MCU was exempt from HEEACT 2011 institutional accreditation due to its MSCHE accreditation status. However, the process and design of the HEEACT 2011 institutional accreditation were similar to its 2008 program-level accreditation. The analyses will apply the documents and related reports of the 2011 institutional accreditation and draw on MCU's experience with the 2008 program accreditation.
2. Due to the distinct features of the MSCHE and HEEACT, MCU has changed. While the HEEACT instituted a mandatory QA initiative, the MSCHE process provided MCU a practical opportunity to push for excellence. 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 accreditation body.

As a strategy to advance MCU, the MSCHE accreditation is significant in two respects. First, MCU strengthened its administrative effectiveness and improved overall quality by establishing strategic planning and QA mechanisms. Second, the experience and outcomes of MSCHE accreditation allowed MCU to distinguish itself from local private universities. In this article, the aim is to configure the relevant elements and the dynamic relationship among them that help transform a university to reach its vision via Eastern and Western external accreditation processes.