Exploring the influence of the Japanese accreditation system through managerial and institutional lenses

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In response to the declining quality of Japanese undergraduate education, the Ministry of Education implemented the accreditation system in 2004. As the first cycle of accreditation reviews ended in 2010, the effectiveness of these reviews has been discussed in the policy arena. This qualitative study examined the influence of accreditation reviews on improvement efforts in undergraduate education relative to other influences from the external and internal environments of colleges and universities.

Over the summer of 2010, the researcher conducted field research interview with provosts, special assistants to presidents, senior administrators, faculty members, and middle management staff at eleven national and private colleges and universities. The findings indicated that the accreditation reviews were the least influential on improvement efforts in undergraduate education, relative to other factors in the external and internal environments. More specifically, student enrollment, competitive funding, faculty autonomy, and organizational culture were more critical for educational improvements. Document analysis of accreditation documents was also conducted to supplement interviewees' observations.

In previous studies, to examine the effectiveness of accreditation reviews, new public management theory often represented the view of policy makers and accreditation agencies, while new institutionalism theory represented faculty perspectives. As a result, the two theories were often presented as competing and conflicting with one another. Instead, this study applied both theories in the analytical framework for a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of accreditation reviews. The researcher developed a three-pendulum analogy to synthesize the two theories.