Managing the demands of accreditation: the impact on global business schools

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several years the academic community has become abundantly aware of the requirements of university-wide and specialized accreditation. This paper describes the background to accreditation models initiated in several regions of the world, such as the specialized business accreditations of the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) and the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) in the US, giving the motivation as to why and how they were established. Comparisons will be drawn among these models, and describe the impact of specialized business accreditation at Webster University. Through this paper, the ongoing concern with higher education assessment and accreditation will be placed in a global context, something that is essential for academic institutions to remain competitive.

Keywords: AACSB, Accreditation, ACBSP, assessment, EQUIS.

INTRODUCTION

The ever-increasing emphasis on assessment and accreditation in academia throughout the world is changing the culture of a great many educational institutions. Accreditation is the tool used to monitor, assess, and evaluate the standards and quality of the education received by students. An increasing focus on strengthening accreditation requirements in the United States is escalating the need to improve curriculum and assessment systems.

Accreditation is exceedingly important to an educational institution and all of its stakeholders. From a prospective student's point of view, such validation is particularly important to help identify reputable institutions and provide an assurance that the institution will maintain and update resources on a regular basis. From a faculty perspective, accreditation helps to provide a framework for continuous improvement of programs. From the institution's perspective accreditation helps to increase visibility, facilitates funding from public and private funding organizations, enhances the attractiveness of the institution for prospective students and faculty members, and instills a sense of pride within the institution. The actual process of preparing for accreditation itself advances the focus on quality of student learning and renews a commitment to the educational mission.

An increasing focus on accreditation exists or is emerging in many regions around the globe including Europe, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the US (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley,2009). The globalization of accreditation provides strong motivation for the academic community to implement and improve both curricula and assessment systems (Lubinescu, Ratcliff, and Gaffney 2001).

There are two basic types of educational accreditation, one identified as "institutional" and one referred to as "specialized". Institutional accreditation normally applies to an entire university or college, indicating that each of an institution's divisions is contributing to the achievement of the overall objectives. In the US, the Council on Higher Education (CHEA) is an association of 3000 degree-granting colleges and universities, and recognizes more than 80 institutional and specialized accrediting organizations across many disciplines. CHEA in essence vets the accreditors, thereby confirming that the accrediting body is reputable. To be recognized, accreditors must meet a variety of standards related to academic quality, accountability, fairness, and continuous improvement (http://www.chea.org).

A reputable university in the US should possess institutional accreditation by one of the seven regional higher education accreditation organizations (http://www.chea.org). Webster University, located in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, falls under the oversight of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (http://www.ncahlc.org), a member of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Accreditation for institutions of higher education throughout the north central region of the US is provided by the HLC. Webster University's institutional accreditation was recently renewed for a ten year period after an extensive and demanding self-study and physical site visit by the HLC.

Specialized accreditation normally applies to programs, departments, or schools that are sub-components of an institution of higher education. The accredited unit may be as large as a college or school within a university or as small as a single curriculum within a discipline. Most of the specialized accrediting agencies that review units within an institution of higher education are accredited by one of the regional accrediting commissions. In turn the regional accreditors are recognized by CHEA.

Within the US there are two major business school accrediting organizations; the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International), and the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP). AACSB International is an association of educational institutions, businesses, and other organizations devoted to the advancement of management education (http://www.aacsb.edu). It is also the premier accrediting agency of collegiate business schools and accounting programs worldwide. The focus of AACSB institutions is on research institutions and it currently accredits 579 schools across 37 countries. The ACBSP currently accredits Webster's Business and Management programs and focuses on teaching-based institutions. There are 529 schools, across 22 countries, currently accredited by the ACBSP.

In Europe, the Bologna Process is designed to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010, by making academic degree standards and quality assurance standards more comparable and compatible throughout Europe. Currently there are many countries with multiple degree systems. The Bologna Process aims at making these degree systems more transparent, enabling students and faculty members to more seamlessly move around Europe from country to country, in keeping with the general philosophy of the European Union. Further, this transparency will make European education more attractive to prospective students outside Europe (European Higher Education Area, 1999; EHEA, 2010; Adelman, 2008).

An example of a specialized business accreditation in Europe is the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS). This is a leading accreditor of management and business administration programs in Europe and currently accredits 128 schools across 35 countries. EQUIS confers accreditation on the entire institution based on criteria that include internationalization, educational quality, and relevance to professional practice (http://www.efmd.org).

Within EQUIS an accreditation offered at the program level in business and management is EFMD Programme accreditation System (EPAS). EPAS focuses on the program while EQUIS looks at the entire institution. EPAS examines program design, delivery, outcomes as well as quality assurance. Both accreditations, EQUIS and EPAS, were established by the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD). The EFMD has a much broader scope to seeking the improvement in international management education and practice (http://www.efmd.org).

THE WEBSTER ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Webster University'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, spread throughout the world. Each extended campus has a director who has overall responsibility for the operation of that site. This type of distributed environment presents many special hurdles in terms of curriculum design and development, effective communication with faculty and administrators, and ensuring that a consistent program is conducted at all sites. Although full-time faculty members at the main campus are at the core of all departments, the college engages practitioner faculty to teach many classes. These individuals have strong academic credentials, but also have significant and current experience in areas of business about which they teach. The involvement of practitioners as instructors has many benefits:

- The latest techniques and technologies are seamlessly incorporated into our programs,
- Associations with industry leaders are naturally established, and
- A constant stream of input into trends in business is automatically established.

Along with the many benefits to having practitioner faculty integrated into our teaching faculty, there are also many challenges stemming from this form of organization. The primary difficulty involves the dissemination of course-related information in a timely manner. Moreover, providing a vehicle through which practitioner faculty from around the globe can, in turn, contribute to the continued enhancement of our programs. The knowledge management system described in this paper was a major effort to serve both of these purposes, and many benefits have been observed since its introduction.

The George Herbert Walker School of Business and Technology (WSBT) is the largest of five schools and colleges at Webster University. Three departments comprise the WSBT: Business, Management, and Mathematics and Computer Science. Such a unique blend of disciplines gives rise to a wide range of multi-disciplinary programs, involving traditional business and management concepts along with state-of-the-art technologies, being offered at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The WSBT has over 15,000 enrollments across a network of over 100 physical campuses located in 21 US states, Europe, and Asia. International sites include London, Geneva, Leiden, Vienna, Bangkok and Cha-am Thailand, and Shanghai, Shen Zhen and Chengdu China. Having campuses throughout the US, and indeed several other countries, serves to compound the challenges of communication.

Even within a traditional university environment, effective communication can be challenging. However, with over 100 worldwide locations, the scale of communication issues escalates enormously.

Such potential difficulties are compounded by the school's reliance on over 1500 practitioner faculty members, distributed throughout the world, complementing approximately 40 full-time faculty members primarily located at the home campus in St. Louis. Although this diversity may be viewed as a potential obstacle to delivering consistent, state-of-the-art programs, there can be significant advantages inherent in such an environment.

Having campuses throughout the US, and indeed several other countries, serves to compound the challenges of communication. It also presents an opportunity to gain insights into the experiences of practitioner faculty who are working in businesses in other countries. When taken collectively, this information allows faculty members in St. Louis to develop a global perspective of the true business world. Taking advantage of all of this expertise is therefore of paramount importance, and input from as many sources as possible is pro-actively encouraged. Again, the knowledge management system described here facilitates the necessary two-way communication very effectively, and subsequently has the capability to store the appropriate details in preparation for future analysis.

The model for curriculum design and development at Webster University is that full-time faculty members based in St. Louis make decisions about all programs. However, this faculty group continually requests input from all stakeholders, including practitioner faculty. These individuals provide the benefit of already being involved with Webster so understand the philosophies of the institution, but they also have significant real-world experience. The college

is therefore able to benefit greatly and strongly want to establish a knowledge management system to harness their knowledge.

Harnessing the global viewpoints of faculty members from across the world is a key goal of the school. To achieve this goal the WSBT strives to establish effective channels of communication among full-time faculty, and practitioners, many of whom have current industry experience.

During the recently-obtained ACBSP accreditation, and the institutional re-affirmation from the HLC, many aspects of the institution were closely examined. The journey towards these successes centered on ensuring the quality and consistency of curricula, an especially monumental task given the global profile of Webster.

ACBSP REQUIREMENTS

ACBSP examines all aspects of the programs applying for accreditation. The process involves the educational unit applying for accreditation and meeting the eligibility requirements before being designated as a candidate for accreditation. Once the candidacy requirement is met, the educational body responds to the preliminary site visit questionnaire. At this point ACBSP will make a determination about whether the applicant may proceed or not.

With ACBSP approval, the educational unit prepares an extensive self-study. The self-study focuses on six basic standards: leadership, strategic planning, student and stakeholder focus, measurement and analysis of student learning and performance, faculty and staff focus, as well as education design and delivery. It requires significant work and analysis to carry out a 360 degree review.

Successful completion and acceptance of the self-study is followed by a site-visit. A team of ACBSP evaluators visits the site for an extensive review of the data supplied in the self-study. The team may use auditing techniques to verify data, interview any stakeholders, and explore any questions they may have.

A critical requirement for accreditation is the ability to assess programs on a regular basis. To achieve this goal, all programs have clearly defined, measurable learning outcomes. Each course within a program in turn has course learning outcomes, which support those of the program. Assessment data for program outcomes are collected from courses in which a particular outcome is emphasized.

IMPACT

The process of preparing for and earning accreditation, whether specialized or university-wide has had an extensive impact on the George Herbert Walker School of Business and Technology.

Before program assessment could begin, all departments in the WSBT needed to agree upon and describe a common representation of course content, course learning outcomes, and program learning outcomes. A study of syllabi revealed a wide variation in content and format of course syllabi. This was the first area of significant work. After many iterations, all departments agreed on a common format that is now required throughout the WSBT. A more daunting task was applying the new guidelines to every program and course in the catalog, thus

impacting every full-time faculty member. This task required a significant amount of faculty resources. Again several iterations were necessary requiring considerable calendar time.

Devising a plan to satisfy the requirements imposed by an ongoing assessment process has initiated the need for several course-related documents. Program-level assessment is based upon specific outcomes being assessed at pre-determined points within a curriculum. A 'curriculum map' relates the program learning outcomes to the courses in which they are assessed. Such a map must be designed and communicated with all faculty. If a program outcome is to be assessed in a course, the instructor for that course must be prepared to gather the appropriate data. The tool for assessment may be a specific assignment, a standard test, or perhaps a pre-determined question embedded in an exam. Carefully crafted rubrics are designed to enable instructors to enter assessment data in a consistent manner.

Once the documents, necessary to implement an assessment plan, have been prepared they must be distributed to all faculty members. Given Webster's global environment this distribution mechanism and subsequent ongoing communication is a potentially daunting challenge.

Throughout the process to prepare for assessment and accreditation, it was essential that communication among all constituents such as faculty, staff, site directors, practitioner instructors and students needed to improve. A great deal of time was needed to explain what was being attempted, the motivation, and the value. The college needed to get full-time faculty on board in order to reach other stakeholders. Many approaches were tried, discarded some, and moved on to try others. This cycle continues to this day.

In order to meet the ongoing communication requirements of assessment and accreditation, a web-based knowledge management system was designed to provide a solid framework for communication among faculty and staff, and encourage knowledge sharing.

Our approach to building a knowledge management system to communicate curricula in a widely distributed educational environment involved recognizing several fundamental requirements as follows:

- Be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week (24x7) to instructors around the globe
- Communicate curricula to instructors regardless of location or instructional delivery method
- Provide sufficient intellectual capital to guide instructors in delivering a consistent course yet allow the course to be tailored to a given group of students or instructor
- Communicate program learning outcomes and assessment procedures and processes
- Provide an electronic mechanism to collect assessment data
- Provide mechanisms to monitor its use and support compliance audits
- Support the faculty in analyzing assessment data and closing the loop for assessment via continuous process improvement.

The knowledge management system was made available to faculty members and administrators throughout the world of Webster as an integral component of the university website. It enables the leadership in the School of Business and Technology to monitor progress toward the goals of consistency and assessment as described above.

Once the system was in place faculty throughout the world of Webster needed to be trained. This training took many forms, including numerous site visits, online chat sessions to

address current questions and concerns, and a wealth of resources posted on the school's website.

CONCLUSION

The overwhelming response to this system from instructors throughout Webster has been very positive. Instructors have generally felt that communication within the university system is far more effective, which in turn enables them to feel a more integral part of the Webster community. Some specific comments from Webster faculty regarding the knowledge based management system:

- "…have better sense of program goals and expectations."
- "…clearer communication from School."
- "…improved sense of belonging to the School."
- "…there is a sufficient degree of flexibility in how I present a course."

The less positive responses have cited the learning curve, resistance to change, and the hesitation in having to use technology. Instructors have different levels of aptitude when it comes to using technology, in some cases presenting an initial barrier to fully using the system.

The dramatic improvement in communication has resulted in a far more consistent program of courses being offered throughout the world. This consistency, as well as the documentation maintained by the system, has proved invaluable for current assessment and accreditation efforts.

Through this work a better understanding of how individual efforts in this area fit into that of the global academic community was developed.

The ACBSP final report noted that the knowledge management system developed at Webster constituted "… a well-deployed, best-in-class, systematic approach to ensuring that programs are delivered worldwide with consistency and quality". ACBSP 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."

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