

Quality Street

THE SWEET SIDE OF ACCREDITATION

Gaining accreditation (and maintaining it) is a tough business. But **Julie Perrin Halot** and **Rachael Weiss** argue that it provides its own long-term rewards

The business school race for accreditations shows no sign of losing momentum. On the contrary, the number of schools entering their first accreditation process remains steady and those embarking on the long-term work of maintaining their accreditations continues to grow.

Accreditation presents a challenge for many schools. They must decide how best to integrate the work done for accreditation into their organisational structures and processes and how to use the data gathered.

Accreditation may often begin as an *ad hoc* project management response, resulting in a sometimes rather chaotic and stress-laden collection of data and production of reports. Many schools are now looking to move beyond this to a more sustainable means of embedding accreditation management into the life of their institutions.

Accreditation labels on institutional websites and brochures carry significant clout in the eyes of many future students and other stakeholders. However, it is what we are doing with our accreditations internally that provides the greatest value.

Ideally, the quality process that we engage in by working to obtain or maintain accreditation should be synonymous with continuous improvement in our schools and should act as a key element in informing strategic planning and decision making. It is here that we are able to guarantee the quality sought by our stakeholders.

We believe that two primary factors enable this and help us to address many of the challenges schools face.

The first factor is organisational – the positioning of quality in the institution and the existence of a dedicated service.

The second is operational – having the most efficient systems and processes possible for collecting data, reporting it and then converting it into a useable tool.



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Institutionalising accreditation – a Quality Office

Every institution should have its own Quality Office staffed with a dedicated team – its size and remit depending upon the scope and resources of the school. We are sceptical about the long-term sustainability of treating accreditation as a project assigned to a faculty member or an administrator in addition to their “real job”. Accreditation needs to be embodied by a leader and a team of people with clear responsibilities in the process.

A Quality Office needs to be a permanent part of the organisation with a mission to be responsible for accreditation during the first and subsequent review periods and to use it as a tool and guide for continuous improvement.

This structure should engage with both pedagogical and administrative departments.

Ideally, the Quality Office manager should report directly to the Dean and be a member of the executive team. He or she should also be a permanent member of the principal academic and administrative committees. This ensures that information is constantly being collected. It also ensures that development and decisions remain consistently informed by – and in compliance with – standards for good practice.

A dedicated IT specialist who provides the link between available in-house data and the reporting requirements of both the school and accrediting bodies is also essential to the Quality Office.

Equally important, this individual must play a key role in developing the tools necessary to capture data at its source and producing statistics and scorecards necessary to monitor activities in real time. Because of his/her knowledge of the accreditation requirements, the IT specialist will be able to assist school managers to structure and apply the information they are required to provide.

Last (but in no way least), the Quality Office team plays a fundamental role in bringing staff and stakeholders together around a common objective to drive improvement and pursue excellence across the full range of the school’s activities .



Operationalising accreditation – a system for data management

The most challenging aspect of making use of an accreditation process in this way is gathering and presenting the evidence to support the narrative of the self-assessment documents.

It is relatively easy to document journal articles and conference papers; it is harder to catalogue the full story around, for example, a school's internationalisation or its corporate relations activities.

Even so, the documentation of journal articles can prove a more complicated task than it might at first appear. Often, research output is collected in a university-wide system that does not classify output in precisely the ways required by accreditation.

For this reason, schools must install systems to collect information already available and devise methods of further categorisation. This further categorisation, since it documents activity and output of staff, will always involve input from academic staff.

Generally, the best method at this point of first collection is a survey to identify and provide data to be added to data already held. This can be stored in a database that must have the following characteristics:

- Easy accessibility
- Easy interface for academics and administrators to update
- Output matches accreditation requirements
- Robust data integrity maintenance

Ideally, the system should be able to feed that information into other output requirements such as individual academic web pages, standardised CVs and annual reflection documentation.

The information for accreditation will often have been collected previously – often several times – in different formats for different purposes. A tangible result of accreditation must be that data is held centrally and used efficiently, by both the school and its academic staff.

The evidence collected for accreditation purposes needs to be accessible to individual academics for their own purposes, such as data for an annual self-reflection and showing individual contributions and developments against a school's strategic imperatives.



Beyond the needs of the individual, the evidence must also be readily available as a key input into development choices and other decision-making processes.

Internationalisation provides a good example of data that can be difficult to capture and maintain. Typically, internationalisation will have many facets in a business school, beginning with simple demographics of staff and students through student exchange activities, visiting scholars, module content, student extra-curricular activities, conference attendance and continuing up to research collaboration and dual degrees.

Data will range from a school's internationalisation strategy, its criteria for partnership at different levels, student experiences at exchange schools, academic research projects, case studies, university international fairs and so on.

Not all of this can be captured in one neat database although the database should acquire everything that can be tabulated. Further mechanisms and repositories need to be implemented to capture these activities.

Once a first accreditation has been gained, the focus of the school changes to accreditation maintenance and hence robust data collections. This will mean that different areas in a school need to absorb accreditation-related activities and data capture.





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Staying with the example of internationalisation, it is likely that at a first accreditation, a school will have a well thought-out internationalisation strategy and a plan in place for increasing the reach and level of internationalisation activities.

Typically, hiring policies, conference funding and marketing would be the first areas affected by a wide-ranging internationalisation strategy. But in order to implement continuous improvement, an accreditation presence needs to be maintained in each area affected by strategic change. Functional managers need to be aware of the strategic impact, of course, but also of the fit with accreditation so that data gathering and storing can take place continuously and meaningfully.

The systems used can be relatively simple. Key to effective ongoing collection and analysis of accreditation-related data is an interconnected strategy in which accreditation is explicit and acknowledged and the strategic imperatives are communicated regularly throughout the school. This requires a combination of tools, such as

- an integrated database
- reports with key data sets included and mandatory
- a reporting system that is meaningful and integrated

and processes, such as

- regular database updates
- regular meetings in which key reports are absorbed and actioned
- feedback loops

The implementation of post first-accreditation processes and tools is the immediate main focus of the Quality Office. These tools aim to streamline data collection and, more importantly, optimise data use and output for both the school and the individual academic.

This is one of the most valuable outcomes of accreditation for a school and provides a secure base for its future.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Julie Perrin-Halot is the Associate Dean/Director of Quality at Grenoble Ecole de Management in France. She joined the school in 1998 and as Head of the Centre for Quality and Institutional Development has guided the school through national and international accreditations and ISO 9001 certification.

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