

LEBANESE STUDENTS' AWARENESS REGARDING ACCREDITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore students' awareness about Accreditation in Lebanon. Researchers tested many variables among students. The research adopts a quantitative approach by collecting primary data through a 14 items-questionnaire given to students at different Universities in Lebanon. Researchers used SPSS software to analyze data and derive appropriate conclusions and implications. After conducting correlation and regression analysis, the study reaches four main conclusions. First, there is high awareness of Accreditation in higher education. Second, students are willing to pay higher tuition fees if the university is internationally accredited. Third, Accreditation makes it easier for students to transfer between majors and/or between colleges. Finally, rich students are less interested in accreditation. Some conclusions are not definite and need more research to detect the factors lying behind. There is not much research done in Lebanon targeting the Education sector and investigating the importance of student's awareness regarding accreditation. Therefore, this study is vital because it explores a managerial sector of great importance in a country in which research is seldom conducted.

JEL: A10, A20

KEYWORDS: Awareness, Accreditation, Tuition, Education

INTRODUCTION

Students consider many factors when selecting a college or university. However, even if students select a university, some students may be undecided on a specific major or a career path. Thus, it is important that advisors explain how accreditation may affect student's future decisions and opportunities (ASPA, 2013). According to the American Psychological Association (APA), "Accreditation is both a status and a process. As a status, accreditation provides public notification that an institution or program meets standards of quality set forth by an accrediting agency. As a process, accreditation reflects the fact that in achieving recognition by the accrediting agency, the institution or program is committed to self-study and external review by one's peers in seeking not only to meet standards but to continuously seek ways in which to enhance the quality of education and training provided" (APA, 2013). An institutional accrediting agency evaluates the institution as a whole, applying the standards in light of the institution's mission. Besides assessing different educational programs, accreditation evaluates different areas such as governance and administration, financial stability, physical resources, library and technology, admissions, and student services. Institutional accreditation encompasses the entire institution and the Standards for Accreditation guide all decisions (NEASC, 2013). Since most theories are generated and empirically tested in a western context (Yu Zhou, 2011), this study attempts to fill a gap in literature by collecting data in Lebanon, a small Middle Eastern developing nation that lacks accreditation. The study is targeting Lebanese universities, mainly students in higher education to test their views and awareness about the importance and need of accreditation for high education institutions. In Lebanon, one university only, American University of Beirut (AUB), an

affiliate of state university of New York, is internationally accredited. According to AACSB, “There are 672 member institutions worldwide that hold AACSB Accreditation with nearly 50 countries and territories represented by AACSB-accredited schools” (AACSB, 2013). The huge number of accredited institutions around the world shows how important accreditation has become in recent years. Researchers ask two questions, what is the level of awareness of university wide accreditation among Lebanese students? What are the factors affecting this awareness? The aim of this research is to explore the student’s awareness about Accreditation and its relationship with each of the following variables: Ever heard about Accreditation, Easier University transfer, Tuition fees willing to be paid and Yearly tuition fees. The paper will proceed from the introduction, to the hypotheses to the Literature review, followed by the methodology used to test the hypotheses and its results. The final section summarizes the conclusion, the implications and the limitation of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Accreditation is an extensively discussed issue among the educational sector. Yet, in Lebanon, few studies approached accreditation itself and the awareness towards accreditation among students, who generally consider many factors when selecting a college or university. The article, “What Do Staff Benefit from Working in an Accredited Organization,” defines accreditation deeply. According to the article, “It provides standards against which faculty members and students can assess their skills and talents, receive peer group recognition, improve career opportunity and mobility; as well as highlights the image of the business school as a leading organization and strengthens community’s confidence in its standards and staffs’ competency” (Alameh, 2006).

As for Allie Griffiths, she investigated the advantages this process would generate to applicants. She argued that the application process itself is a journey of self-reflection, which increases self-awareness among the applicant (Griffiths, 2007). According to John Saunders, accreditation helped the Aston Business School, United Kingdom to "calibrate" itself, to gain early leader advantage, and to associate itself with other accredited schools (positioning) as well as getting recognition within the "University" and from the international players and suggesting "competitive moves and shifts" (The Guardian, 2002).

A study by Ronald R. Slone, Jerry LaCava argued that accreditation facilitates the setting of new strategic directions for business schools and assists them in creating sustainable competitive advantages (Ronald et al, 1993). W.B. Scott-Jackson noted that competitive advantage could spring from differentiating the business program (Scott, 2006). In their article, Seers and Krug observed that people usually have a perception of MBA programs as being largely undifferentiated and that the same strategies and characteristics are applicable across the majority of business schools (Seers et al, 2007) Schools pursuing similar objectives and strategic moves have become less able to differentiate themselves in the marketplace.

Arthur Kraft mirrored this viewpoint during the AACSB (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) International Continuous Improvement Conference; he noticed that differentiation through accreditation is becoming more important than ever, bearing in mind the increasing number of business schools offering similar programs in (Kraft, 2006). An additional benefit certified to accredited colleges/programs is the quality of education. The perception of students for tuition programs is important in this sense. For students, education is an ongoing process where mobility is highly valued (Delors, 1996).

The accreditation maintenance standards promulgated by the AACSB (2002) place "greater emphasis on continuous improvement" and "instill significant improvements over time through continuous and accumulative, rather than episodic, processes." However, According to Billing and Thomas (2000), some business colleges expect only external benefits (i.e. recognition and positioning) as if the accreditation

process is not for improving the quality of education but for earning the reputation. Therefore, they conclude that the objectives of accreditation must be clear and the strategic direction of the college be directed towards improving the quality of education through meeting the accreditation requirements.

A leading study investigated business schools' professors and students' perception of accreditation in Lebanon. The studies showed that respondents from programs based on the American system of education have more information than their French counterpart has about the real meaning of accreditation and are more aware of its benefits and disadvantages as cataloged by the academic and professional press. In general, accreditation links to quality assurance and continuous improvement. There was also a consensus that external assessments leading to accreditation would strengthen the image of the school/program and positively affect the educational level at these schools. Then, better image is linked to better mobility and better job prospects for both professors and students due to better quality programs and degrees and continuous improvement processes (Boushra et al, 2009).

Contrary to the supportive ideas for accreditation, Basken (2007) argued that accreditation could worsen academic quality rather than improve it. He noted, "Nothing in the accreditation process concretely measures student learning, instructional quality or academic standards." Moreover, McKee et al. (2005) observed that some deans at well-known "accredited" business schools considered that the AACSB accreditation requirements related to the curriculum are still predominantly U.S. driven which creates some restrictions if applied in other countries, and that to some degree, discourage innovation and differentiation in programming and curriculum.

Jill K. Bryant conducted interviews with students regarding accreditation awareness; he said that although students may not have been part of the decision-making process to pursue accreditation, they had definite opinions on what it meant to have their program accredited. The majority of the comments suggested that students viewed their degree as having more value coming from an accredited program. On the other hand Bryant mentioned that although students were aware of benefits, there was some concern that schools and agencies in the area were either unaware of what a accreditation means, or may in fact, simply don't care. He also mentions that his findings are similar to past literature suggesting generally positive views about accreditation (Bryant, 2012), ((McGlothlin & Davis, 2004 Schmidt, 1999; Wilcoxin, Cecil, & Comas, 1987) and the conviction that accreditation enhances professional identity (McGlothlin & Davis, 2004; Pate, 1990).

Participants see the merit in accreditation because they perceive it as a provided structure and increases rigor for the current program. Such results are congruent with past research indicating that both students and faculty (Schmidt, 1999; Smaby & D'Andrea, 1995; Vacc, 1985) value standards, specifically core standards. Students in the research "Perceptions of an Initial CACREP Accreditation by Students in Program," done by Jill K. Bryant, were keenly aware of the lack of knowledge present in community agencies and schools regarding accreditation.

Students suggest that the obligation lies on the department of business to inform and educate community partnerships regarding this big step and its implications. Moreover, students appeared irritated by faculty who taught the standards of accreditation, but failed to apply the coursework to real-world experiences, and from the interviews, it became evidenced that the participants believed this was a result of the accrediting experience. Such perceptions correspond with previous work by McGlothlin and Davis (2004). Thus, the new accreditation process, in addition to being mission-linked, should rely heavily on the existence of the academic processes considered necessary to the delivery of quality academic programs that create value for students (Bailey and Bentz, 1991).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The research required gathering relevant data using questionnaires, composed of five demographic questions and nine subject-specific questions, to specifically test: the level of awareness about accreditation, its importance for inter-college and inter-major mobility, willingness among students to pay a premium for accredited programs, and awareness about any impact accreditation has on university students. Researchers formulated the demographic part in a way that could relate any result gained to the demographic distribution, income level, academic year and college location. Moreover, researchers use IBM SPSS to analyze statistically significant relations between the different factors studied in the survey.

Researchers collected and analyzed data during December of 2012. The study is targeting University students, thus researchers distributed questionnaires across Lebanese universities, mainly, universities that implement the American system. In total, 260 questionnaires were distributed and 235 returned, thus making the percentage of available questionnaires for analysis 90.38 percent.

Distribution of the characteristics of the valid samples is as follows: 44.7 percent female and 54.9 percent male. Thus it is fairly distributed among genders with 6.8 percent freshman students, 24.3 percent sophomore students, 24.7 percent junior students, 40.4 percent senior students, and 3.8 percent master's and doctorate graduates. The clear majority are senior students. 24.3 percent of the participants pay a yearly tuition fee <\$5,000, 33.2 percent pay a yearly tuition fee between \$5,000 and \$8,000 amounting for the largest group of the population, 19.1 percent pay between \$8,000 and \$12,000 of yearly tuition fees, and 23.4 percent have their tuition fees over \$12,000. This gives us a fair distribution of the population among groups of different classes since university cost is an indicator of the financial classes of the participants where 24.3 percent have an income level <\$3,600, 38.7 percent have between \$3,600 and \$6,000, 15.3 percent between \$6,000 and \$12,000, and 21.3 percent have an income greater than \$10,000. Geographically 40.4 percent reach a university located inside Beirut and 59.6 go to a university located outside Beirut.

The paper defines ten independent variables of measurement. These variables are: university location, income level of students and/or parents, parents' level of education, academic year/level, yearly university tuition, role of students in the accreditation process, importance of accreditation for future career prospects, the role of accreditation in the mobility of students (major or university), the importance of 3rd party assessment, and willingness to pay extra tuition for accredited universities. The Dependent Variable is a Likert's Scale form question that state: Accreditation is important to my academic and professional future.

Descriptive analysis and cross tabs are used to identify any relation between demographic factors and accreditation awareness. However, the results of these statistical analyses show that there is no significant relation between demographic variables and accreditation awareness. Researchers use Correlation and Factor analysis to test the correlation between accreditation awareness and the most influential independent variables.

$$Y = \alpha + \sum_{i=1}^n \beta_i x_i \quad (1)$$

α and β are coefficients

Were X_i tends from 1 → 10 (Ten independent variables)

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The first research question is the main part of the survey, which answers the research problem. 63% of the surveyed students strongly agree that accreditation is beneficial for their future careers 29.8% agree, 6% have a neutral/undecided view and only 1.3% disagree. These values are comparable with the question of whether respondents have heard about accreditation before, of which 22% said they have not, and 77.4% said that they have. Compared to only 6% of undecided views about accreditation impact, 22% actually have not heard of it which means that 16% made an uneducated guess of whether accreditation is important to their future careers or not.

Another interesting result the frequency analysis show is that 69.4% percent answered that they have never heard of third party assessment, which implies that they probably do mix up between third party assessment which accreditation is all about and government licensing for universities. While only 0.4% disagree that accreditation is important to the actual service, which a university provide (education), 7.2% reported an undecided view, 15% agree and 7.2 % strongly agree.

Cumulative percentage shows that 67% agree or strongly agree that they are willing to pay higher tuition fees if the university was accredited which is interesting since pervious questions have established that university students do not have a clear idea about accreditation. 18% of the respondents had a neutral/undecided view 11.9% disagree and only 2.1% strongly disagree for any increase in their tuition fees. Although we have no data about previous studies done to test the willingness of students for paying higher tuition fees, we suspect that more than 14% of students would normally disagree to any increase in the tuition fees.

When asked whether accreditation facilitates mobility between colleges and/or majors 74.5% (cumulative) agreed or strongly agreed 21.7% where undecided and only 3.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is another predictable result when we compare our findings to the literature review. Future career status (employed, self-employed or both) showed a normal distribution between those who expect to be employed and self-employed with a majority of 54% stating that they will be both employed and self-employed. However, this result had no statistical indication to awareness of accreditation.

The Demographic questions in the questionnaire where formulated to test the distribution of the population according to the following parameters: University location, income level, parents’ level of education, gender, yearly university tuition and academic year/rank. With the exception of the parents’ level of education, distribution of all demographic factors was normal with no skew-ness. This result ensures that the distribution of the population has no bias towards one group regarding income level, gender, university location, university tuition fees and academic year. Table 1 below shows normal gender distribution among male and female respondents, 55.3% were males and 44.7% were females, this shows that distribution among respondents’ gender was normal and unbiased towards one gender.”

Table 1: Gender distribution among Respondents

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	130	55.3	55.3
Female	105	44.7	100.0
Total	235	100.0	100.0

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Table 2 below shows the results of correlation and regression analysis of the seven independent variables and awareness about accreditation programs among Lebanese higher education students. The relationship between students who have heard about accreditation and accreditation’s importance appears to be positive since people who have heard of accreditation know that it is important for their academic and professional future. The relationship between willing to pay higher tuition fees and accreditation’s importance is highly correlated with a Pearson correlation and a significance of (0.000). A student who knows that accreditation is important; is eventually willing to pay more for higher standards of education. The relationship between transferring amongst majors and/or colleges and accreditation importance is positively correlated with a significance (0.000) indicating a fair knowledge about the benefits of accredited educational institutes. The relationship between yearly university tuition and the importance of accreditation has negative correlation and significance of (0.35). This interesting result might indicate that students in universities with a high tuition fees believe that their degree has high value and do not seek further accreditation as students in unaccredited universities. In addition, we suspect that those students, which are mainly located in LAU and AUB, are not as worried about their future career prospects since people with lower income and less-sought-after universities.

The relation between students that are willing to pay more university tuition fees and who believe that accreditation makes it easier to transfer between majors and/or colleges has a positive correlation and significance (0.08). This justifies why students are willing to pay more tuition fees for accredited universities since it facilitate their entrance to highly recommended majors or colleges. The relationship between students having a major role in the accreditation process, and who believe that accreditation makes it easier to transfer between colleges and/or major has positive correlation with significance of (0.00), as proved before, accreditation is important for those students to be able to transfer between universities and/or majors. The relation between income level of parents and yearly university tuition has positive correlation with significance of (0.001), since parents with higher income level have the ability to pay higher tuition fees respectively.

Table 2: Correlation between Variables and Awareness about Accreditation Programs among Lebanese Higher Education Students

Variables	Correlation Coefficient	Significance	Expected Sign	Produced Sign
Is there a relationship between students who heard about accreditation and accreditation importance?	0.304***	0.01	+	+
Relationship between willing to pay higher tuition fees and accreditation’s importance	0.234***	0.01	+	+
Relation between transferring between major and college and accreditation importance	0.236***	0.01	+	+
Relationship between yearly tuition and importance of accreditation	-0.138*	0.05	-	-
Willingness to pay higher tuition fees and the ease of major and college mobility due to accreditation	0.173***	0.01	+	+
Role of students in accreditation process and the ease of major and college mobility	0.243***	0.01	+	+
Relation between income level of parents and annual tuition	0.219***	0.01	+	+

***→ $P \leq 0.01$, **→ $P \leq 0.02$, *→ $P \leq 0.05$

Researchers use Correlation and Factor analysis to test the correlation between accreditation awareness and the most influential independent variables. The table shows the level of correlation between seven independent variables and awareness about accreditation programs among Lebanese higher education students. All variables show positive correlation and high significance level except for the “Relationship between yearly tuition and importance of accreditation” which yield negative correlation and low significance level. This indicates that students in universities with a high tuition fees believe that their degree has high value and do not seek further accreditation as students in unaccredited universities.

Regression analysis was conducted using the above four components to test the correlation between each of the four components and awareness about accreditation. The four factors have a significant impact on accreditation awareness 21.6% (R - Square). Those factors are X1= knowing about accreditation, X2=

willing to pay higher tuition fees for accredited universities, X3= the role of accreditation in inter-major transfer and inter-college transfer, and X4= the current yearly tuition fees of the participants.

$$Y = a + bX1 + cX2 + dX3 + eX4 \tag{2}$$

	$Y = 0.304 + 0.273X1 + 0.158X2 + 0.207X3 - 0.135X4$				
t	3.067	4.560	2.597	3.424	- 2.255
Sig:	0.002	0.000	0.10	0.001	0.025

Thus, these independent variables are good predictors of awareness about accreditation. We observe a relatively low F- Statistics (F= 13.2) which is statistically significant (sig. = .000), which means there is a 13.2 chance in 100 that all of the regression parameters are zero. Demographic factors had insignificant effect on regression analysis; this was expected since demographic factors were normally distributed, thus not affecting the general regression model.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper investigated the level of awareness of university wide accreditation among university students in Lebanon. In general, people had very positive views about accreditation, but their knowledge was limited. Many people confuse accreditation for government licensing for higher education organizations. Although students did not really understand details about the process of third party assessment, its implications were accurate compared to the literature review of the subject. This study showed that the majority of students were ready to pay extra tuition fees if their university is accredited. A high percentage is also aware that accreditation could help them transfer to different colleges that have similar accreditation, which is an important aspect for students who plan to complete their graduate studies abroad.

Although this research was carefully prepared, it has some limitations and shortcomings. The research took place in a sample of three universities. Moreover, the literature review is limited to studies conducted abroad due to the limited research that is available about accreditation awareness in Lebanon. There is still a socio-cultural barrier in Lebanon for respondents to convey, in a precise manner, to a survey questionnaire the data about their financial status – in this case their willingness to pay more for an accredited college - even though it researchers state that the survey is completely anonymous.

One thing to mention, researchers could conclude out of this paper is that most respondents feel obliged to agree to questions they really do not have a clear idea about to be decisive. The frequency analysis showed contradicting views about awareness on accreditation. Students do know that it is a good thing to have the university committed to certain standards, but few knew what accreditation is specifically about. This paper’s findings and conclusions make important contributions to Educational Institutions and students. This study’s results are robust, as are the reliability of its measures and regression model. However, it would be useful if future studies extend this research to other Educational institutions, like high schools, to shed light on the importance of accreditation and the seeking of best educational levels. Moreover, further studies could also expand this research to investigate factors affecting knowledge sharing in Universities. Future work may also expand the analyses to include other Lebanese universities including private and public sectors. Research that is more detailed is also advisable to test the willingness of people to pay higher tuition fees for accredited universities. Such a research will give universities a clearer financial insight to assess the direct implications of raising tuition fees in exchange for accreditation.

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