

ADAPTING TO GLOBAL TRENDS IN SPECIALIZED BUSINESS ACCREDITATION: IMPLEMENTING A SUCCESSFUL CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

While specialized accreditation for business schools has existed for many years, we have recently found accreditors expanding their reach and modifying their criteria. Keeping abreast of this ever-changing landscape, and ensuring that there are adequate processes in place to accommodate the trends, is extremely challenging.

Webster University, a multi-campus, multi-national university, has obtained specialized business accreditation from the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP). Obtaining and successfully maintaining accreditation, regardless of the accrediting body, depends largely on there being an established, solid framework for continuous improvement of educational programs. Clearly setting and communicating educational expectations among a group of faculty members is a highly challenging task - given a worldwide university environment these challenges increase dramatically.

In this paper we will summarize specialized accreditations for schools of business including: the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), ACBSP, and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS). We will also report on a web-based environment used to capture and convey course and program details, aiding the educational process and enabling consistent material to be delivered throughout the world. Through carefully crafted web-based interfaces, this technology also enables a feedback loop for gathering and analyzing data. Results of such analysis can then be incorporated, thus facilitating the ongoing improvement of both courses and programs. We will share the feedback from users of the system, and describe the integral role it has played in our success in the world of accreditation.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing emphasis on accreditation, both at the university level and at the school or even program level, is causing major changes in the infrastructure and communication mechanisms at higher education institutions. Such change is emerging in many regions around the globe including Europe, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the US. Successful accreditation, no matter which accreditation organization is involved, requires a very solid assessment process to be established, and an effective continuous improvement mechanism to be implemented.

In all cases, the accreditors consider educational quality and continuous improvement as central themes. A brief introduction to the three specialized business-school accreditors follows.

1. Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), based in the US, was founded in 1916 and established accreditation standards by 1919 (<http://www.aacsb.edu>). The standards currently cover business, management and accounting programs. The AACSB's focus more closely matches programs housed in research universities. Guidelines for the intellectual contribution of faculty place an emphasis on publications albeit via a variety of venues. AACSB quality standards are organized within three major categories: strategic management, participants, and assurance of learning.
2. Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), formerly known as the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs, is also based in the US but is much younger than the AACSB, as it was formed in 1988 (<http://www.acbsp.org>). The ACBSP attempts to balance the significance of both teaching and research. In addition to valuing student-oriented objective excellence in teaching, the ACBSP encourages enhancing learning experiences via faculty involvement in the business world.
3. European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) is located in Belgium. However, its perspective was heavily influenced by the Bologna Agreement, an initiative to foster educational quality through comparability and mobility across national boundaries in Europe (<http://www.efmd.org>). In this way EQUIS is designed to offer an international accreditation rather than an accreditation based on national values. EQUIS also differs from the AACSB and ACBSP in that it examines the entire institution unit as part of the business school accreditation process. Further, EQUIS examines the level of internationalization in an institution.

ACCREDITORS EXPAND THEIR REACH

The accreditation programs presented above initially focused on institutions in either the US or Europe but now have members in many countries. For example, the ACBSP expanded to Canada in 2005 and Latin America in 2009. ACBSP has a stronger presence in India and perhaps the only presence in Russia. Current ACBSP members number 645 in various phases of the accreditation process across 46 countries. The AACSB currently has 637 accredited members across 41 countries with a strong presence in the Middle East. Member institutions are now located in the Middle East, Latin America, Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. EQUIS has accredited over 130 institutions in 38 countries.

ACCREDITORS MODIFY STANDARDS

Accreditors apply the same continuous improvement model to their own accreditation criteria and processes. For example: EQUIS approved major revisions in 2003, 2007 and 2011. ACBSP revised the approach to measuring and reporting learning outcomes in 2003 and 2006 with rebranding in 2008. Similarly AACSB standards were revised in 2003, 2009, and 2010. As a result, currently accredited programs and institutions must be flexible and be prepared to adapt to changing standards, criteria, and reporting requirements.

As previously noted, the increasingly international reach of all three accreditors is likely to bring with it new ideas and problems. Based on the continuous improvement philosophy, such ideas and problems are likely to result in additional changes to accreditation standards and processes. Therefore it is important for educational programs to recognize that changes are inevitable and indeed may accelerate. Systems that can support continuous improvement must include flexibility and a loosely-coupled modular design.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

A sustainable mechanism for continuous improvement is essential in any educational institution. Such a mechanism must involve establishing an assessment process, together with an ability to easily analyze assessment data and feed it back into program maintenance (Lubinescu, Ratcliff, and Gaffney 2001). Current accreditors focus on outcomes-based assessment, which must be performed at the program level. Therefore, specific courses are deemed appropriate for the assessment of particular program learning outcomes. Within a given course, this data could be generated by embedded assignment or examination questions, a standardized test, or a particular assignment or examination question as determined by the instructor.

Once data is gathered for these outcomes, it must be stored in a repository and presented in such a way to enable analysis to be straightforward. Once analyzed, the results will determine if there is a learning issue that must be resolved, and if so where this learning should be occurring within the program. Adjustments to the appropriate course and/or program must then be made. The desired continuous improvement process is depicted in Figure 1.

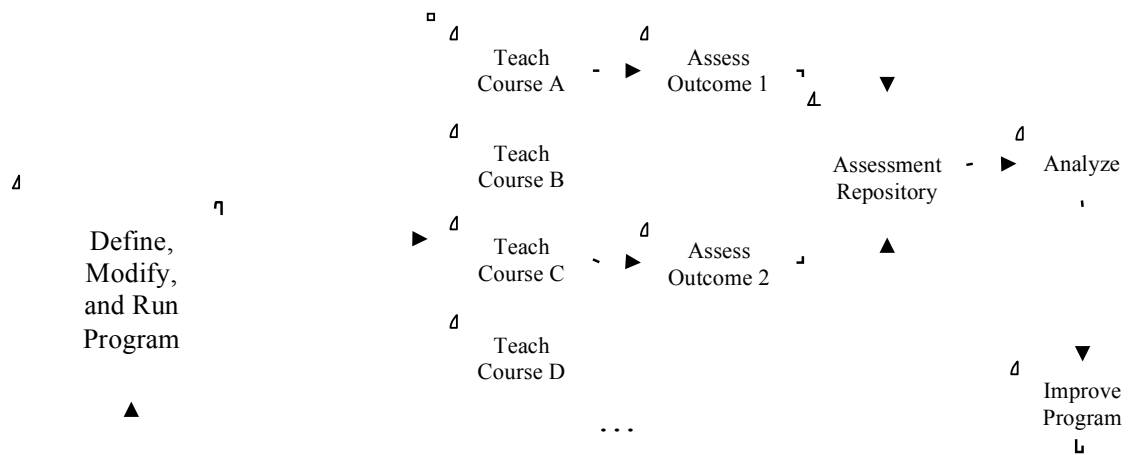


Figure 1. Continuous Improvement Process

SETTING AND COMMUNICATING EXPECTATIONS

Every educator would agree that we are unified in having a clear goal to improve the learning for our students. However, for the continuous improvement process in Figure 1 to be feasible every instructor must be fully aware of the expectations and responsibilities within the context of the program. In a large institution this will only be the result of clearly communicating the requirements to everyone involved. These requirements will include the overall intent of assessment, the learning outcomes for the program, and the tool to be used for measuring one or more program-level outcomes in a particular course.

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES OF THE WEBSTER ENVIRONMENT

In addition to changes generated by accreditors, the organizational structure of Webster University further complicates the design of information systems for continuous improvement. Webster’s main campus is located in St. Louis, Missouri in the USA. However, it is uniquely positioned in that there are over 100 extended campuses, located in 21 US states, Europe, and Asia. International sites include London, Geneva, Leiden, Vienna, Bangkok and Cha-am

Thailand, and Shanghai, Shenzhen and Chengdu China. This type of distributed environment presents many unique challenges in terms of curriculum design and development, effective communication with faculty and administrators, and ensuring that a consistent program is conducted at all sites (Hustad 2004).

The model for curriculum design and development at Webster University includes requested input from all stakeholders, including practitioner faculty. Final decisions regarding program modifications rest with full-time faculty members based in St. Louis.

WEB-BASED SOLUTION

A web-based knowledge management system (KMS) was implemented to manage information about courses and programs, as well as to provide a means of gathering assessment data as and when required (Maher, and Kourik 2008).

The KMS was implemented gradually over time resulting in the following main components: A) Course Information Interface, B) Course Syllabus Collector, C) Assessment Data Collector, and D) an area to Disseminate Results.

The course information interface (A) captures and communicates several kinds of data including suggested syllabi, guidance for instructors based on the experience of others who have taught a course, and mandatory assessment-related activities (Slattery, and Carlson 2005). Further, instructors are afforded the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of our programs by providing input based on their real-world experiences (Florescu 2005). Changes in learning outcomes, assessment techniques, and accreditation standards can easily be entered into the documents in this system. This component enables the management and dissemination of unstructured course information and revisions without requiring any modifications to the information system itself. After modifying the documents for any affected courses, the changes are in effect immediately deployed: any reference to the course information will be current and reflect the changes required by accreditors.

The syllabus for each section of a course is collected by the Course Syllabus Collector (B). Hence administrators and program leaders may monitor teaching activities, and thus have the ability to ensure that consistency is taking place across all locations. The resulting historical archive also provides evidence of the implementation of changes to curricula over time.

The Assessment Data Collector (C) system facilitates the submission of course-level assessment data. The course-level collection forms are very flexible and may be modified to collect revised or additional assessment data. Further, the data collector facilitates subsequent analysis of assessment data whenever necessary.

A key element of continuous assessment and improvement is sharing the results from assessment activities with a variety of stakeholders. An area to Disseminate Results (D) was added to the entry page of the course information interface (A). In this way results from assessment efforts are available to all program faculty and staff, regardless of their physical location, around the clock (24 x 7).

CONCLUSION

Emerging trends in specialized accreditation for business schools have been described. Three major accreditors, AACSB, ACBSP, and EQUIS, were presented. In each case, new member schools on other continents or in new regions of the world provide evidence of the expanding reach of specialized business education accreditation. Further, the accreditors update their processes, standards, and criteria repeatedly. Such dynamic accreditation requirements point to the need for flexible and adaptable knowledge management systems for use by academic business programs.

A flexible and adaptable web-based knowledge management system that has been implemented is described. Adaptability of the system stems largely from the management of unstructured data. Flexibility is reinforced through four loosely-coupled components: A) Course Information Interface, B) Course Syllabus Collector, C) Assessment Data Collector, and D) an area to Disseminate Results.

Some specific advantages of the KMS are as follows:

- Revisions prompted by accreditors or assessment results are readily accommodated.
- All practitioner and full-time faculty members at all locations have immediate access to the revised program and course documents.
- Access is largely 24 x 7, a feature that is critical given the geographically dispersed environment at Webster.
- The web-based system facilitates flexibility and continuous improvement by means of incremental revisions.

The web-based system's flexibility and adaptability facilitate the schools response to changes in assessment and accreditation standards. When Webster received accreditation from ACBSP, their report noted that consistency provides the necessary foundation for assessment efforts as evidenced by an "...Academic Assessment Project is also a well-deployed, best-in-class, systematic approach to ensuring that learning outcomes are achieved worldwide." This web-based system has been indispensable for Webster's assessment and accreditation efforts.

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