

**KOREAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN
HIGHER EDUCATION**

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PREVIEW

KOREAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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University of Pittsburgh, 2015

Accountability in higher education has been a significant issue throughout the world over the past few decades. The Korean government over the last few years has enacted various education policies and ambitious projects in response to calls for accountability in higher education. No matter how important and necessary education policies made by policy makers and led by a few administrators of each HEI, policies would not be effective or successful without students' active participation or understanding of those issues. This study explored the similarities and differences of university students' perceptions on major issues related to accountability according to school types and majors.

Findings from this study demonstrated that students' perspectives provided some noticeable comments on accountability issues in Korea. Due to the lack of literature regarding college students' perceptions on higher education, administrators and policy makers may not know to what extent on how college students perceive accountability issues in higher education. This study revealed that most students think curricular and faculty capabilities related to their major specialties are both significant factors influencing higher education quality. Students are well aware of education quality, but previous studies do not relate to the matter focused on

students' perspectives but rather, most of them dealt with education issues based on administrators' standpoints.

The majority of the respondents agreed with that their opinions on accountability issues should be considered in some ways. The results in the study indicated that most students answered to questions seriously more than the researcher thought. That means that they should be considered as one of the significant discussants so that they express their opinions on accountability in higher education.

PREVIEW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xiii
1.0 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	2
1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	5
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	5
1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	6
2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	9
2.1 QUALITY ASSURANCE	9
2.1.1 The purpose of quality assurance.....	10
2.1.2 Why quality assurance is necessary for HEIs	12
2.1.3 Quality Assurance Agencies.....	15
2.1.3.1 INQAAHE	15
2.1.3.2 ENQA.....	17
2.1.4 Quality assurance in global context.....	18
2.1.4.1 Quality assurance in Australia	18
2.1.4.2 Quality assurance in England.....	19
2.1.4.3 Quality assurance in the U.S.....	21
2.2 ACCOUNTABILITY	27

2.2.1	Definition	27
2.2.2	Relevant theories for accountability in higher education	29
2.2.2.1	The Accountability Triangle.....	29
2.2.2.2	New Public Management (NPM).....	32
2.2.2.3	Managerialism.....	36
2.2.3	Autonomy and Governance in Accountability.....	39
2.2.4	The Issue of Measurement	41
2.3	NATIONAL LEVEL HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN KOREA.....	44
2.3.1	Historical Background on Higher Education Accountability in Korea.....	45
2.3.2	Institutional Accreditation	49
2.3.2.1	Accreditation agency	50
2.3.2.2	The purpose of accreditation	50
2.3.2.3	The process of accreditation	52
2.3.2.4	Standards for accreditation	53
2.3.3	Self-Evaluation Report	54
2.3.3.1	The purpose of self-study reports.....	55
2.3.3.2	Purpose of the self-evaluation.....	56
2.3.4	University rankings by the <i>JoongAng-Ilbo</i>	58
2.4	THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMWORK.....	61
2.4.1	Total Quality Management	61
2.4.2	Conceptual Framework.....	63
3.0	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	66
3.1	SURVEY INSTRUMENT.....	66

3.2	PILOT STUDY.....	69
3.3	POPULATION AND SAMPLING.....	69
3.3.1	Rationale for selection of sample and respondents.....	71
3.4	DATA COLLECTION.....	73
3.5	DATA ANALYSIS.....	74
4.0	RESULTS.....	75
4.1	DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS.....	75
4.2	DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS.....	77
4.2.1	Response Analysis for each survey question.....	77
4.3	INFERENCEAL ANALYSIS BASED ON MEAN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GROUPS.....	84
4.3.1	Mean Difference Analysis regarding the Role of Higher Education.....	84
4.3.2	Mean Difference Analysis Regarding Quality of Higher Education.....	88
4.3.3	Mean Difference Analysis regarding Accountability.....	91
4.3.4	Mean Difference Analysis regarding Quality Assurance.....	94
4.4	CORRELATION ANALYSIS.....	96
4.5	MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS.....	98
5.0	DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	101
5.1	SUMMARIZE FINDINGS OF STATISTICAL DATA.....	101
5.1.1	Summary for Research Question One.....	101
5.1.2	Summary for Research Question Two.....	103
5.1.3	Summary for Research Question Three.....	104
5.1.4	Summary for Research Question Four.....	105

5.2	DISCUSS RESPONSES OF THE OPEN ENDED QUESTION	106
5.3	IMPLICATIONS	111
5.3.1	Implications for Policy.....	112
5.3.2	Implications for Practice	113
5.4	CONCLUSION	115
5.4.1	Recommendations for Future Study	116
5.4.2	Great Example of College Students' Survey	117
5.4.3	Closing Thoughts	119
APPENDIX A	121
APPENDIX B	137
APPENDIX C	138
BIBLIOGRAPHY	140

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Different Types of Institutional Autonomy	40
Table 2. Evaluation Territory and Standards	58
Table 3. Critical Criteria, Key Indicators and their Weight for Overall Condition of Education by <i>JoongAng-Ilbo</i>	60
Table 4. Research Questions and Survey Questions.....	68
Table 5. Descriptions of Selected Students for Pilot Study.....	69
Table 6. The Total Number of 4 year Universities by Establishment in Seoul, Korea	70
Table 7. Distribution of Surveyed Students by Gender, Class year, Major, and Institution Type	76
Table 8. Response Analysis of Question 1,2,3,4	77
Table 9. Response Analysis of Question 5,6,7,8	78
Table 10. Response Analysis of Question 9,10,11,12,13	79
Table 11. Response Analysis of Question 14,15,16	80
Table 12. Response Analysis of Question 17,18,19,20	81
Table 13. Response Analysis of Question 21,22,23	82
Table 14. Response Analysis of Question 24,25,26,27,28	83
Table 15. Mean Comparison by Class Year	85
Table 16. Mean Comparison by Institution	86
Table 17. Mean Comparison by Major	87

Table 18. Mean Comparison by Class Year	88
Table 19. Mean Comparison by Institution Type	89
Table 20. Mean Comparison by Major	90
Table 21. Mean Comparison by Class Year	91
Table 22. Mean Comparison by Institution Type	92
Table 23. Mean Comparison by Major	93
Table 24. Mean Comparison by Class Year	94
Table 25. Mean Comparison by Institution Type	95
Table 26. Mean Comparison by Major	96
Table 27. Correlation Analysis	98
Table 28. Influence on Attitudes towards Accountability related to Finding Jobs.....	99
Table 29. Influence on Attitudes towards Accountability regarding Reform of the Higher Education	100

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The Needs for External Quality Assurance	14
Figure 2. The Accountability Triangle.....	30
Figure 3. Key Trends in Higher Education.....	35
Figure 4. Performance funding indicators: concerns, values, and models.....	42
Figure 5. Population that has attained Tertiary Education Percentage, 2010.	47
Figure 6. The Basic Direction of Accreditation.....	52
Figure 7. The Procedure of Accreditation.....	53
Figure 8. Assessment Area and Contents	55
Figure 9. Needs for the Self-Evaluation	57
Figure 10. Principles of TQM.....	64
Figure 11. Students-Centered Management for Accountability in Higher Education.....	65
Figure 12. Number of Schools by City/ Province and by Establishment	70
Figure 13. IRB Exempt Approval Letter	137

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Accountability in higher education has been a significant issue throughout the world over the past few decades. Today, as the demand for higher education has rapidly increased, individual stakeholders and governments have become more interested in accountability. As a global knowledge-based society has evolved, our society asks higher education to play a more significant role by developing potential human resources. As tuition has increased, stakeholders such as parents and governments have started to question HEI educational quality because there are many doubts or concerns regarding whether HEIs contribute to social and economic development and whether they can produce productive and capable citizens.

There is little doubt that if HEIs do not function well, they may hinder economic growth and national development since higher education plays a leading role throughout the world. HEIs cannot be regarded as separated or disjoined entities; rather, they are intertwined with society. As the demand for accountability in higher education has increased, policymakers have expected universities to achieve more goals and to demonstrate their capabilities and outcomes. For this reason, many higher education policies deal with accountability issues related to quality assurance, a responsibility of universities all over the world.

The Korean government over the last few years has enacted various education policies and ambitious projects in response to calls for accountability in higher education. Most education policies are closely related to quality assurance and evaluation of HEIs. The primary purpose of

new education policy is to strengthen global competitiveness based on improved quality of HEIs in Korea. ‘Brain Korea 21’ and ‘New University Project for Regional Innovation’ are two of the representative governmental projects for enhancing accountability in higher education; however, there are still controversial issues regarding quality of HEIs and their global competitiveness.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

No matter how important and necessary education policies made by policy makers and led by a few administrators of each HEI, policies would not be effective or successful without students’ active participation or understanding of those issues. This study will explore the similarities and differences of students’ perceptions on major issues related to accountability according to school types and majors. This study will begin to explore the general images of accountability issues in higher education through students’ viewpoints.

In general, Korean students have not been regarded as a major stakeholder group in terms of their right to speak or know about education policies; rather, they have been passive receivers. The research goal is to determine what university students think about accountability issues and policies in higher education in order to obtain insight and seek to understand the need for attention to their perceptions concerning rapidly rising higher education accountability issues in Korea.

Quality assurance and university evaluation are not only significant but they are complex issues in Korea due to controversial arguments about various evaluation criteria and the use of evaluation results. There are some major issues related to HEIs’ accountability in Korea. These

include 1. Accreditation, 2. University ranking, 3. Self-evaluation reporting, and 4. Education policy regarding university evaluation and its resulting applications by the Korean government.

To increase accountability in higher education, the Korean government passed the Higher Education Act of 2008, which mentions “accreditation” of HEIs. Before 2008, Korean higher education had very weak legislative requirements with regard to accreditation. Since 2011, the Korean Council for University Education (KCUE) has begun to conduct accreditation of HEIs through an affiliated agency, the Korean University Accreditation Institute.

Apart from the accreditation done by an external agency, the Korean government has also started to evaluate HEIs by using somewhat different evaluation criteria in order to examine whether HEIs meet minimum requirements and to assess their operational system since 2012. The main purpose of this evaluation is for the Korean government to structure reforms so as to meet the needs of accountability in higher education. The Korean government has revised plans for evaluation criteria, evaluation periods, and evaluation items.

Another rising issue involves university ranking, which refers to various types of statistical data. The newspaper *JoongAng-Ilbo* is one of the three biggest newspapers in Korea, and its writers have evaluated Korean four-year universities and announced evaluation results every year since 1994. The newspaper has ranked each university according to evaluation scores, which are determined by a variety of criteria. Ranking reports of the *JoongAng-Ilbo* have provided some significant information regarding four-year universities to the public, including high school students who want to go to college.

Self-evaluation reporting is one way to evaluate internal accountability, which is done by each university independently. Self-evaluation reports have been widely used in many countries for a long time; however, Korean universities have just started to use them since 2009 at the

request of the Korean government. The Korean government has provided specific evaluation criteria that should be included in self-evaluation reports so each university can assess its accountability based on their needs and differentiated situations.

Lastly, new higher education policy for accountability in higher education has significantly influenced Korean universities. In 2012, the Korean government announced new education policy designed to reform universities and two-year colleges. The main purpose of this policy is to strengthen competitiveness of HEIs. The government decided to use evaluation results when they provide HEIs with federal funds for state and/or national level projects. Evaluation criteria used by the Korean government is not exactly the same as that of accreditation, which is done by KCUE. Consequently, there have been controversies in university evaluation results and its uses.

Recently, these four major issues, which are tightly related to higher education accountability, and have led to highly controversial problems in Korea. There are a few studies, including surveys, on administrators' perceptions of education policy and/or relevant issues regarding accountability in higher education in Korea. Also, the Korean government has held conferences so that those who are interested in education policy know about newly issued education policies and agendas. However, unfortunately there have been no official studies or conferences designed to provide information regarding accountability issues to students who are current or future primary stakeholders in higher education.

As stated above, education policies, accreditation systems, university rankings, and self-evaluation reports are most significant topics, and all of them aim at strengthening accountability in higher education. Although students do not directly participate in the process of making education policies and regulation, there is no question that the Korean government and university

administrators need to know how students perceive accountability issues and what students think about criteria regarding university evaluation.

There is no question that students are not only primary consumers but also will be potential indicators in identifying accountability in higher education across the country. In spite of this fact, researchers have not focused much on students yet. Students' perceptions of accountability issues need to be considered as a crucial factor.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study was to examine university students' perceptions of quality assurance and university evaluation with regard to accountability in Korea. This study investigated students' perceptions of higher education accountability policies and issues. While most previous studies aim to describe the perspectives of administrator groups with regard to education policies or major issues, this study focused on students' thoughts and understandings on this topic.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examined on quality assurance and university evaluation issues, topics that relate to higher education accountability in Korea, based on Korean university students' perceptions on those issues. The research addressed the following questions:

How do university students perceive the issue of higher education accountability?

To what extent do university students know about education policies and issues regarding quality assurance and university evaluation?

What are the important factors affecting accountability in HEIs in Korea?

How do answers to the first two research questions differ among types of institutions (national, public, and private) and by majors?

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Traditionally, Korean education policies are entirely oriented to providers, such as the government and administrators. In spite of the fact that students are the primary stakeholders who will play a main role in society after graduating, their opinions have not been reflected in education at any level. Students had a lack of opportunity to speak their thoughts on major issues; rather they were asked to follow predetermined regulations or policies enacted by providers.

Today, more than ever, higher education is one of the most important indicators related to national competitiveness. One of the main reasons is that higher education is considered a global product, similar to electronic goods and automobiles. As the number of student studying abroad has rapidly increased across the world, the quality of higher education institutions (HEIs) has become one of the major issues in many countries. Many countries have tried to assure HEI quality in response to the call for greater accountability.

Many can access higher education quite easily compared to the past; consequently higher education is no longer the exclusive property of privileged people. As more people decide to go to universities, more of them express concerns about higher education quality in Korea. The Korean government has tried to make new education policies and government-led projects to strengthen HEIs quality rather than quantity over the last few years. However, there are still many controversial arguments in terms of HEI quality.

As mentioned earlier, university students' perceptions of quality of higher education is important as they will directly experience education through HEIs and will demonstrate quality of higher education as critical evidence in the future. This study will contribute to what should be considered as fundamental factors so as to improve quality of higher education through the lens of students. There is little doubt that any providers should consider consumers as a top priority. In other words, they need to know what concerns consumers have about their products and how consumers recognize and/or evaluate products. In this sense, one of the key contributions of this study is to demonstrate how students perceive quality of higher education and how their perceptions differ from the ideal goals and purposes for accountability provided by the Korean government.

Another contribution of this study is that it helps stakeholders to understand university evaluation-related issues by virtue of different perspectives among types of institutions and by departments or academic majors. There are several conferences and seminars regarding quality issues of higher education in Korea, but they are mainly designed for administrators and policy makers rather than students. To put it another way, due to lack of study of university students, it is difficult to know what the most serious or important issues are among Korean university students and how to address chronic problems related to higher education.

The results of this study may have policy implications in terms of quality assurance issues and evaluation of HEIs in Korea. The perceptions of university students at three different types of institutions will provide insight on what issues need to be reconsidered based on more effective plans for improved accountability in higher education. In reality, students cannot participate in the process of making education policy; however, it is necessary to listen to students' opinions because they are significant stakeholders and are the group who will make a great contribution towards the development of the country.

PREVIEW

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents a review of the literature on quality assurance and accreditation issues with regard to accountability in higher education within a global context. The following literature review begins with a brief overview of accountability based on relevant theories, and current issues within higher education settings around the globe. Next, at the national level, newly initiated education policies regarding accreditation and self-evaluation in Korea will be discussed based on the Korean government documents and some official websites. In addition, the issue of university rankings, which have been conducted by *Joong-Ang Ilbo*, one of the three biggest newspapers in Korea, will also be explored.

2.1 QUALITY ASSURANCE

Education quality has always been a concern in education; however, quality assurance is regarded as one of the representative instruments of ensuring accountability in higher education. Dill (2007) explains, “The term quality assurance in higher education is increasingly used to denote the practices whereby academic standards, i.e., the level of academic achievement attained by higher education graduates, are maintained and improved” (p. 1).

Wilger (1997) defines quality as follows:

Quality assurance focuses on process; it seeks to convince both internal and external constituents that an institution has processes that produce high quality outcomes. Quality assurance makes explicit accountability for quality at various points within an institution. Quality is the responsibility of everyone in the organization. Quality assurance is a continuous, active, and responsive process, which includes strong evaluation and feedback loops (p. 3).

The OECD (2009) quotes definitions of quality assurance from Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002)'s works: "Quality assurance is an all-embracing term covering all the policies, processes, and actions through which the quality of higher education is maintained and developed" (Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002, OECD, 2002, p. 324). Simply, quality assurance refers to monitoring, evaluation, or examination of higher education institutions so as to make sure HEIs work properly to meet minimum requirements.

2.1.1 The purpose of quality assurance

According to the OECD (2008), "Quality assurance can be considered as one of the most prominent reform issues in higher education worldwide. Since the beginning of the 1990s, countries and international non-governmental organizations have discovered the potential of quality control as a means of generating accountability in increasingly deregulated higher education systems" (p. 2). As discussed above, the increased call for greater accountability in higher education is one the most significant factors regarding quality assurance.

Hénard and Mitterle (2010) explain, "Accountability is an increasingly important element in the governance of tertiary education systems. It reflects the recognition that there is a public interest in tertiary education which needs to be reconciled with the benefits that institutional