



Does accreditation promote organizational learning? A multiple case study of Canadian university business schools

Accreditation

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential learning consequences of AACSB accreditation as perceived by administrators and faculty members at four Canadian university business schools.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative, multiple case study approach was employed. A purposive sample of four Canadian business schools was selected and data were collected from multiple sources. The data were analyzed using NVivo7 and a cross case analysis was performed.

Findings – The results indicate that AACSB accreditation facilitated organizational learning in three of the four schools. Respondents felt that accreditation promoted strategic alignment, a re-assessment of the school's mission, and an emphasis on performance management; others identified an increased focus on quality and/or research. Accreditation also served as a catalyst for change, one which motivated program improvement. In terms of contextual factors, leadership was found to be the most pervasive influence on organizational learning effects. Resource dependence was also found to be influential.

Research limitations/implications – This research highlights the importance of educational leadership in facilitating organizational learning through evaluative inquiry. Because of the qualitative methodology, the sample size is limited to four university business schools.

Practical implications – This study has practical implications for management education internationally, as AACSB accreditation is increasingly a global phenomenon. The findings will be of interest to educational administrators, policy makers, managers, and accrediting bodies who are interested in facilitating learning through accreditation.

Originality/value – This research offers a novel approach to studying the question of AACSB accreditation and its learning effects. By using a qualitative multiple case study method, this research provided a unique opportunity to focus more keenly on context and its role in influencing the potential learning consequences of accreditation.

Keywords Canada, Business Schools, Accreditation, Learning organizations, Organizational learning, Continuous improvement, Case studies, Quality, Management education, Higher education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The last 15-20 years has witnessed a rapid increase in the number of business schools seeking accreditation. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB – International), for example, has increased its accreditations from 246 accredited American institutions in 1987 to 438 in 2006 (Zammuto, 2008). In addition, it has expanded its reach into international markets (White *et al.*, 2009); and the proportion of international accredited schools has been steadily rising. While there were only three accredited schools from outside the USA in 1996 (all three being Canadian schools), by 2006 there were 93 from across the globe; and currently, schools seeking AACSB accreditation are primarily international institutions (Trapnell, 2007). In Canada, the growth curve was correspondingly steep, with two institutions accredited in 1989,



increasing to 17 in 2008, representing 33 percent of all Canadian university business schools (UBSs) (McKee *et al.*, 2005; Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), 2006, 2008).

The stated purpose of accreditation is to improve quality or promote continuous improvement; however, there is little research to substantiate this claim (Julian and Ofori-Dankwa, 2006; Romero, 2008). While some studies have documented benefits such as increased professors' salaries (Levernier and Miles, 1992; Roller *et al.*, 2003), higher retention rates and student graduation rates at accredited institutions (Espiritu, 2007), higher research productivity and/or perceived importance of intellectual contributions (Ehie and Karathanos, 1994; Udell *et al.*, 1995; Hedrick *et al.*, 2010), few have looked at outcomes such as improved student learning or organizational performance. Recently, several authors have taken steps in this direction: Pritchard *et al.* (2010) measured instructional effectiveness at an AACSB accredited American college of business and reported no change over a six-year period (as measured by the Educational Testing Service Student Instructional Report (SIR II)); Lejeune and Vas (2009) measured perceptions of organizational effectiveness and found that Equis accreditation contributed toward effectiveness measures such resource acquisition, but not necessarily student outcomes. As they conclude:

Although one would expect accreditation to improve the quality of educational programmes, we observe that the deans' perceptions emphasized more the impact of accreditation on the attractiveness or image of their school, as an improved performance, rather than students' satisfaction with their curricula. Further, the dimensions of effectiveness that seem to have been most improved are linked to schools' resources, in particular qualified faculty and academic partners. To this extent, the accreditation seems rather to have strengthened an external ability to acquire and develop strategic resources (p. 736).

This study strives to extend this line of inquiry, by exploring the degree to which AACSB accreditation promotes organizational learning (OL) at AACSB-accredited institutions in Canada. Following Argyris and Schon (1978, 1996) and Senge (1990), OL refers to both single loop learning and double loop learning. The former is also known as continuous improvement, and this is the aspect that is emphasized by the AACSB. Continuous improvement or single loop learning is incremental in nature, and refers to the ongoing detection and correction of errors. In contrast, the latter (double loop learning), is more radical, and involves questioning the underlying assumptions or values which are the basis for decision making (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990). Both modes of learning are valuable: "both learning forms can lead to a higher degree of effectiveness and competitiveness of business organizations" (Geppert, 2000, p. 29). For this reason, both will be considered as evidence of increased "OL" in this study.

OL

OL, first popularized in 1990 by Peter Senge in *The Learning Organization*, refers to the process whereby an organization gains competitive advantage in the marketplace because of its ability to acquire, create, and transfer knowledge and "modify its behavior to reflect new insights" (Garvin, 1993). Over the last 20 years, research on OL has been prolific; yet, there remains a lack of agreement upon a definition of OL (Crossan and Guatto, 1996; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2000; Bapuji and Crossan, 2004). To draw some boundaries around this burgeoning body of research, we will focus on a more specialized area – how accreditation, as an evaluative process, is related to, and can contribute to OL. First, we will also situate our approach among the different

perspectives of OL, to clarify the perspective to be taken and address a few of the common critiques that have been waged by researchers in the field (Bapuji and Crossan, 2004; Templeton *et al.*, 2004; Friedman *et al.*, 2005).

One of the longstanding debates which persists throughout the literature on OL relates to how organizations learn (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1998, 2000; Yeo, 2005). In keeping with this “descriptive” camp, we are interested in exploring the processes by which organizations learn. As opposed to the “prescriptive,” or normative camp (which tends to focus on how organizations should learn based on a number of pre-defined attributes), we are exploring the relationship between accreditation and OL – how it may (or may not) contribute toward learning.

A second debate surrounding OL has been the nature of learning as a multi-level concept – is it individual, group, organizational? Does learning occur in organizations, or by organizations? (Popper and Lipshitz, 2000). Cognitivist researchers assert that all learning takes place by individuals in organizations. Senge (1990) for one, believes that “organizations learn only through individuals who learn” (p. 140); and Simon (1991) asserts that “all learning takes place inside individual human heads.” Others argue that organizations themselves can learn, attributing human-like cognitive abilities to organizations, in their capacity to process and store information (Hedberg, 1981).

However, the cognitive approach creates a number of dilemmas. Conceiving of OL as merely learning in organizations does not explain the link between the two. How does individual learning become organizational? On the other hand, applying a cognitive model to describe learning by organizations is problematic as it raises difficult questions about the ontological status of organizations, requiring a conceptual leap to view organizations as if they were individuals, with human characteristics, capable of learning and thinking. A social constructivist perspective helps to resolve these dilemmas. Learning is viewed as primarily a social process whereby individuals are active producers of meaning, situated in a social, historical, and cultural context (Brown *et al.*, 1989; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Cook and Yanow, 1993; Cullen, 1999).

As a result, the following approach will be taken in this study. As defined by Preskill and Torres (1999), it is social constructivist in nature, it emphasizes the importance of context, and it focusses on the role of evaluative inquiry to promote OL; moreover, it recognizes both single and double loop learning:

Evaluative inquiry for organizational learning and change is grounded in a social constructivist theory of learning which suggests that learning takes place through (a) the collective creation of meaning, (b) action, (c) the development of new knowledge, (d) an improvement in systemic processes, and (e) the overcoming of tacit assumptions. Team learning from evaluative inquiry occurs when individuals share their experiences, values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge through dialogue, and engage in collaborative learning efforts. When individuals and teams disseminate their learning from inquiry throughout an organization, and action results from this learning, it can be said that the organization learns. Evaluative inquiry can facilitate learning at all levels by stimulating and supporting the ongoing process of asking questions, the collection and analysis of data, and using what is learned from an inquiry to act on important organizational issues [...] (p. 50).

This definition was then further operationalized for the study. OL was defined as single loop or double loop learning. Single loop learning refers to incremental change and is also called continuous improvement (i.e. these terms are synonymous). Double loop learning refers to more radical changes in mindset and decision making. Examples of single loop learning include: key actions or decisions taken toward administrative, research, or educational improvement (e.g. process improvements, new programs

introduced, and policy or procedure changes), as well as evidence of their success (e.g. increased research productivity or student satisfaction). Examples of double loop learning include more radical organizational transformations, changes in individuals' or group attitudes, and changes in the nature of collective decision making in the school (e.g. increased reflection and collaboration, identifying underlying assumptions, and discussing these assumptions through dialogue).

Accreditation, OL, and higher education

The AACSB (International) is committed to promoting continuous improvement through its accreditation practices. This intent is stated clearly in the AACSB's official documentation, the AACSB eligibility procedures and accreditation standards for business accreditation: "The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business promotes continuous quality improvement in management education" (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), 2010b). The first line of their web site is almost identical (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), 2010a). While some research on accreditation has touched upon these learning effects (e.g. Roller *et al.*, 2003; McKee *et al.*, 2005), none of these researchers have extended their analysis to OL *per se*. Perhaps this is not surprising, as the study of OL and its relationship to evaluative inquiry is a relatively new domain. Recently, however, researchers have shown a growing interest in this linkage.

Evaluation can be defined as "systematic inquiry leading to judgments about program (or organization) merit, worth, and significance and support for program (or organizational) decision making" (Cousins *et al.*, 2004, p. 105). Accreditation falls under this definition, as do other types of formative, improvement-oriented evaluation (e.g. process evaluation, implementation evaluation), or summative, more judgment-oriented evaluation (e.g. impact evaluation). As an intervention, evaluation offers a chance to go beyond the collection and monitoring of performance information to the creation of knowledge for strategic decision making and continuous improvement (Preskill, 1994; Preskill *et al.*, 1999). Accreditation can present many opportunities for learning: through the substantive results of the evaluation, or by virtue of participating in the actual process (Patton, 1998).

However, the current body of knowledge linking OL to evaluative inquiry in educational institutions is relatively lean. While the concept of OL has received growing interest as a way of dealing with accountability and ongoing school reform (Marks and Printy, 2003), the development of professional cultures in schools (Louis and Kruse, 1999; Scribner *et al.*, 1999), effective school leadership (Leithwood *et al.*, 1998; Leithwood and Louis, 1999; Silins *et al.*, 2002), and school decision making (Stevenson, 2001), it has not been linked to evaluation (or accreditation) *per se*.

With respect to institutes of higher education (IHEs), two graduate theses were located which examined quantitatively the relationship between OL and university-level accreditation at a small sample of American colleges and universities (Neefe, 2001; Beard, 2005). Both authors compared the OL capacity of universities which used a "traditional" accreditation process vs those which used a new "quality-based" approach (modeled on the Malcolm Baldrige quality process). While Neefe (2001) found that the "quality-based" approach promoted more OL (as hypothesized), Beard (2005) found that these differences did not persist at two of the schools over time (five years later the author returned to two of these same schools). Surprisingly, she discovered that the school using quality-based criteria did not improve over time and had a lower overall score than the traditionally accredited school. These results

illuminate the importance of contextual factors, within the university, which impact the extent to which an OL capacity can be developed and sustained. Neither study, however, collected qualitative data to investigate the deeper meaning of these factors. As Beard recommended in the conclusion:

Qualitative data, obtained through interviews with faculty and administration, would provide a richer understanding of the impact of issues such as unionization, barriers to organizational learning, tenure (long-term employees), fragmented departments, and the type of institution. This research design would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of organizational learning in IHEs (Beard, 2005).

Methods

To address these contextual issues and to investigate this relationship between OL and evaluative inquiry (AACSB accreditation) at UBSs a qualitative research strategy was used. This approach provided an opportunity to examine in depth, the deeper issues, and meanings surrounding accreditation – particularly its OL consequences – that have largely been overlooked in the existing literature. A qualitative strategy also emphasizes the importance of context; a critical consideration in research on organizational behavior which has often been ignored (Johns, 2006).

A multiple case study was chosen as the research design. Following Stake (2006), four cases were selected to optimize the interactivity between the sites and their unique situations. The “cases” were four Canadian UBSs, all of which had been accredited by the AACSB (initial accreditation) in the last ten years. The schools (UBSs A-D) ranged in size from medium to large. All offered a variety of business programs – graduate, undergraduate, full-, and part-time – and two offered doctoral programs. In order to minimize the potential effects of multiple program-wide accreditations, schools with other business school accreditations were excluded.

Sample and context

Because of the focus on context in this study, a few comments about the sample are warranted, to situate the UBSs within their broader context. Throughout the 1990s, Canadian universities faced an increasingly turbulent and competitive environment. Fueled by an unprecedented decline in public funding throughout the 1990s, many were forced to adopt a more commercial, “corporate” paradigm[1] (Tudiver, 1999; Turk, 2000; McKee *et al.*, 2005). Responding to this fiscal uncertainty, Canadian universities sought out alternative sources of revenue in order to survive: tuition fees escalated, universities generated funds from individual and corporate donations and grants; and new business-research partnerships were forged. Of the UBSs in the sample, all four encountered these competitive pressures, the need to increase enrollments, and financial hardships (to varying degrees), due to decreased public funding for education. However, the greatest financial challenges were described by participants at UBS C and the least by UBS B. In terms of leadership, three of the four schools (A, C and D) had new deans who championed the AACSB accreditation effort as they commenced their deanship. In contrast, the dean at UBS B was approached proactively by the AACSB and invited to pursue accreditation. While the dean was motivated to sponsor the accreditation effort, he left the school midstream and his successor was more interested in business schools rankings than accreditation (therefore, the accreditation effort was completed by the associate dean). In terms of the accreditation process itself, there was variability across the schools in terms of the degree and type of stakeholder involvement. While some were participative and well resourced (e.g. UBS A and C),

others were primarily viewed as an administrative exercise (e.g. UBS B). All were accredited between the years of 1997 and 2004; and as a result, at the time of this study, two were preparing for, or engaged in the process of re-accreditation (UBSs B and C).

Data collection

Data were collected from multiple sources: published documentation, UBS web sites, and interviews. At each case study site, the person responsible for accreditation served as the key informant and identified relevant documentation for review (e.g. accreditation reports, strategic plans, or other official documents); in addition, the UBS web site was reviewed to garner more information about the business school, its enrollment, size, programs, and official views on accreditation. Valuable information about the context of the UBSs was garnered from both of these sources. As well, this data served to validate the consistency of data received from interviewees (dates of certain actions, decisions taken, program changes, research productivity, etc.).

Individual interviews were also conducted with members of the faculty and administration using a semi-structured, open-ended protocol. At each school, the sample consisted of seven-ten interviews (totaling 31). Interviewees included personnel who had been on faculty or serving in administrative roles at the time of accreditation (e.g. deans; vice, assistant or associate deans; accreditation coordinator(s); and undergraduate and/or graduate program directors). Attempts were made to recruit faculty members from different disciplines (finance, accounting, marketing, human resources), to maximize the diversity of views. Using multiple data sources (faculty and administrators from different disciplines and four different schools), and multiple data collection methods (e.g. interviews, document, and web site review), also enabled the researchers to triangulate the data, an important strategy for ensuring the internal validity of qualitative research (Merriam, 2002).

Data analysis

Data analysis was performed in two Phases. In Phase I, the data from individual cases were subjected to a basic interpretative analysis (Schwandt, 2000; Merriam, 2002) with the aid of QSR NVivo7, a qualitative software analysis tool. All data (verbatim transcripts from interviews, observations, and documentation), were read, re-read, and coded according to the dominant themes which emerged. Upon completion of this coding process, the data were then further analyzed and summarized for a draft case profile report (one for each UBS). All participants were asked to validate the case profile report – to review the document to identify “any errors, omissions, or clarifications that might be needed.” In all cases, feedback indicated that the case profiles were an accurate representation of the events which had occurred throughout the accreditation period.

When all of the individual case profiles were complete and validated, the multiple case analysis was performed. With the assistance of NVivo7, this iterative process consisted of three steps, performed concurrently – data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The first two steps were facilitated by NVivo’s querying function which was utilized to generate matrices. The matrices were then combined across the four UBSs and assessed for patterns, differences, contradictions, and unique findings. At this point, conclusions were made, summarized, and documented.

Results

OL

During the interview process, participants were asked to discuss the degree to which accreditation promoted (or did not promote) OL. First, they were asked about single loop learning: “One of the primary aims of AACSB accreditation is continuous improvement. Do you think that this process promotes continuous improvement?” They were then asked to explain their responses and provide examples of “positive incremental changes” due to accreditation (if they had answered “yes”). As a follow-up to this question, participants were then asked to discuss double loop learning as well, to articulate whether they felt that AACSB accreditation had facilitated this aspect of OL. A simple definition was provided: OL refers to both incremental change (single loop learning) and “double loop learning.” Double loop learning involves a more dramatic change in mindset – challenging the underlying assumptions or values on which programs or decisions might be based. Once again, the participants were prompted to explain their responses. The purpose of this double-barreled approach (i.e. asking separate questions about continuous improvement and double loop learning), was to tease out these two important elements of OL, which otherwise may not otherwise have surfaced. However, as noted earlier, both elements are considered to be key components of OL; and the results have been combined for data analysis and reporting.

The results are presented. It is important to note that, while the interview data constituted the primary data source, these results were validated by data collected through other means – published documentation and web site data. For example, if participants described program changes which were prompted by accreditation, these actions/decisions were typically described in and validated by the accreditation reports and/or web site data. The perceptions of participants could thereby be compared to the “official” version in these documents. This is an example of how multiple sets of data were triangulated to ensure data consistency and quality.

In Table I, the predominant themes have been summarized as they emerged, by school. These results represent the affirmative responses, where interviewees felt that accreditation had contributed to OL in some way.

University business schools	UBS A	UBS B	UBS C	UBS D
<i>Predominant themes^a</i>				
Strategic alignment/performance management	● ●		○	
Approach to change/decision making	○			
Change in focus	⊗		○	⊗
Catalyst for change	○		●	

Notes: Legend and decision rules

Symbol	Meaning	Evidence
● ●	Very strongly present	The strong majority of respondents (> 70%)
●	Strongly present	//// - 3 or more (> 40%)
⊗	Moderately present	////-////
○	Slightly present	//// or 1 validated with documentation.

^aParticipants were asked whether accreditation promotes OL: Does accreditation promote single loop learning (continuous improvement)? Please explain; and does accreditation promote double loop learning? Please explain. Participant’s responses are counted only once

Table I. Organizational learning: affirmative responses

Affirmative responses

Overall, the greatest number of positive responses was evident at UBS A, where 70 percent of respondents felt that accreditation promoted OL (single or double loop learning). This was significantly higher than the number of affirmative responses at the other schools, which had agreement of 0 (School B), 57 (School C) or 50 percent (School D). However, worth noting is the general lack of decisiveness. Many of those who said “yes” often qualified their responses. This uncertainty is evidenced by their comments:

Yes, I think so. I mean, we’re really, I mean, it’s interesting [...] It [i.e. accreditation] probably has. If I sat down and thought about it, I would probably draw a connection.

I think that the process has contributed to – I mean, we now take it into account every time that we think about new programs, new courses – so there is a process [...]

Strategic alignment/performance management

At UBS A, participants felt that the accreditation process contributed to OL in several ways. First, the AACSB process forced them to reflect on the program, the mission, etc., and critically assess whether their processes and programs are in alignment. Second, it provided external benchmarks against which the school could measure its performance – AACSB reviewers provided an objective, external viewpoint, and a set of metrics which were taken seriously. Third, since the accreditation process is cyclical (every five-six years), respondents felt that this helped to ensure that the school “stays on its toes,” and maintains its focus on performance improvement. In their own words:

Yes, absolutely [...] All of the processes and systems that result from the AACSB are continuous improvement oriented. You measure something, and if it’s not at the desired level, you take action. That’s what quality improvement is all about.

Yes, I think that it does because you know that you are going to be constantly looked at, every 5 or 6 years and I think that keeps you sharp [...]

It is worthwhile noting that these themes were most strongly evident at UBS A when the respondents were specifically discussing the continuous improvement component of OL as opposed to double loop learning (i.e. themes were more frequently mentioned and there was less equivocation from participants). This same pattern was evident at UBS C, where several participants felt that the accreditation process had prompted single loop learning, but not double. That is, while some felt that accreditation had promoted strategic alignment – “it made us question a lot of things, you know – what do we want to do, what’s our mission?” – they did not believe that it had promoted radical change.

Approach to change/decision making

AACSB accreditation was also seen to influence the nature of decision making at UBS A. It contributed to the introduction of data-driven, systematic processes of critical review, and analysis; as well, it has forced the leadership at UBS A to consider the implications of decisions on their accreditation status (e.g. maintaining teaching “ratios”). According to one participant:

[...] generally speaking, that is a question that is top of mind when we are looking at any change internally. “How does it relate to AACSB accreditation?” “How does it relate to our mission?” “How will it relate to the best possible use of resources to achieve this overall objective?”

Change in focus

At three of the schools, participants mentioned a “change in focus” brought about by accreditation. At UBS A, for example, participants referred to two aspects: an increased attention to quality, performance measures, and student satisfaction; and the beginnings of a research-intensive culture. At UBSs C and D, respondents referred only to the latter.

Quality. At UBS A, participants mentioned that their “focus” had changed due to accreditation. In other words, they felt that their conversations were now different – in committee meetings there is more discussion about quality, performance measures, and “the customer.” While this was not entirely attributable to AACSB alone, the respondents felt that accreditation had contributed. In their words:

[...] it forces us to do continuous improvement and to revise our programs on a regular basis in order for us to maintain accreditation. So, in a sense it has changed the focus [...] There have been other sources as well – student satisfaction at the undergrad level for example that are not related to AACSB but which also force us to periodically review our course offerings, the quality of the curriculum, the quality of the delivery and so on and so forth [...]

Research. Participants from all three schools (A, C, and D) identified an increased focus on research that had come about due to accreditation. At UBS D, for example, three participants felt that accreditation had helped to improve the school’s research productivity and also provided some leverage for the dean to realize his objective of creating a research culture. As the participants described:

[...] while we still have a long way to go, there is very, very, much the beginnings of a much stronger research culture than there was in the past [...]

[...] it brought research – those people trying to promote the research agenda – it gave them some more leverage.

Related to this, UBSs C and A also identified recruitment as an area of improvement. Several respondents felt that AACSB accreditation had influenced hiring practices, helped to attract high-quality candidates, and this has contributed to increased research intensity. As one explained:

I think that there is continuous improvement in our attention to faculty and their doing research. And that has been a prominent shift. That sort of fed into recruitment decisions more systematically. And the more of those kinds of people that you bring in, the more that you want to bring in people who are like them. I think that’s what has kind of been lifting us up – we have people publishing in really much better quality journals than we did in the past [...]

Catalyst for change

At UBS A, accreditation was also identified as a stimulus for change, one which motivated discussion and analysis of many areas of the school, thereby leading to improvements in the current curricula and to the introduction of new programs (e.g. adoption of the AACSB Beta Gamma Sigma program and a dedicated career center). UBS C mentioned this aspect as well – that accreditation was a catalyst of change, particularly with assurance of learning (AoL)[2] and the “true assurance of quality aspects” that are currently being ushered in. Since UBS C was in the throes of re-accreditation, these participants were in the position of being able to reflect back upon the previous years of accreditation and what they had accomplished. They were optimistic that the new accreditation process would stimulate change:

[...] now with the maintenance, with the AoL, that is a direct quality measure because those are actually the outcomes [...] so if we start to get to outcomes, that will stimulate changes and that is a whole new thing [...] I can see that already.

Non-supportive responses

Table II presents the “non-supportive responses.” This includes the most frequent responses for those interviewees who said “no,” that accreditation did not promote OL. Please note that many respondents provided non-committal responses (e.g. “yes and no,” “maybe,” “in some cases”); and these responses have been included, as appropriate, in both tables. The themes are then described in more detail in the text which follows.

In general, across all UBSs, there were slightly more skeptical or negative responses than positive. This was particularly evident when respondents were talking about double loop learning vs continuous improvement – while many felt that accreditation had contributed to incremental improvements, they were much less likely to feel that more radical changes had occurred (i.e. dialogue and reflection leading to changes which became embedded in the culture, systems or mindset of the school). The predominant themes are described in more detail.

Application of OL to an academic institution

One of the most frequently mentioned themes was related to the relevance of OL to an academic institution – does it apply in this context? Respondents from UBSs A, C, and D posed this question. As they described, unlike in the private sector (where the concept of OL was first conceived), university and faculty leadership do not have the same powers to effect change:

It doesn’t work in a school. Because you’re managing [...] if there are 100 professors, you are managing 100 individual stars who want to be treated as such [...] so it’s negotiation [...]

Furthermore, there is an academic socialization process which encourages independent “academic entrepreneurship” – not teamwork, experimentation, knowledge transfer, or risktaking – the types of practices in which learning organizations engage. As this participant observed, seldom do academics even think about the actual “management” of the faculty *per se*, nor are they trained in these management practices:

University business schools	UBS A	UBS B	UBS C	UBS D
<i>Predominant themes^a</i>				
Application of OL to academic institution	●		⊗	⊗
Lack of sustainability	○		● ●	⊗
OL is internally driven		●		⊗
Lack of engagement	○			⊗

Notes: Legend and decision rules

Symbol	Meaning	Evidence
● ●	Very strongly present	The strong majority of respondents (>70%).
●	Strongly present	✓✓✓ – 3 responses or more (>40%).
⊗	Moderately present	✓✓-✓✓✓ – 2 to 3 responses.
○	Slightly present	✓✓ or 1 validated with documentation.

Table II. Organizational learning: non-supportive responses

^aParticipants were asked whether accreditation promotes OL: Does accreditation promote single loop learning (continuous improvement)? Please explain; and does accreditation promote double loop learning? Please explain. Participant’s responses are counted only once

[...]faculty are brought up through a system, right from when they first start as undergrad students, until they're finished their PhD, that really is a black box. They don't understand, they don't concern themselves with, they don't think about the management processes. Basically, they focus their attention on the research and teaching that they have prepared themselves over many years to do [...] except that, part of the job, is administrative work [...]

Lack of sustainability

Nonetheless, as mentioned, some participants did feel that accreditation served as a lever to bring about learning and change (or at least had the potential to be). The challenge was whether this change became institutionalized, whether it was disseminated throughout the faculty, and whether it could be sustained over time. In general, the respondents felt that accreditation had not reached its potential in their schools. For example, at UBS A, despite any changes that had been instituted (e.g. program improvements, new data-driven decision-making practices, increased research productivity), some participants felt that dissemination and sustainability was an issue: “[...]the faculty was mobilized when it happened, and now, nobody even talks about it anymore – we have forgotten about it [...].” The dean at UBS A was specifically asked for his thoughts on this topic, and he believed that, despite their best efforts at regular communication (providing progress reports on the strategic plan – of which accreditation was a part), the faculty members were not necessarily fully engaged, interested, or attentive. But he did think that, over time, their communication efforts had raised the level of trust:

But basically, what it has done [...] I think if you talk to faculty, they are confident that the school is heading in the right direction, that they trust us to make the kinds of decisions that are right for them.

Similarly, at UBS C, the participants felt that any signs of OL which may have come about due to initial accreditation did not become embedded in the mindset or the culture. The changes were primarily short term, responding to the immediate requirements of accreditation (e.g. coverage ratios, intellectual contributions, minor curriculum modifications, faculty qualifications). While accreditation had the potential to stimulate large scale OL, it did not. Why? This was attributed primarily to change resistance and the length of time between accreditation visits: “[...]because the forces of inertia are really, really strong.” In the participant's words:

[...]when they realize that they won't be reevaluated or checked on for 5 or 10 years, there is a tendency to relax – like our students, when we test them, after the testing they relax. But that isn't the intent of the AACSB – they want schools to continue in that process and accreditation is the start of the process.

Particularly in the area of course curricula, several participants at UBS C pointed out that accreditation had not stimulated quality improvement or major revisions that were truly ongoing. For example, over the ensuing years since initial accreditation, there had been a proliferation of graduate courses which needed to be reviewed; and in the respondents' own words, “our school certainly became quite lethargic over the years in terms of curriculum planning [...].” The participants, however, expressed a great deal of optimism about the current AACSB re-accreditation process (in which they were engaged), and hoped that it will be easier to sustain continuous improvement over time. Partly, this optimism was due to the shortened AACSB review period (every five-six years), partly it was due to new AoL standards and focus on outcomes, and partly this was due to the concerted, participative approach which was being taken to manage the accreditation process this time around.

Internally driven

In contrast, at UBS B, none of the respondents (0 percent) felt that the AACSB accreditation process promoted continuous improvement or OL. While the participants strongly believed that their school had improved; they perceived that it was internally driven; and that the dean was the prime motivator. Through ambitious goal-setting, high expectations of faculty, successful fundraising, and a focus on rankings, he had spurred the business school on to remarkable achievements over the last eight to ten years – striving to reach their goal of becoming a world-class business school. In the participants' own words:

From what I've seen, it truly is Dean B and his vision – and his wanting to provide an outstanding business education. That's what I see as the driver for the need to continuously improve the curriculum, the need to continuously strive for better and better applicants and quality students. I have never been in a meeting where the accreditation came up as “that's one of the things that we have to do [...]”

A few participants at UBS D also attributed changes in the UBS to the personality and focus of the dean rather than to accreditation. While Dean D may have used accreditation as “lever” at the time, it was his style, priorities, and strategic direction that brought about the change in culture. In one participant's words:

I would put it more on the personality of the Deans than I would on accreditation. Dean D probably used it as a lever to make us move in the direction that he was comfortable with. He was a very, very research-intensive person himself [...]

Lack of engagement

At two schools (UBS A and D), participants suggested that increased faculty engagement in the accreditation process could possibly have promoted higher levels of learning. At UBS D, for example, one member of the faculty noted that AACSB accreditation is not “something that impacts them on a daily basis.” Another participant speculated that perhaps “the level of internalization” was not there because of the way in which the process had been managed: faculty members' ownership over the process and degree of engagement in the process had been fairly low.

In contrast, at UBS A, the reported benefits were quite high. Nonetheless, in order to promote sustainability and fully leverage the learning benefits of accreditation, the dean and accreditation coordinator felt that increased faculty engagement might help. As one commented on this ongoing challenge: “[...] The big question for us is how do we diffuse those benefits to the general faculty?”

Discussion

Overall, what did the results say in terms of AACSB accreditation and its consequences for OL? The findings were somewhat mixed. Participants at three schools reported that some aspect of OL was evident (either single loop or double loop learning). However, across all schools, respondents were more likely to feel that accreditation promoted single loop learning (continuous improvement) rather than double loop learning. Nonetheless, the predominant themes which emerged were consistent – at some schools, accreditation promoted an increased focus on performance management, research, and quality. Some participants felt that it acted as a catalyst to change, prompted a review of the school's mission/vision (and alignment of strategic priorities), and altered the school's approach to decision making. However, any resultant changes in practice were difficult to sustain over time and required a concerted effort to engage

a greater number of stakeholders. Several participants also wondered if the concept of OL was fully relevant and attainable in a university setting.

There was a significant degree of variability across the four schools in terms of the OL effects. At UBS A, respondents felt that accreditation had contributed to OL in many ways. UBS C reported several moderate learning effects as did UBS D. At UBS B, the learning consequences of accreditation were absent; however, the participants overwhelmingly reported that the university was a learning organization nonetheless. To what can these differences be attributed? They point to the importance of contextual factors as explanatory variables. Two of the most influential contextual factors which emerged in this study were: leadership and resource dependence. Both are discussed as follows.

Leadership

The results show that leadership was the most pervasive contextual factor in influencing the degree to which OL was fostered. At three schools (A, C, and D) the dean was the main motivator and champion of accreditation; and his influence was felt in terms of the type and strength of the consequences. At UBS A, for example, the dean was perceived to be the prime driver of accreditation; and due to his leadership, accreditation was a powerful lever for positive improvements of many types. He orchestrated the change process successfully – he ensured that stakeholders were informed and engaged in the process; he communicated regularly; and he optimized synergies between the various projects which were underway at the school. Moreover, his tenure and leadership was consistent throughout the entire accreditation process. Similarly, participants at UBSs C and D identified their deans/directors as the prime motivators of accreditation and change. However, there was less support for OL in these schools. In the case of UBS C, this was partially explained by the length of time since initial accreditation (ten years) – and the lack of sustainability was particularly evident since they were going through a new and “improved” AACSB re-accreditation. It is also noteworthy that they had changed deans twice in that time period. At UBS D, the participants felt that the previous dean had primarily been interested in promoting his agenda of research productivity; therefore, the improvements were primarily in this area (i.e. not broad in focus or application). Furthermore, he did not distribute his leadership to his team or communicate a compelling vision of change (due, in part, to a somewhat challenging governance structure). School B was perhaps the most interesting. Even though accreditation was not a lever for change, all of the participants felt that they were a “learning organization” and credited Dean B with being the impetus behind this approach (they were unanimous in this viewpoint with 100 percent of respondents.) He was described as a charismatic leader, connected in the corporate world, a superior fundraiser, and master of public relations. However, he joined UBS B mid-stride; therefore, the process was managed by the associate dean and the new dean did not champion the accreditation effort. Without his active sponsorship, accreditation became little more than an administrative exercise.

These findings lend support to the literature on accreditation, OL, and leadership in educational settings and extend it into the domain of higher education. For example, in secondary schools, transformational leadership has been shown to be an influential variable in fostering OL (Ogawa and Bossert, 1995; Leithwood *et al.*, 1996, 1998; Silins and Mulford, 2002a, b; Silins *et al.*, 2002). The results of this study are also consistent with Preskill and Torres’ (1999) model of evaluative inquiry for learning in organizations. In their framework they emphasize the key role of leadership as one of the four “infrastructure” variables which provides a strong “foundation or framework for

supporting learning in the organization” (Preskill and Torres, 1999, p. 153). They emphasize that leadership support for evaluative inquiry must come from the very top of the organization but also from within. This notion of leadership – throughout the entire organization – also fits with Silins and Mulford’s (2002a) findings that transformational as well as distributed leadership are central to promoting OL. In the four universities studied, the most engaged, distributed leadership teams were present at schools A and C. Not surprisingly, these were the two schools with the strongest learning effects.

Resource dependence

Another important contextual factor was resource dependence – the level of resourcing of the UBS and the school’s dependence upon central administration (i.e. the degree to which it relied on the university for financial support for staffing, research, infrastructure, facilities, etc.). The greater the dependence of the business school on the university for financing, the greater their uncertainty around resources and the greater their incentive to seek and use accreditation as a potential negotiating tool as well as a catalyst for change. For example, UBS C was the least well resourced of the four, had experienced severe fiscal restraint in the early 1990s as well as a decade later, and had relied most heavily upon central administration for funding. Acquiring AACSB accreditation (and later the threat of potentially losing accreditation), therefore provided an opportunity for the school to successfully lobby central administration to secure the resources that they desperately needed to survive (and thrive). It also served as an opportunity for learning and change. The dean and administrative leadership treated accreditation very seriously and were incented to make improvements in programs, administration, and research productivity.

UBSs A and D were moderately resourced and had not experienced the same kind of drastic cut-backs in faculty as school C. Participants at UBS A, however, did talk about having experienced financial restraint and having to increase enrollments. As a result, accreditation served as a point of leverage for limiting class sizes, as well as securing additional funds to achieve research productivity goals (i.e. approval for research programs and research chair positions). The accreditation effort was taken very seriously by the UBS Dean, staffed appropriately, and viewed as an opportunity for positive change; OL effects were therefore observed. At UBS D, the UBS’s efforts were focussed on acquiring a new building; and accreditation was positive insofar as it contributed to their efforts in reaching that goal (e.g. leverage with central administration). However, the learning aspects were not as strongly emphasized, except in the area of research (the dean’s personal agenda); and some learning effects were observed here.

UBS B was significantly better resourced and financially more independent than the other three schools. They did not rely on accreditation for leverage purposes (mentioned by 0 percent of participants). They were also the furthest ahead in terms of fundraising, branding, securing a new (endowed) building and named school. As a result, accreditation was not viewed as valuable and it did not promote OL. Instead, the dean used other methods to promote learning among the faculty and staff (e.g. clearly articulated, ambitious goals around educational improvement and business school rankings, relentless communication, and high expectations of faculty).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that accreditation can promote OL (particularly continuous improvement), in UBSs. There was significant variability across schools in terms of the learning consequences of accreditation; and these results point to

the importance of contextual factors as explanatory variables. The most salient was leadership. The dean was seen to be the prime driver of change; and the degree to which he sponsored the accreditation effort and the way in which he orchestrated the change associated with accreditation influenced the learning consequences. Resource dependence also influenced the degree to which accreditation was used as leverage with central administration and as a driver for positive change and OL.

Given the prevalent role of leadership that was evident in this study, it would therefore be instructive to further investigate the relationship of leadership, OL, and accreditation in IHEs. A potential approach would be to build upon other models of leadership in educational institutions (e.g. Silins and Mulford, 2002b), the current research on OL in public schools (Silins and Mulford, 2002a, b; Silins *et al.*, 2002) and the research on accreditation, higher education, and organizational effectiveness (e.g. Lejeune and Vas, 2009). By expanding these measurement instruments (i.e. in combination with accreditation), into the university setting, it would extend the literature in several new directions.

In addition to opening up new possibilities for future research, the results of this study have some potential implications for policy and practice, particularly in institutes of management education. For example, for UBS deans and directors, this research can provide some key elements to consider when deciding whether to embark upon an accreditation journey. To start with, if accreditation it is undertaken in an authentic, rigorous manner, a number of learning benefits can accrue. Those schools that derived the most benefits had a leader who championed the entire process, who took a deliberate, planned approach, and whose tenure was continuous, throughout the accreditation effort. Ideally, leadership should start with the dean, but be broadly distributed among other members of the faculty and staff (the team, other program directors, program area leads, etc.). Increased participation and involvement assists in promoting ownership over the change, building capacity for accreditation, and promoting use (Preskill, 1994; Patton, 1998; Preskill and Torres, 1999; Turnbull, 1999; Kirkhart, 2000; Alkin and Taut, 2003). As well, to maximize the learning benefits from accreditation, the dean should model and promote behaviors that support a culture of learning. This includes a change in the nature of communication – facilitating dialogue and reflection, openness to risk-taking, and surfacing underlying assumptions. These types of competencies can be difficult to develop and have implications for the training and education of university leaders and senior administrators.

There are also broader implications for management development. For organizations who are interested in developing their managers and/or senior executives, UBSs are one of the primary providers of formal management education (e.g. undergraduate management programs, MBA programs, executive MBAs, specialized MBAs, etc.). UBSs are also becoming increasingly involved in developing customized executive training for partners in the private and not-for-profit sectors. Therefore, it is important for consumers and decision makers to be cognizant of accreditation as a pervasive global trend that is growing in its influence; as well, they should be aware of the significance of accreditation and what it means for management education. As this study has shown, while AACSB accreditation can promote OL and a focus on quality, research productivity, and innovative programming, this is not guaranteed. At the very least, however, AACSB accreditation ensures that the school has voluntarily participated in a regular review of its management education programs with an external peer-review team – with the objective of improving educational outcomes. Moreover, AACSB's focus on AOL and the establishment of learning objectives is moving further in that direction[3].

Finally, for leaders at educational institutions, it is also important to ensure that the learning benefits of accreditation are not only realized, but sustained. What systems, practices, and policies can be introduced to promote sustainability? What rewards are needed to encourage and sustain new behaviors? The answers to these questions can go a long way toward institutionalized practice – ensuring that improvements in management education and are truly continuous.

Notes

1. Between 1992/1993 and 2004/2005, federal and provincial per capita cash transfers to universities declined an estimated 40 percent. As a share of the economy, the federal cash contribution reached its lowest level in 25 years in fiscal year 2004 (CAUT, 2005).
2. In 2003, AACSB introduced AoL standards which necessitate that accredited institutions provide direct evidence of student learning across all business programs. This was a marked shift from standards which were based entirely on inputs (e.g. faculty qualifications), to those also based on outcomes. Also note that two of the universities in this study were initially granted a ten-year accreditation renewal (UBSs B and C).
3. As noted by Lejeune and Vas (2009), AACSB has a stronger focus on student outcomes than the European-based accrediting organization, EQUIS. They comment: “Regarding students’ satisfaction, it could be interesting to compare EQUIS and AACSB on this dimension, as the later seems more focussed on the “assurance of learning” through the establishment of learning objectives. Students may indeed be more directly satisfied with clearly defined courses’ objectives than the number of international partners of their school” (which is the focus of EQUIS) (Lejeune and Vas, 2009. pp. 736-737).

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