

Beyond evaluation: Improving quality and impact through programme accreditation

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Abstract: This study assesses the role and process of accreditation in enhancing the quality and efficacy of higher education institutions in Zimbabwe, with a specific focus on the transformative effects this process has on educational standards. Using Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU) as a case study, the research examines the programme accreditation process, the challenges, and the success factors thereof. The study adopts a qualitative approach, with in-depth interviews with participants across administration, faculty, and students and document reviews. Through findings of the study, we model the multi-stage accreditation process, identifying challenges, key factors, and strategies that contribute to successful accreditation, such as rigorous self-evaluation, robust stakeholder engagement, and compliance with overarching accreditation benchmarks. The research findings present a compelling argument for the integration of accreditation as a central component of quality assurance across the higher education spectrum. The implications of this study stretch across borders, offering evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and educators to reinforce their quality assurance systems and thereby fostering an environment conducive to generating graduates prepared for the global workforce. By highlighting the accreditation process as a vehicle for continuous quality improvement, this research positions higher education institutions as pivotal contributors to individual empowerment and societal progress. The research thereby offers insights that are intended to support policy formulation, inform institutional strategies, and guide quality enhancement initiatives across various educational contexts.

Keywords: accreditation; quality assurance; higher education; Zimbabwe; institutional performance

1. Introduction

Accreditation, a global benchmark for quality in higher education, ensures graduates are equipped to face the world's complexities [1–3]. In 2006, Zimbabwe, driven by a thirst for educational excellence, established the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) [4,5]. Accreditation then became a tidal wave, washing over universities and demanding quality. Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU), a young institution brimming with ambition, stands as a testament to this surge. This research dives deep into this transformation, exploring how accreditation fuels quality enhancement within a specific corner of Zimbabwe's higher education landscape—higher education institutions (HEIs).

Founded in 2012 with a visionary mission to empower individuals [6], ZEGU embarked on a journey of rapid academic expansion. This growth, however, was tested

and refined through multiple accreditation cycles overseen by ZIMCHE. With each cycle, ZEGU emerged not just compliant but transformed. Accreditation served as a catalyst, not only strengthening individual programs but altering the very DNA of the institution. By dissecting ZEGU's metamorphic journey, we can extract best practices and valuable lessons that transcend its walls, offering insights for HEIs throughout Zimbabwe and beyond.

This study transcends the confines of a single university, offering a powerful lens through which to examine the vital role of accreditation in a time of unprecedented challenges [7]. As the world grapples with globalization, the rise of artificial intelligence, and a burgeoning demand for skilled graduates, the lessons learned from case studies of this nature become critical tools for navigating the turbulent waters of higher education [8–10].

On a national level, this research contributes to addressing a critical research gap in understanding of Zimbabwe's quality assurance landscape. While statutory frameworks and processes for accreditation are well established through ZIMCHE, in-depth analyses exploring lived experiences within higher education institutions (HEIs) and the wider implications remain limited [11]. The Solusi University case study [11] provided initial insights but called for further institution-specific research. By zooming in on ZEGU's journey through the accreditation process, this study unpacks the granular drivers of their successful programme accreditation.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the broader literature on quality assurance in higher education, which highlights the importance of a holistic and sustainable approach to quality assurance [12]. By examining the experiences of ZEGU and other HEIs in Zimbabwe, this research can inform the development of a more comprehensive and effective quality assurance system that addresses the needs of all stakeholders. Furthermore, our findings hold valuable lessons for international academics and practitioners grappling with similar challenges in their own contexts. As accreditation models and global trends converge, the insights gleaned from ZEGU can inform and strengthen quality oversight practices worldwide.

This research revolves around three core objectives:

- Describe the accreditation process for higher education programs in Zimbabwe, with specific focus on the stages, documents, and actors involved.
- Identify the challenges associated with the programme accreditation process.
- Identify the key factors that contributed to ZEGU's successful accreditation of its programmes.

The role of accreditation in quality assurance

Quality assurance in higher education strives to build transparency and trust within the system, striking a delicate balance between accountability and continuous quality improvement [13–15]. Accountability refers to an institution or program demonstrating its effectiveness in fulfilling its intended purpose and meeting stakeholder expectations [16]. Quality improvement encompasses the ongoing efforts of an institution to elevate its quality beyond previously assessed levels, often in response to self-assessment, accreditation, or external reviews. Meanwhile, quality enhancement involves deliberate initiatives to raise quality standards above minimum

thresholds, pushing the boundaries of excellence [17].

Among various quality assurance strategies, accreditation remains the most prevalent globally [18,19]. It serves as a crucial validation tool, assuring stakeholders that the institution: delivers credible programs; employs robust teaching and learning practices; and equips graduates with the necessary competencies for lifelong success and societal contribution [20]. In essence, accreditation signifies a rigorous external evaluation of an institution or its programs conducted by subject-matter experts against pre-established, nationally agreed-upon standards [21]. Accreditation leads to institutional reforms such as internal quality assurance processes, governance, and other operations [22].

In contrast to other parts of the world, such as America, where accreditation is voluntary [23], program and institutional accreditation is a mandatory process and a legal requirement in most African countries, including Zimbabwe. Accreditation is applied equally to both public and private HEIs and is carried out by ZIMCHE [5,24]. Whereas previous studies on the impact of quality assurance and accreditation processes have mainly been conducted in public universities in the studies [25,26], there have been scant studies on the process and impact in the private university settings. This study aims to fill this gap by using a qualitative approach.

Key steps in the multi-stage program accreditation process include institutional self-studies demonstrating adherence to eligibility criteria, an on-site evaluation by external experts, and a review and final decision by the accrediting body [27,28]. Self-studies gather evidence on outcomes, curriculum, faculty qualifications, infrastructure, and processes [29]. Site visits examine document accuracy through stakeholder interviews [28].

2. Conceptual framework

This study explores how accreditation acts as a powerful catalyst for systemic change within universities. To understand this complex process, we draw on three interconnected theoretical lenses:

- 1) **Systems theory:** Universities are viewed as complex, interconnected systems with various parts like academics, administration, partnerships, and student support. Accreditation assessments act like a pebble dropped in a pond, sending ripples across these interconnected parts. This lens helps us see how accreditation's impact spreads and affects the entire university, not just individual programs.
- 2) **Continuous quality enhancement:** Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle emphasizes continuous improvement through feedback loops [28]. Accreditation assessments become structured opportunities for universities to critically evaluate their quality across areas like teaching, research, and student services. This triggers a cycle of reflection, adaptation, and improvement, leading to lasting advancements.
- 3) **Organizational change management:** This lens helps us understand how leaders guide universities through transformation. Kotter's eight-step process, for example, highlights the importance of engaging stakeholders, creating a compelling vision, and celebrating successes [28]. Similarly, participatory change management principles emphasize transparency, involvement, and

empowering people to drive change effectively.

By weaving these three lenses together, we gain a richer understanding of how accreditation acts as a catalyst for multifaceted change. It's not just about ticking boxes; accreditation triggers a ripple effect, prompting iterative quality improvement and empowering leaders to guide a dynamic transformation throughout the university. This comprehensive framework allows us to move beyond a narrow view of accreditation's impact and truly grasp its far-reaching consequences.

3. Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was deemed most suitable given its strength in providing a single-case, interpretive case study design [10]. Specifically, this research followed an interpretive case study design to gain a nuanced understanding of stakeholders' experiences and meaning-making within ZEGU's contextual realities [30]. The researcher acknowledges their position within the system under investigation, being a member of ZEGU. This insider perspective offers valuable insights while recognizing the potential for bias. To mitigate biases, the researcher actively engages in reflexivity and maintains transparency throughout the research process.

ZEGU serves as the bounded system for this study, with a specific focus on its 2021–2022 programme accreditation experience. Purposive sampling was employed to select 23 participants who represent diverse perspectives. The sample includes 6 senior administrators, 7 program coordinators and academics from various departments, and 10 students.

Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 45–60 min, were the primary data source. The interviews followed a comprehensive interview protocol. The interview questions were crafted around the three research questions.

In addition to interviews, document review (program documentation, accreditation reports, strategic plans, quality assurance policies, and ZIMCHE standards for accreditation) was conducted to triangulate the data.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's approach [31]. Interview data and document content went through manual coding and thematic analysis to systematically group emerging patterns and insights against the research aims [32]. Interpretive techniques like constant comparison analysis and narrative structuring helped establish meaning and relationships in the data while maintaining the study's theoretical lens. This way, the key stages, actors, duration, challenges, and key success factors of the accreditation process were identified. The resultant information was used to develop a comprehensive flow diagram.

Throughout the research process, protocols ensured integrity and confidentiality. Participants provided informed consent and were anonymized. An audit trail enhanced dependability and confirmability, while peer debriefing strengthened the credibility of emerging interpretations. Overall, these techniques ensured a rigorous yet empathetic investigation aligned with capturing lived experiences [33,34].

The researcher's position within ZEGU facilitated access to participants and established rapport. However, potential biases were addressed through various

strategies. The researcher engaged in critical reflection to identify and minimize personal assumptions and biases. Preliminary findings were shared with participants to seek their feedback and validation. Emerging interpretations were discussed with external researchers to obtain critical feedback. Detailed documentation of research decisions and processes was maintained to ensure transparency.

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from participants, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Data storage and management adhered to ethical standards.

4. Findings

The findings are presented according to the three research objectives.

4.1. Accreditation

4.1.1. Process

The accreditation process at ZEGU follows globally recognized best practices, according to participants. It typically occurs over a 24-month period from conception to approval. The key stages described by administrators and outlined in planning documents are shown in **Figure 1**:

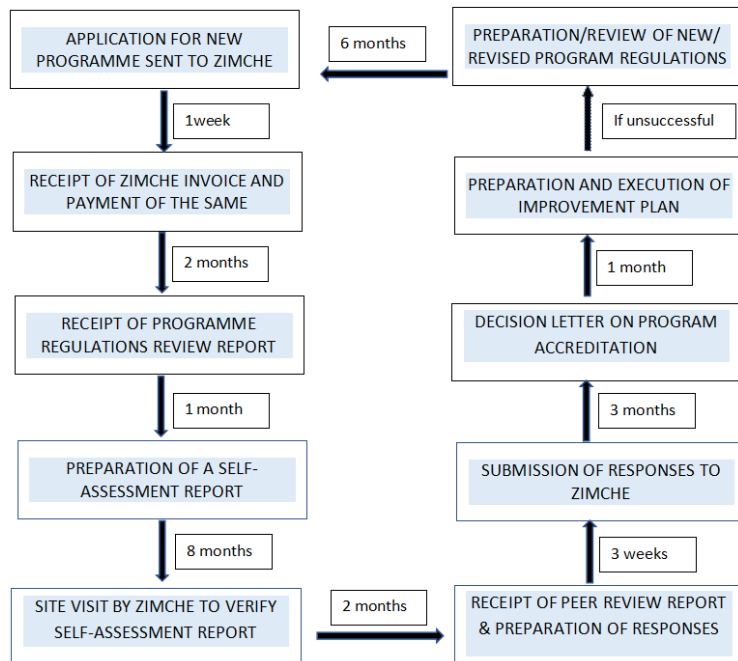


Figure 1. Programme accreditation process: From conception to approval.

This initial stage involved a thorough six-month examination of new and revised program regulations. The process begins within the relevant department, where subject matter specialists meticulously review the regulations before they progress to discussions at the academic committee and final approval by the senate. The process requires the participation of the various HEI stakeholders. Each program has a dedicated anchor/coordinator, who, in collaboration with other specialists, spearheads the drafting of the program regulations. These comprehensive documents delve into

essential aspects like title, duration, mission alignment, learning objectives, expected competencies, delivery methods, teaching approaches, assessment strategies, curriculum content, credit allocations, work-related learning opportunities, and faculty qualifications.

Stage two culminated in ZEGU submitting a comprehensive application for accreditation or re-accreditation to the accreditation agency. This could be for either a new program being introduced or an existing program reaching its five-year review milestone. As stipulated by ZIMCHE, the application comprised essential documents such as program regulations, a needs analysis and stakeholder consultation report, a finance department endorsement, a detailed articulation of how the program fulfills the university's mission, and official Senate minutes verifying program approval.

“Upon receipt of the application dossier, stage 3 involved the ZIMCHE invoicing ZEGU for each of the programmes. Once we paid the prescribed fees, the ZIMCHE assigned a minimum of three experts, ideally teaching similar programs, to meticulously assess our program regulations in line with the approved Minimum Bodies of Knowledge and Skills (MBKS). These esteemed peers meticulously analyzed our programmes offering valuable insights within a timeframe of 2 months. ZIMCHE then compiled their feedback into a consolidated report, which we received for careful consideration. We analyzed each point raised by the reviewers, weighing its merit and relevance to our programmes' goals and objectives. This allowed us to either embrace their suggestions, enriching our programme, or, with well-reasoned explanations, respectfully decline recommendations that may not align with our specific context or vision.”

ZEGU was then invited to submit a self-assessment report using the templates provided by ZIMCHE 3 months prior to the site visit. “Self-assessment afforded us with an opportunity to step back and critically examine our readiness to offer the programmes, identifying areas where we excel and those requiring improvement. This introspection aligns with the ZIMCHE's agreed-upon accreditation standards, meticulously detailed in a shared self-assessment template. It's important to note that these standards are not dictated solely by the ZIMCHE; they're the culmination of a collaborative effort with stakeholders across the higher education sector.” One Dean intoned, “Beyond its immediate role in accreditation, self-assessment served as the cornerstone of our journey towards quality improvement. It fostered institutional self-awareness, illuminating our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges. This reflexivity allowed us to take proactive steps towards betterment.”

The accreditation site visit involved a team of 2 experts accompanied by ZIMCHE officials who spent a whole day eyeballing facilities, requesting evidence, examining records, and interviewing stakeholders. They assessed the report's claims and investigated issues. An academic reasoned, “Recognizing that staff are often more receptive to feedback from fellow professionals, we actively welcome the team's diverse perspectives and expertise.”

Following these activities, the team compiled their findings and delivered them in two stages:

Preliminary debrief: During this initial meeting, the team offered their initial observations and suggestions, highlighting any areas requiring further information or

documentation. This open feedback allowed us to address any concerns promptly and effectively.

Formal report: The team submitted a comprehensive report outlining their evaluation, including recommendations for improvement and a timeframe for implementing them. We carefully analyzed this report and developed a concrete action plan to address all recommendations.

Following a thorough analysis of all evidence, ZIMCHE issued ZEGU a written decision letter within eight months. This timeframe is noteworthy, considering the various outcomes possible in such processes, including unconditional accreditation, conditional accreditation with specified timeframes for improvement, or even program revocation. However, ZEGU achieved a remarkable outcome: full re-accreditation for all eight new programs. Overall, respondents expressed confidence that ZEGU's diligent, inclusive process aligned with best practices and fostered continuous advancements in quality and renewal of accredited status.

4.1.2. The challenges encountered during the accreditation process

ZEGU's journey towards program accreditation wasn't without its obstacles, revealing diverse challenges faced by different stakeholder groups. Administrators, burdened by the logistical juggle, lamented, "Managing the overall process, coordinating tasks across departments, and securing resources within tight deadlines... felt like an uphill battle against constant resource constraints."

For academics, the process often meant grappling with intensified workloads. Dr. Z, a senior lecturer, shared, "Updating syllabi, developing new materials, and integrating those new assessment practices... it all felt like juggling fireballs while managing my existing classes and research." This sentiment resonated with many, leading to anxieties about disrupting established routines and facing external evaluation. Dr. X aptly captured this fear: "Adapting my teaching style? The thought of someone judging my classroom felt daunting."

Students too felt the pressure. Adjusting to the revised curriculum and rigorous assessment methods brought on by accreditation resulted in increased workload and exam anxiety. One student remarked, "The whole accreditation thing made every test feel like a make-or-break moment." Another lamented, "We barely understood what was going on with this accreditation stuff, and no one really asked for our input. It felt like something being done to us, not with us."

These firsthand accounts illustrate the diverse challenges encountered during ZEGU's accreditation process. They highlight the need for:

- Investing in administrative support: Providing adequate funding, personnel, and training can equip administrators to effectively manage the logistical demands and minimize resource constraints.
- Engaging academics in the process: Early engagement, addressing anxieties, and offering professional development opportunities can foster ownership and mitigate resistance to change among faculty.
- Prioritizing student communication and involvement: Increasing transparency, actively seeking student feedback, and creating avenues for meaningful participation can empower students and alleviate their anxieties about the process.

The challenges encountered during the accreditation process revealed diverse obstacles faced by different stakeholder groups. However, ZEGU demonstrated resilience in navigating these hardships. Through proactive leadership and cross-stakeholder involvement, they tackled each problem as an opportunity for growth. By cultivating collaboration and persevering with commitment to quality advancement, ZEGU was able to build upon challenges and transform them into successes that reinforced their institution. These triumphs resonated broadly, extending far beyond narrow compliance to fuel advancements impacting pedagogy, culture, outcomes, and community. ZEGU's story serves as a testament to the dynamism of accreditation when navigated strategically, reshaping not only isolated programmes, but entire universities.

Key factors that contributed to ZEGU's successful accreditation of its programmes

ZEGU's journey towards program accreditation wasn't just about overcoming challenges; it was also a story of remarkable successes, resonating across different stakeholder groups. Here's a glimpse into these victories, told in their own voices:

At the helm, ZEGU leadership played a pivotal role, as professor Y declared, "We set a clear vision for quality improvement, fostered collaboration across departments, and showed everyone why accreditation mattered for our future excellence." This unwavering commitment translated into a tangible win: "Now, with our accreditation badge of honor," beamed Ms. F, a senior administrator, "we've seen a surge in applications from both students and top-notch faculty, thrilled to be part of our success story."

For academics, the process sparked a wave of professional development. Mr. C shared, "Attending those accreditation workshops opened my eyes to innovative teaching methods. I came back energized and redesigned my course—my students love it!" This wasn't just personal growth; it translated into enriched learning for students. As J, a graduating student, enthusiastically shared, "The curriculum felt sharper, more relevant. We were challenged, engaged, and it showed—my grades soared!"

The students weren't just beneficiaries; they actively contributed to the success. As student E recounted, "We participated in peer reviews, gave feedback on courses, and felt truly involved in shaping our education. It sharpened our critical thinking and leadership skills." This involvement paid off beyond the classroom. "With our accredited degree," boasted Sarah, a recent graduate, "employers take us seriously. My interview skills honed through accreditation helped me land my dream job!"

These testimonials paint a vivid picture of the diverse successes of ZEGU's accreditation journey. It wasn't just about ticking boxes; it was about a collective push for quality, leading to enhanced leadership, academic enrichment, empowered students, and ultimately, graduates prepared to conquer the world. ZEGU's story serves as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of accreditation, not just for one programme, but for the entire institution and its community.

5. Discussion

The application of systems theory in understanding higher education institutions

as complex adaptive systems proved to be relevant in this study. The findings demonstrate that the accreditation process triggers systemic ripple effects, as actions taken in response to accreditation resonate across various components of the institution. This aligns with the literature, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of different functions within higher education institutions [35,36].

The continuous quality enhancement concepts, particularly the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle, were also evident in the findings. The accreditation assessments provided structured opportunities for self-evaluation and iterative cycles of reflection, adaptation, and refinement. This is consistent with the literature, which highlights the importance of ongoing assessment-driven improvements in quality assurance [36,37].

The findings of this study align with the principles of organizational change management theories. The leadership strategies employed by ZEGU during the accreditation process, such as mobilizing engagement, crafting a compelling vision, and celebrating short-term wins, were crucial in facilitating successful reform initiatives. This is in line with the literature, which emphasizes the importance of participatory change management and empowerment in driving transformation [38].

This study adds to the broader literature on quality assurance in higher education by emphasizing the importance of a holistic and sustainable approach. The findings suggest that accreditation serves as a crucial validation tool, assuring stakeholders of the credibility of programs, teaching and learning practices, and the competencies of graduates. This aligns with the literature, which recognizes accreditation as a prevalent and effective quality assurance strategy globally [18,19].

The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers and educators in Zimbabwe and beyond. The integration of accreditation as a central component of quality assurance across the higher education spectrum is supported by the research findings. Policymakers can use this evidence to reinforce their quality assurance systems and create an environment conducive to generating graduates prepared for the global workforce.

Additionally, the insights gained from this study can inform institutional strategies and guide quality enhancement initiatives in various educational contexts. The successful accreditation of ZEGU's programs provides a model for other HEIs in Zimbabwe to follow. Moreover, the lessons learned from ZEGU's transformation can be valuable for international academics and practitioners facing similar challenges in their own contexts, contributing to the strengthening of quality oversight practices worldwide.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The qualitative case study design focused on a single institution, ZEGU, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could include multiple case studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of accreditation in different educational contexts. Additionally, the study relied on interviews and document reviews as the primary sources of data. Including other data collection methods, such as surveys or observations, could provide a more holistic perspective on the accreditation process and its impact on quality enhancement.

6. Conclusion

This study explored Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University's experience with programme accreditation through a qualitative case study approach. The findings provide valuable insights into how accreditation can function as a change catalyst for both compliance and innovation within higher education institutions. Specifically, the research examined ZEGU's accreditation journey through three conceptual frameworks—systems theory, continuous quality enhancement concepts, and organizational change management theories.

First, conceptualizing ZEGU as a complex adaptive system resonated with accounts of accreditation's systemic ripple effects across interconnected institutional functions. This confirms perspectives that view higher education institutions as networks susceptible to wide-scale transformation. Second, narratives highlighted ZEGU's leveraging of regular quality assessment and feedback cycles for iterative improvement, affirming accreditation's role in ongoing enhancement.

Third, leadership strategies illuminating ZEGU's change management process, such as vision guidance, collaboration, and stakeholder participation, paralleled successful change management models. Beyond regulatory compliance, participant experiences also demonstrated accreditation's catalytic role in generating enhancements to pedagogy, research culture, and graduate outcomes.

Notably, this research provides insights into a Zimbabwean private university context, complementing previous studies focused on public institutions. Findings around harmonizing processes with organizational missions also build on generalized discussions.

Overall, this study validates the use of systems thinking, quality management concepts, and change management frameworks to understand accreditation's complex interplay within higher education. Implications can inform policy, practice, and future research exploring quality assurance's vital function worldwide. Additionally, the research presents opportunities for accrediting bodies, institutions, and scholars to continue advancing conceptualizations of accreditation as a driver of continuous improvement.

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