

María Helena Jaén outlines how to make the accreditation process as pain-free and rewarding as possible

ACCREDITATION: HOW TO GET IT RIGHT



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Why should our business school be accredited? Deans in developing countries often ask this question. The cost is high, staff must be assigned and faculty motivated. It takes a good deal of time, money and effort. What do we gain from accreditation?

This article outlines the experience of my business school, IESA in Venezuela. Thanks to the processes involved in triple accreditation – EQUIS, AACSB and AMBA – IESA has improved its positioning, become stronger and more prestigious, and is better able to cope with the challenges of operating in Venezuela's turbulent business context.

The benefits obtained by IESA from accreditation have been many but are only one step towards continuous improvement. For IESA, the process and the achievement of accreditation has:

- ushered in a thought process of sweeping, multifaceted self-study, entailing a review of mission, vision and values and of assessing strategy, systems and processes from different angles
- updated operations and “put the house in order”, helping to identify and document procedures, raise standards and apply international benchmarks and best practices
- positioned the school internationally and vis-à-vis local stakeholders, acquiring a quality seal readily recognised by students, faculty, staff, institutions of higher education and, not least, accreditation agencies
- alerted the local and international markets that the school features academic excellence, thus attracting customers

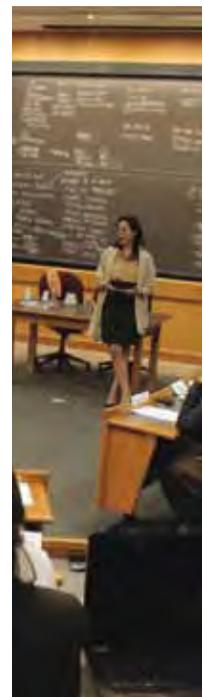
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Accreditation is a tough decision, touching on a school's foundations and posing strategic challenges not only for students and alumni but most especially the school's leadership, faculty and administrative staff. Responding to demands that stem from this decision inserts the accreditation process into the school's strategic planning, one might say its DNA.

When a school begins a quality improvement task of this magnitude, its leadership may be tempted to run the accreditation process as a separate exercise, independently of a review of school strategy or its on-going activities. Some may even consider assigning the process to a special task force, charged with preparing the documents required for a self-assessment report. But doing so may lead to a situation where the school's stakeholders, including faculty, will overlook what accreditation is all about, why it is imperative and what value it holds for the institution. Failure to participate fully in the process may cause key stakeholders to overlook its significance.

Experience with accreditation shows that the process requires committed academic and administrative leadership, supported by faculty members who are convinced that attaining accreditation, notwithstanding the effort entailed, is good for the school and for themselves. Of course there will be sceptics and critics who view the process as unjustified, especially in schools facing uncertainty or lacking financial resources.

Accordingly, accreditation must be leveraged and built into a school's existing management processes. Any attempt to delegate the accreditation process outside day-to-day operations will probably be a waste of time; worse yet, it may fail to trigger strategic change.



To ensure the process is successful, the school's leadership must be prepared to bear the financial cost entailed in managing the process and also to place additional demands on faculty members even when retaining them may itself be a challenge.

Unquestionably, accreditation has become a distinctive assurance of brand quality for business schools worldwide. The most widely recognised agencies are EQUIS, EPAS (both run by EFMD), AACSB and AMBA. Each offers schools a different but complementary assessment and each places a school in a different international reference group, offering a particular value proposition and learning experience and fostering the search for excellence.

As well as asking whether accreditation is worth it, deans also ask how to choose an accrediting agency that best fits their school.

At the risk of over-simplification, it could be said that each accreditation enables a school to view itself in a different light,

- AACSB features key standards, especially in relation to managing faculty and assurance of learning
- AMBA focuses on the MBA
- EPAS focuses on specific programmes
- EQUIS offers a strategic view of a school as a whole, highlighting internationalisation and its relations with the corporate world.

Beyond benefiting the school with a different perspective, the accreditation process employed by each agency generates significant institutional challenges.



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AACSB spotlights meeting academically qualified faculty standards, with refereed papers published in recognised international academic journals. A key issue is how a school defines its own academic and professional qualifications in the light of local realities and how it balances a qualified corps of faculty with what each is willing and able to do. Additional demands are made on graduate programmes, especially the use of reliable indicators to measure learning outcomes.

AMBA challenges some schools offering a full-time MBA programme by requiring more than three years' work experience as a criterion for admission. In Latin America, perhaps because of the average age of qualified candidates and local employment opportunities, many schools find it hard to fulfil this requirement.

EQUIS requires schools to feature an international faculty and student body. In most of Latin America, cultural and geographic factors render attaining such a goal difficult. For example, qualified faculty rarely accept employment at schools outside their home country; distance between countries can be daunting; and students able to afford study abroad are likely to favour attending a US or European School in preference to one located elsewhere in their own region. This requirement tends to be exacerbated for schools located in countries fraught with political uncertainty or a volatile business context. Similar internationalisation issues apply to EPAS.

Given these challenges, a good question is whether the accreditation process is worth all the effort. Besides, some deans argue that accreditation agencies don't favour innovation. Deans of schools holding multiple accreditations invariably agree that, despite the pain, the process genuinely contributed value to the school and is well worthwhile.





Key reasons favouring school accreditation include:

- Accreditation offers a periodic, external, “sharp and fresh” review of a school by experienced deans who both assess the institution and counsel its leadership on school-wide improvement.
- Accreditation requires a gearshift to assist with change and continuous improvement, promoting accountability and transparency, pushing through improved strategic planning and management control systems. It also helps to embed organisational learning. Accredited schools show a commitment to the enhancement of standards of academic excellence.
- Accreditation encourages and helps develop a school’s own standards for managing faculty, in accordance with its mission, vision and strategy so as to serve a given market. Academic and professional faculty qualifications are not uniform among accredited schools and they vary in the light of faculty profiles and professional interests.
- Accreditation strengthens student admissions standards and uses these higher standards to ensure learning objectives are achieved.
- Accreditation promotes internationalisation as a key school strategy and helps create national and international networks and partnerships.
- Accreditation strengthens a school’s brand recognition and provides stakeholders a guarantee of quality.
- Accreditation often strengthens school pride and makes for more satisfied faculty members. To quote one: “This school has a reputation, is internationally recognised and is a good place to work.”

On the other hand, accreditations are not enough since they must be maintained. When a school joins an elite group of internationally accredited institutions, it must commit to continuous improvement, keep up to date with global trends in management education and ensure that quality and excellence standards are built into its strategic makeup.

This suggests that before going for accreditation, a school must think through its decision.

Experience with accreditation points to several initial points to consider: which accreditation agency to begin with and what sequence to follow?

First, assess the school’s strategic objectives in order to determine which accreditation best suits the school’s strategy – why and what for?

Second, identify key challenges faced by the school and its strategic plans and goals – probing how accreditation can help address those challenges.

Equally as important, articulate the school’s chief strengths and weaknesses in gauging which accreditation may contribute to early success – an important step to get the accreditation process moving and to overcome sceptics.

Then ask which accreditation can best serve as an organisational learning gearshift. If a school has a robust MBA, AMBA may help ensure early success or EPAS may provide an early win with a key programme – but these may not be a strong enough gearshifts to drive organisational change.

Accreditation improves a school’s “self-esteem” but failure to obtain accreditation can incur high costs, depending on the school’s circumstances. It is important to weigh the impact of an unfavourable outcome – especially on the faculty.

Finally, if a school is considering accreditation, it should explore the process with deans who have gone through the process and discuss the options. Or better yet, if possible, search out a mentor who can assist in taking decisions on how best to proceed.

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