

The case for accreditation

Richard McCracken describes how writing and teaching cases can contribute to business schools achieving accreditation



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Business school accreditation is fast becoming a hot topic as the long-established criteria used to judge and award this coveted recognition are revisited. Advocates of the case method have long believed that the many unrivalled educational and professional benefits it brings could take centre stage in any accreditation process.

And I believe this applies as much to EFMD's EQUIS, the leading international accreditation system for business schools, as it does to EPAS, EFMD's accreditation system for individual programmes offered at business schools.

For many years, faculty promotion has depended heavily on the regular publication of scholarly articles in high-profile four-star journals. However, this "academic" model, often associated with research-driven university business schools in the US, has had an adverse impact on the criteria by which schools seeking accreditation have been judged.

This is now changing as accreditation bodies shift the lens to focus equally on the impact schools have in practice as well as the purely academic achievements of their faculty.

As explained in the most recent EQUIS Standards and Criteria document:

"The expectation within EQUIS is not that all schools should conform to or aspire to the 'academic' model ... Ideally, EQUIS is once more seeking a balance between the academic and the managerial dimensions."

This is an exciting move and one that I hope will prove inspirational for those business schools across the world whose emphasis on top-quality teaching and practice-led research, as well as the employability and development of career-ready graduates, will now be assessed on equal terms alongside more traditional academic activities.

So what role can the case method play? I would argue a central one.

Schools that embrace the case method to enhance faculty development and student learning develop key links with the business world and conduct relevant research. Such schools may now find themselves at an advantage when seeking accreditation rather than being on the back foot.

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Let us look at a few of these elements in a little more detail, starting with a greater recognition of those schools that eschew an "ivory tower" approach to management education and create meaningful and reciprocal links with the wider world of business. EFMD's accreditation criteria now recognises and values these achievements as making a key contribution to a school's accreditation status.

The most recent EFMD Quality Services publication notes:

"Since EQUIS looks for a balance between high academic quality and professional relevance, a strong interface with the world of business is as much an expectation as a strong research focus."

The publication also states that:

"Business schools therefore need to be closely connected to the corporate world which is the end user of their output of graduates ..."

The case method comes into its own here, enabling both faculty and students to forge meaningful relationships with key players in industry and commerce via case writing and teaching.

Field-written cases require faculty to work closely with subject companies, offering a direct conduit for students into the everyday world of management decision making. This truly comes to life when case protagonists agree to be part of a case teaching session, either in person or via video interviews, offering students invaluable insights into real-life decision making and the realities of doing business in today's world.

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Employability and life skills are also highlighted by EFMD as part of its newly envisioned accreditation requirements. As pointed out in the EFMD Quality Services publication:

“EFMD views business schools as analogous to medical or law schools in which it is necessary not only to teach the theories of the disciplines but also to teach and develop skills in their practice.”

Again, I can think of no other pedagogical tool that can deliver these requirements as well as the case method.

Cases describe real-life business situations usually involving a tricky challenge or decision being faced by the case protagonist. Class participants can “step into the shoes” of the protagonist to discuss possible solutions and analyse the pros and cons of various approaches to the problem.

Within the context of real-life decision making, students take on board new ideas and concepts, learning business and management theory while at the same time developing a wide range of vital professional and life skills. As a result, the case method undoubtedly produces job-ready graduates, primed and inspired to make a valuable and valued contribution from day one of their management careers.

And it is interesting to note that variations on the case method are also widely used in medical and law schools, the examples cited by EFMD.

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Of course, research results can still be published in respected academic journals and practice-based publications but the case method also enables research activity to contribute towards accreditation by, to quote again from the EQUIS Standards and Criteria document, demonstrating how:

- the outcomes of research contribute to the quality of learning and programme innovation
- research has contributed to the accumulation of distinctive expertise with the school

Here we must be clear about the difference between teaching cases (which can contribute to accreditation in other ways, as outlined above) and research cases.

Teaching cases enable participants in the classroom to grapple with real-life business



The many unrivalled educational and professional benefits the case method brings should take centre stage in any accreditation process

issues and learn and apply management tools and techniques where appropriate.

In contrast, research cases provide an empirical basis for developing or testing a theory, the aim being to explore a research question. They are a great way to integrate research and teaching and can be extremely effective in the classroom and hugely beneficial for both faculty and students – producing results that will offer a concrete, positive contribution to any school's accreditation application.

So what does the future hold? I'm pleased to report that The Case Centre has some exciting plans to work closely with EFMD in mapping all aspects of the case method to the official accreditation criteria, demonstrating that the case method can undoubtedly be a vital component in any accreditation evaluation.

This will cover elements such as case writing, case teaching, strong and productive links with the business world, the use of relevant research in the classroom, and key outcomes such as employability and the development of work and life skills.

Together with EFMD, we will be producing an accreditation template that will explain in some detail the relevance of using the case method in gaining accreditation and how best to put this into practice. The template will be designed as a guide to help schools through the process of directly correlating their case method activities with the required accreditation criteria.

I would welcome any suggestions on how to make this accreditation template as useful as possible, or any other ideas or comments you may have about the case method and accreditation (email me at: richard@thecasecentre.org).

We are also planning to run some webinars on this topic, aimed at schools that wish to gain accreditation, as well as Peer Review Chairs and advisors who may want to familiarise themselves in more detail with the fundamental role the case method can play in achieving accreditation – both EQUIS and EPAS.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard McCracken is Director of The Case Centre, a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to advancing the case method worldwide, sharing knowledge, wisdom and experience to inspire and transform business education across the globe. www.thecasecentre.org