

The Impact of International Accreditation on Universities' Brand Image: A Brand Management Approach

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Abstract

International accreditation provides universities with a sustainable competitive advantage by highlighting positive perceptions of critical features such as reliability, transparency, and quality. Today, many universities are making great efforts and investments to be accredited on a departmental basis by a recognized international accreditation organization. On this account, day by day, the high perceived quality in higher education institutions has begun to be directly associated with international accreditation. This study aims to reveal the effects of international accreditation on the perceived brand image of universities from a brand management perspective. In this context, issues such as known and recognized international accreditations in higher education, accreditation criteria, brand image, theoretical models related to brand image and factors forming the brand image, stakeholders affected by accreditation, and image interaction are evaluated from a brand management perspective. Accreditation processes and their effects around the world have been examined, a theoretical model has been built that reveals criteria, titles, and/or themes that can be associated with the image, and international accreditation and quality perspectives in higher education have been associated with the brand image.

1 Introduction

Universities that intend to obtain accreditation complete their processes by fulfilling the requirements within the context of the criteria of the accreditation bodies. Considering national and international accreditation bodies, although the requirements may differ, common issues and criteria form the basis for the sustainability of Higher Education Institutions. Fulfilled criteria expectations actually contribute to improving the quality of universities. Accomplished criteria expectations actually contribute to improving the quality of universities. In addition, when the outputs within the scope of both education and services provided to students are evaluated, they become components that can be ranked in the long term and constitute a list of inputs in the comparable evaluation of the quality perceived by stakeholders. In a situation where all universities attach similar importance to accreditation processes and show similar sensitivity in fulfilling the requirements of education quality, the issue of differentiation-criteria of universities with this ranking can come to the agenda. When this structure is associated with brand management, universities may start to follow similar strategies with companies in other sectors if they exceed the minimum level in terms of standardization in this harvest race. For educational institutions that aim for high performance in their accreditation processes through their quest for innovation, there is always a possibility that the accreditation standards will be revised, and the conditions will become even more difficult. Innovations in areas such as the number of publications, technology production skills, and social activities, which can be considered the basic outputs of education and can be associated with the quality of education, are not only the driving force of competition between universities but also have the potential to become exemplary models and targets to be surpassed for each other. When considered in terms of stakeholder evaluation and satisfaction in the long term, a set of criteria and connotations associated with the reputation or image of universities may lead to reshaping with the fulfillment of requirements and revision of stakeholder expectations. If there was a standard and identical path that would ensure a positive image of universities, it is likely that all universities would want to follow that path rather than try different paths. Similarly, with the differentiation in fields within international accreditation bodies (ABET, AACSB, AMBA etc.), there are different organizations that provide accreditation in the same field (e.g. EQUIS, CEEMAN etc. for Business and Management Sciences). In fact, universities that want to gain international prestige may have more than one national or international accreditation. The sociological dimension, which is another critical component of the accreditation process, motivates universities and academic circles to make comprehensive evaluations under relevant topics. How equal and fair the education offered for stakeholder evaluation is compared to the rest of the world. The potential impact of institutional adaptation-rate on differences in educational standards, both country-based and university-based, as international pressure towards accreditation becomes more evident. The possibility of gaining an advantage in the competitive environment for universities that have reached the accreditation process at an early stage. Strategies to generate possible waves of innovation as education reaches maturity in the product life cycle. Strategies to generate possible waves of innovation as education reaches maturity in the product life cycle; this topic is also a potential guide to sustainable improvement in education worldwide. The possible perception of equivalence between two institutions with the same accreditation for the same period of time in terms of educational quality, and, conversely, the possible perceived differences between the two institutions in stakeholder evaluations. The possibility of the university to build a balanced and stable brand value in the long term with the brand image formed on this perception of differences. The potential positive effect of the quality perception obtained through accreditation on the existing

image. The potential effect of the brand image of the accrediting institution on the brand image of the higher education institution obtained through accreditation. The potential for accreditation of a university or department to be associated with qualities such as being highly prestigious, ethical, transparent, socially responsible and respected; even broader, the possibility of these qualities being ranked. With the acceptance that accreditation and educational quality are directly related, the collective sum of the expected criteria for accreditation constitute the dimensions of educational quality. This interaction nurtures the expectation of adding a rating score to the accreditation documents given on a yearly basis, possibly, in the access of stakeholders. The relationship and interaction between branding and accreditation seem to be on the agenda of much more in-depth and numerous research topics in the coming years.

2 Background

Accreditation strengthens stakeholders' perception of quality. As a dimension that creates brand value, it can be considered to contribute to strengthening and protecting the brand image, which increases the attractiveness of the university and creates brand value through standards. On the other hand, Meiners and Morriss stated that it can be associated with cartelization because of the imposition it contains and pointed out that standardization and restrictions narrow the options and can have negative effects on the general economy (Meiners & Morriss, 2025).

Another study examined how ranking systems can be effective tools in associating universities with academic excellence and institutional recognition. For newly established universities, it can be effective in recognizing the institution's name, and at more advanced levels, in the institution's visibility and recognition (Biagioli, 2022). Snadrou & Haoucha defined brand image in higher education with rational and emotional dimensions. Rational factors consist of a series of items that can be associated with measurable indicators of international accreditation organizations. A series of factors related to career opportunities, quality and infrastructure are expressed with the rational dimensions of brand image. Emotional factors consist of a series of emotional elements that can be associated with personality and culture, including values, identity construction and commitment. Brand image has a potential impact on students' perception when choosing higher education institutions, and this perceptual effect usually occurs during first impressions (Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024).

Corporate image, which is the basis of branding and corporate differentiation, is also strongly associated with perceived value and stakeholder satisfaction in the long term (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009). The recognition of the interaction between corporate image and perceived value has triggered a high interest in measuring perceived quality. Many of the factors included in international accreditation criteria overlap with these perceptions, and brand reputation is increasingly associated with sustainability efforts within higher education. Systematic competitive approaches that conform to models of excellence can indirectly support brand image positively (Araci et al., 2025). A study on brand image in the context of higher education has shown that factors such as corporate reputation (including trust and past performance), perceived quality, corporate personality, and stakeholder relationships significantly affect brand identity. In this context, brand identity affects brand image through dimensions such as academic reputation and visibility (Bosch et al., 2006).

The university brand image and brand identity can be strengthened with the brand community and student communities in a way that is compatible with each other. Supporting and highlighting a department where the university is already strong can also contribute positively to the general image of the university. One of the criteria for accreditation is the participation of stakeholders and determining their expectations. Carrying out these evaluations on the data obtained with appropriate techniques will contribute to the improvement processes of universities at the department level (Spry & Pitch, 2021). Stakeholders are the communication bridge for universities, and in this communication, which is expected to be mutual and determined, there is a demand and effort by the university to reach stakeholders. In addition, the attraction that this communication will create is not only good relations with stakeholders. At the same time, this form of communication is the external face of universities, and it has the potential to attract more stakeholders with its dynamic and multidimensional structure. Accreditation is also a form of communication for universities. It is an expression to the public that they have met certain standards and are ready to provide the necessary qualities and quantities for stakeholders.

Accreditation has gone beyond a perception of quality and has become a respected status in which universities increasingly invest. In this context, accreditation has become a market with its own rules and expectations. Institutions that comply with these standards not only fulfill the accreditation criteria but also move toward the goal of international recognition (Adiatma et al., 2022). This increased sensitivity to quality supports universities' efforts to establish themselves as brands, leading to the determination of higher performance criteria and more challenging goals. Strengthening this brand identity requires strategic branding efforts that interact with the institutional image. In addition to basic components such as curriculum, research output, and technological advancement, universities are also improving the quality of support services and infrastructure. In recent years, graduate programs have become the main driver of institutional reputation and a center of attraction for students (Maulanadi et al., 2025). The existence and diversity of these programs can positively affect stakeholders' perception of service quality and institutional value.

In recognition-first initiatives, education extensions and visibility efforts, especially sustainability and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have become critical. Although not all accreditation bodies have incorporated these standards into their bodies today, they are increasingly expected to adopt them. Competition in higher education is evolving as improvements in standards are monitored more closely. Strategic goals are shaped by the constraints that affect competition, and accreditation, by its nature, acts as a driving force in this environment. In this sense, accreditation processes include competitive demands and contribute to a culture of continuous improvement. This dynamic has the potential to define the future nature of education; constantly evolving and increasingly innovative. As digital transformation accelerates, education is becoming one of the most significantly affected areas. Infrastructure and learning environments should be continuously evaluated in light of development, and adaptation should be ensured in terms of the delivery of education and how it is perceived.

3 Main Focus of the Paper

In the increasingly competitive global education market, accreditation from recognized international organizations has become a strategic communication tool for a positive contribution to the perception of institutional credibility and to attract students, academicians, and partnerships on an international scale. This paper aims to examine the impact of international accreditation on the brand image of higher education institutions. In this context, it investigates how international accreditation affects the perception of quality, academic excellence, and global competition in the perception of stakeholders and students and consequently, its effects on the brand image of a university.

| Author | Concepts Related to Brand Image |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Biagoli, 2022 | Brand image is related to the university's past-based symbols and its transmitted history. This interaction may not always have a positive effect. |
| Brown et al., 2016 | In the study, where suggestions are presented for effective brand strategies of universities, the importance of brand identity, shaping the relationship between different campus images of universities and brand identity, creating a strong brand personality, international promotional activities, and effective budgets allocated will help to develop relations with stakeholders. |
| Casanoves - Boix et al., 2025 | It is stated that brand image plays a key role in creating brand value. The image consists of stakeholders' trust, perception and impressions about the university. |
| Effah, 2020 | Among the elements that determine the university brand image, functional features such as physical infrastructure, quality of education and training, campus environment, factors such as academic staff, and for emotional features experiences are associated with establishing a bond. Being known along with reputation and reliability is decisive. Compliance with personal values also emerges as a decisive factor. |
| Haryanto et al., 2022 | It is stated that brand image does not have a significant effect on student satisfaction. It is stated that brand image is related to how universities are viewed by society and stakeholders. This may affect choices and comparisons. |
| Hutabarat & Hutabarat, 2020 | Factors such as national recognition, service-related extensions, good reputation, health insurance, and ease of registration processes have a strengthening effect on the brand image. |
| Widjayanti & Kristiyana, 2025 | It is stated that social media marketing and relations with students affect the brand image, which in turn affects selection decisions. |
| Panda et al., | University heritage (intellectual culture, values, etc.), reliability and service quality are associated with brand image. In order to develop the brand image, originality and difference are emphasized, service quality, trust and reputation are emphasized. |
| Pulido, et al., 2022 | Their study focuses on four variables that affect brand image among undergraduate students: Price-Quality Perception, Ethical Values and Social Responsibility, Visibility in social media, and Position in University Rankings. |
| Shehzadi et al., 2021 | It is stated that the university brand image is greatly affected by student satisfaction and word of mouth communication. |
| Nasution, 2023 | A strong brand image is associated with factors such as building trust, ease of choice, and gaining competitive advantage. |
| Wilkins & Huisman, 2015 | Factors affecting the university image include communication, campus features, and the prestige of the main campus. |

Table 1. Brand Image Source: It was prepared by the author by compiling a literature review.

4 Brand Image and Brand Image Dimensions in Higher Institutions

Studies have revealed a number of factors that may be related to the Brand Image in Higher Education Institutions. The potential effects of internationalization and international accreditation processes on brand image may also affect these factors. The university image and the factors that may be related are presented in Table 1.

5 Spectral Signatures and Brand Image: An Analogy for Accreditation in Higher Education

In the competitive environment of higher education, institutions are expected to demonstrate clarity, consistency, and congruence between their expressed image and their actual performance. In the competitive environment of higher education, institutions are expected to demonstrate clarity and equivalence between their projected image and their actual performance. Rather than glittering mission statements, accrediting bodies look for hard evidence that an institution's identity is being truly and consistently communicated. This process can be conceptualized with an astrophysics-based analogy involving the observation of distant stars.

To the casual observer, a star may appear as a point of light in the night sky, just as a university appears as a respected brand to potential students and stakeholders. Astrophysicists use spectrographs attached to telescopes to image spectral lines that provide information flow through absorption and emission lines. These spectral lines are identifiers for the star's chemical composition, temperature, and life stage. The flow of information coming from academic accreditation analysis functions in a similar way. While an institution's brand messaging and public communications can project an inclusive image, accreditation standards provide deeper validation. This process involves examining the operational and academic components behind the brand, from social events to career guidance. Each of these components represents a "spectral line" that contributes to the institution's identity.

6 International Accreditation and Brand Image Relationship

Accreditation is effective in institutional performance by providing quality assurance. In addition, the fact that this performance can be confirmed can attract more students. Accreditations aim to improve the quality of education by reviewing the program, particularly focusing on learning outcomes. In this manner, public institutions can receive state support during the accreditation phase. Focusing on weak areas will increase the success of students and the institution in the long term and contribute positively to the institutional image. The most distinctive feature of both national and international accreditation bodies is the process monitoring and ensuring continuity (Ulker & Bakioglu, 2018). Commitment to this path will have a significant positive impact on perceived prestige and quality of education. When education processes are evaluated on a global platform, certain basic structures in branding attract attention (Jois & Chakrabarti, 2022)

- When student-related factors are considered, these include loyalty (based on perceived value, trust and satisfaction), satisfaction, career opportunities and related motivational factors and anticipatory opportunities.
- From an academic perspective, there are elements such as intellectual participation through students, curriculum and activities, and teaching methods.
- The campus is evaluated in terms of its culture and ability to attract students.
- Branding is more associated with identity and recognition, and recognition is associated with later recall and image.
- Events are also effective in the branding process of a university.

Fulfilling international accreditation criteria that include all of these mentioned factors will contribute to the brand image of universities. In a study on accreditation and medical schools, the positive contributions of accreditation to the brand image in terms of prestige and respect, recognition, attractiveness, trust and reputation are expressed (Giroto et al., 2024). Internationalization at universities has been associated with indicators such as the percentage of foreign students and the number of foreign professors in the teaching staff (Marquez et al., 2013). Especially considering the strategic value of international accreditation and its evaluation in terms of global recognition, as well as its positive effects on perceived image and quality, universities will continue to strive to gain as much opportunity as possible from this share. Considering that accreditation processes are systematic but not effortless, it will be necessary to overcome some costs and administrative difficulties.

7 Future Research Directions

The potential positive impact of accreditation-induced enhancements and adjustments on both faculty and student levels within the institution is significant because positive perceptions of institutional dynamics can contribute positively to overall brand strength. How accreditation impacts decision-making among international students, and the potential positive contributions of accreditation status to hiring preferences and perceived quality of graduates, could be explored in more depth. Comparative studies across international accrediting organizations

could help identify which accreditation features offer the most significant branding benefits in which local contexts. The multidimensional effect of international accreditation on brand image has significant potential both in institutional perception and overall performance. In addition, cost-benefit analysis of accreditation from a branding perspective can be expected to provide critical support information in situations where return on investment is evaluated. Future research is needed to examine these dimensions in more depth through interdisciplinary comparative analyses.

8 Conclusion

Today, international accreditation has become a strategic tool for higher education institutions that aim to create positive effects on their brand image and improve their perceived credibility in an increasingly competitive global education environment. Accreditation, as a communication tool, not only expresses academic quality and institutional compliance with standards but also represents a strategic process in attracting students, academics, and partners. Accreditation, one of the effective components of global positioning, has a potential contribution to the development of perceptions of prestige and international recognition. This recognition contributes to an enhanced brand image, increased visibility in international rankings, improved student recruitment outcomes and stronger corporate partnerships.

On the other hand, there is a growing concern that some institutions may view accreditation as a marketing-first strategy, focusing on external image rather than internal development. In addition, the financial and administrative burdens associated with the accreditation process can create significant uncertainties regarding accessibility and equity, especially for institutions in emerging economies. Therefore, accreditation should be viewed not only as a branding tool but also as an opportunity to create sustainable long-term strategies that ensure growth objectives and alignment with institutional values.

This paper evaluates how international accreditation affects the perception of quality, academic excellence and global competitiveness in the perception of stakeholders and students by highlighting the multidimensional impact of international accreditation on brand image.

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