

ACCREDITATION PROCESS AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL*

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Introduction

Accreditation is a process in which certification of competency, authority, or credibility is attempted. Higher education accreditation is a type of quality assurance process under which services and operations of educational institutions or programmes are evaluated by an external body to determine if applicable standards or criteria are met. The major international business school accreditation organizations today are the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International, the Association of MBAs (AMBA), and the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD). Accreditation has been a growing phenomenon amongst business schools in the last decade. Hundreds of business schools around the world have invested sizable resources in accreditation processes in the pursuit of desired labels. But is all this done only for the labels? Or, can we identify other additional benefits or positive externalities as process outcomes?

This paper's research question, "does the accreditation process function as a management tool," is derived from the experiences of the accreditation process of an international bachelor's level business programme at the School of Business of JAMK University of Applied Sciences in Finland.

The theme has been discussed in several articles published by the Academy of Management Learning and Education. Noteworthy examples include Julian and Ofori-Dankwa's (2006) piece in which they consider whether accreditation is actually good for traditional business schools' decision making, Zammuto

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and Raymond's (2008) discussion of the potential effects of the globalisation of business education and the push towards accreditation, Romero's (2008) article in which he examines how faculty members might recognise value in accreditation, and Ashkanasy's (2008) paper on whether accreditation brings about good for business and business schools.

In their study, Roller, Andrews and Bovee (2003) surveyed 122 deans and chairs of business schools to examine the costs and benefits of specialised accreditation and the schools' motivations for seeking it. The respondents represented both accredited and non-accredited schools.

The first part of this paper provides a short introduction to the Finnish higher education system, to JAMK University of Applied Sciences, its School of Business and, in particular, the Degree Programme in International Business. In addition a summary of the EPAS accreditation process undertaken at the School of Business is briefly presented. The motivation for the research question is also briefly described.

In the second part of the paper the problem setting and methodology of the analysis are described, and the outcomes of the analysis are reported. In the discussion section some concluding remarks are made and future research avenues are sketched out. Questions concerning the future activities of JAMK's Degree Programme in International Business are also shared as cases of the impact of the accreditation process.

The Context

The Finnish higher education system consists of two publicly funded sectors—universities and universities of applied sciences—both of which are accredited by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Each sector has its own profile. Universities, on the one hand, emphasise scientific research and instruction, whereas universities of applied sciences adopt a more pragmatic approach. Higher education institutions in Finland enjoy a high degree of autonomy in organising their annual academic activities.

JAMK University of Applied Sciences is a multidisciplinary higher educational institution consisting of the School of Technology, the School of Business, the School Health and Social Studies, and the certificate-awarding Teacher Education College. There are, in total, 8,500 students and 700 staff and faculty members. The total annual budget is €60 million. There are approximately 300 international students and over 400 exchange students every year. The University has passed the international quality audit of FINHEEC in 2013 and has two accredited programmes; the Degree Programme in International Business is EPAS accredited and the Degree Programme in Logistics Engineering is EURACE accredited.

JAMK's School of Business creates business competence and competitiveness for students and the business community, and is one of the leading schools of business in Finland, known for its high quality in learning and internationalisation. The School provides bachelor's and master's level programmes both in Finnish and English. The core areas are Business, Tourism and Hospitality, and Business Information Systems. In its intellectual activities the School focuses on its research lines of Responsible and Sustainable Management, Competitiveness and Internationalisation, Internet Technology in Business Processes, and Customer-oriented Services Management.

The Degree Programme in International Business (IB) is designed for young adults who want to develop their international business and management skills in a multicultural learning environment in English, and who seek a Finnish/European bachelor's degree. Geographically speaking, IB's primary market areas are Finland, Russia, the Baltic countries, Central and Western Europe, and Southeast Asia. The programme also welcomes students from growing economies such as those in Central Africa, Asia and the Americas.

The international faculty of the programme implement scholarly projects in the fields of Competitiveness and Clusters; Cross Cultural Management, Diversity, and Ethics; Corporate Governance; Corporate Social Responsibility; Open Innovation; Living Lab and Mobile Learning; Branding; Digital Marketing; Future of Work; Future of Human Resource Management; Visions and Scenarios of Future Workers and Managers; and Collaborative Learning in Education-Enterprise Liaison.

The accreditation process has had its impact on the School of Business's activities since its induction into the ranks of EFMD membership in 2010. Eligibility to start the EPAS accreditation process for the Degree Programme in International Business was attained in 2011. The first accreditation round was completed between autumn 2011 and spring 2012, and the programme has now been EPAS accredited for three years (as of this writing) since May 2012.

The main strategic development areas identified for the School and the Programme in 2012 were

- to further develop the intellectual activity/output of faculty so as to ensure the academic depth and rigour of the programme and its courses,
- to design and articulate more clearly the rationale and structure of the programme, including a coherent set of criteria referenced intended learning outcomes (ILOs) at the programme and course levels, and
- to further strengthen the QA systems, particularly in the areas of fundamental periodic review and monitoring of the assessment regime.

Suggested developmental activities have received special attention since autumn 2012. Progress in these areas has been shared with EFMD in the annual reports of 2013 and 2014. The re-accreditation process, which includes the compilation of a new self-assessment report, started in autumn 2014. The second Peer Review Visit took place in February 2015. EFMD's decision on IB's re-accreditation is expected by the end of May 2015.

In the second wave of the accreditation process the author, Head of IB, opened the discussion of the overall effect of the process. Where has the process led the School and the Programme? Has the process of the last five years been worth the investment? Has the accreditation process been of value for reasons beyond that of obtaining the label? As an outcome of this questioning phase the research question for this analysis was formulated: Does the accreditation process function as a management tool?

In order to generate trendsetting answers, the author conducted a preliminary qualitative analysis of internal stakeholders' reactions to the accreditation process. The key internal stakeholders of the process are the School's Management Team, the faculty of the accredited Programme, and the Quality Officers of the University. These stakeholders were each asked to list their findings and opinions on the accreditation process using a SWOT analysis framework. The material was collected in February 2015, in the midst of the Peer Review team's re-accreditation visit.

Analysis

In total, 10 responses were received. In the qualitative content analysis the author looked for similarities in the entries of each respondent group and formulated two descriptive statements for each of the groups represented in the SWOT analysis. These statements are found in Table 1. The statements are presented in order of importance.

Table 1 Analysis of the response in order of importance

	Management Team	Faculty	Quality Officers
Strengths	1. The process enhances faculty's commitment to development work. 2. The process improves the institution's self-understanding.	1. The process boosts faculty's team spirit. 2. The process brings several stakeholders to work together.	1. The criteria offer new insights to national quality context. 2. The process increases motivation towards quality work.
Weaknesses	1. The process is expensive and the costs may run out of control. 2. The process may unify programmes in a negative way.	1. The process is an additional task. 2. The process raises people's stress level.	1. There is an inherent predetermined quality thinking dominance in the process. 2. The process is an additional task.

Opportunities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The criteria provide endless development opportunities. 2. The process leads the institution to network with quality partners. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The process simply provides improvement opportunities. 2. The process develops communication between stakeholders. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The process can have an impact at the University level. 2. The process disseminates quality thinking.
Threats	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. None. 2. Are the criteria applied in the process future oriented? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The process can only serve itself. 2. None. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The process may have elements that conflict with national goals. 2. The process may lose its effect if implemented only to get a label.

Based on the preliminary results of the analysis it seems that the accreditation process yielded impacts and outcomes to the institution aside from the accreditation itself – or awarding of its associated label – itself. Specifically, the process was found to positively enhance the institution's commitment to the quality of its work, offer endless development opportunities, enhance the institution's self-understanding, boost the faculty's team spirit, and offer new insights into the national quality context.

There were also fears that the accreditation process may lead the activities of the institution in an undesired direction. The cost-benefit ratio of the process was questioned by several stakeholders. The accreditation process was perceived as a stressful additional task, taking resources away from something else only for the sake of the accreditation label. There were also doubts centred around the contents of the process, and some concern that the accreditation process may bring about a detrimental global unification of business education. The risk of quality thinking tunnel vision in the process was seen to potentially give rise to compatibility problems with national rules and regulations. Finally, there seemed to have been a degree of uncertainty with regard to the future relevance of the criteria applied in the process.

The accreditation process of JAMK's Degree Programme in International Business has activated the administration and faculty to discuss how to revise the design, delivery and operations of the programme. This can be seen as one important externality of the accreditation process. This ongoing interactive process should yield answers to the following key questions:

- How can the suggestions and recommendations of IB's Periodic Review 2014 be taken into account?
- How can the quality of learning be ensured amidst the challenges of a growing multicultural student body?
- How can the ILO assessment process and the linkage between intended and actual learning outcomes be improved?
- How can the resource allocation of the faculty be optimised while maximising their intellectual contribution to teaching?
- How can the identified themes for the future of management education (innovation, change management, corporate governance, ethics and leadership) be deeply embedded into the curriculum?
- How can IB's strategic position in global markets be improved in the event that Finnish authorities mandate the imposition of tuition fees for non-EU/EEA citizens? Are there ways to offer a more cost-effective study option for IB's international degree students?
- How can the best practices of IB's international commercial online courses be disseminated to IB's own degree students? Is it realistic to widen the online course portfolio for commercial purposes? How might the technological investments of the School in modern learning applications be more fully exploited?

Discussion

The preliminary analysis of the responses supports the idea that the outcome of the accreditation process is not limited to the label alone. The accreditation process

offers externalities linked to the managerial goals of the institution. It appears to lead the key stakeholders to think, discuss, act and interact. While all of these effects may be seen as positive ones, careful attention must be paid to them since there is a possibility that the process, if mismanaged, could inadvertently cause the institution to suffer setbacks rather than make progress.

The preliminary outcomes of the analysis offer encouragement for widening and deepening familiarity with the subject. The potential research avenues could provide interesting and valuable information to accreditation organisations, schools in the accreditation process and universities considering getting started with an accreditation process. This calls for an extensive, international sample and a properly designed research methodology.

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