

International business accreditation as a trigger for business school development

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Abstract

Purpose – Business schools turn to prestigious international accrediting bodies (AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA) in their quest for legitimacy, improved status and reputation. What pains and gains are involved when pursuing these credentials? What are the facilitative and friction forces, supporting or inhibiting development in the different levels of the organization? The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative single case study provides an extant literature review on business accreditations and their effect on business school development. Through examining the business school organization from four angles, “levels of change,” the accreditation process related events in a Nordic business school during 2009–2017 are analyzed.

Findings – Regardless of the typical path-dependency of academic organizations, an accreditation process significantly affects the business school development in all four levels of the organization – dominant logic, culture, structures and systems – through changing the everyday activities. Individual actors become more aware of the underlying values, beliefs and assumptions behind their own behavior as well as that of the overall organization. Deeply rooted understanding of “academic freedom” is challenged. New relationships and working culture are created across sub-units and individuals. Introducing faculty qualifications criteria may lead to department mergers. Accreditation data systems bring transparency into academic work, increasing the consciousness and result orientation among individuals.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the limited theoretical understanding of the development a professional organization through accreditation, adds to the understanding of practical consequences on the level of an individual organization, as well as offers managerial suggestions for business school leaders.

Keywords AACSB, Faculty development, Accreditation, Business school, Higher education development, Management education development

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In an ever more turbulent environment with an increasing level of global competition among schools, higher education organizations are forced to pursue more systematic quality assurance. These systems are often accompanied by accreditation labels that serve to guarantee their legitimacy and status in the field (e.g. Zammuto, 2008; Lejeune and Vas, 2014; Reddy, 2008; Romero, 2008; Ray *et al.*, 2011).

Recently, international accreditations (such as AACSB or EQUIS) have taken on a greater role as a means of conducting quality assurance in business schools. It is recognized that business schools can gain multifaceted benefits through pursuing and earning this attractive recognition, as well as through maintaining their accreditation. Self-assessments, reviewer comments, consultative visits, evaluation/auditing visits and re-evaluation can fuel the school's search for its own strategic focus area and guiding values (Cret, 2011). Accreditation can offer practical quality assurance tools for teaching, research or stakeholder organization (e.g. Schomaker, 2015). In addition, implementing the philosophy of continuous improvement can



generate efficient quality assessment methods and measurements, a stronger brand and ultimately a totally new direction for the strategic development of the school (Urgel, 2007).

Reddy (2008) suggested that one direction for future research could be to examine the triggers of change or the impact of the accreditation process in an institution. There are numerous studies on the meaning and implementation of accreditation in a variety of cultural and geographical contexts that influence the process (Fernandes *et al.*, 2012; Stensaker, 2011; Schomaker, 2015; Goby and Nickerson, 2014; Onsmann, 2010; Anaam *et al.*, 2009), similarities and differences among different international accreditations (Urgel, 2007), and critical views of those accreditations (Reddy, 2008). There are also studies of internal development related to accreditation, such as a survey on the perceived impact of an accreditation on organizational effectiveness and culture (Lejeune and Vas, 2009), quality culture in higher education (Ehlers, 2009), or how power in its different forms is realized in the accreditation process (Engebretsen *et al.*, 2012).

However, we are still missing a holistic organizational view of how the academic context can affect change processes when a new type of quality culture is implemented. Cret (2011) examined accreditation as a management tool for upper management of business schools, but in his study, the focus is more on deans' roles as leading actors in accreditation implementation.

Our focus is on an organizational change process that is triggered by accreditation. For example, Vogus and Sutcliffe (2012) suggest that a deeper understanding of leadership and management mechanisms in business schools is needed. Similarly, Ray *et al.* (2011, p. 198) suggest that further research in business schools is needed to "explore how organizations become more mindful?" Our aim is to contribute to this understanding of how accreditation can be seen as a driver of development in academic organizations. We pose the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do development activities happen at different organizational levels (systems, structure, culture and dominant logic)?
- RQ2. What kind of facilitative or friction forces are identifiable in this specific academic context (business school) that can either boost or inhibit the development activities needed?

The empirical part of the research was conducted as a case study at a Business School that pursued AACSB accreditation during 2009–2013 and maintained its accreditation since receiving it in 2013. In the following, we will first present our theoretical framework, followed by methodological issues. We then present our empirical analysis, followed by conclusions and managerial implications.

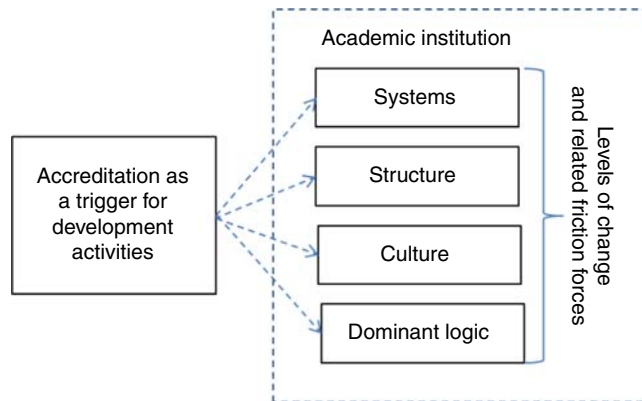
2. Academic institutions as a context for quality assurance system – starting point for empirical analysis

In this section, we aim to present our theoretical starting point for the following empirical analysis. We look at academic institutions and their development (influenced by accreditation) from four angles, or "levels of change" as we call them. We ask how accreditation can be seen as a trigger for development activities, initiating a need for change at all these levels. Furthermore, we seek to identify the facilitative and friction forces at every level that either inhibit or assist in pursuing the needed development initiatives and actions.

Why these levels? As mentioned, we aim to generate a holistic understanding of the organizational change process in the above situation and to provide a more profound description of specific characteristics of the higher education organization that influences that change process. As a result, we wish to add to the existing knowledge on management and development in higher education organizations and offer managerial suggestions for leaders in those organizations (Figure 1).

In developing and managing higher education organizations, there are prevalent challenges caused by specific contexts. Like any other organization, an academic one is also a

Figure 1.
Theoretical framework
and research setting



combination of interdependent or less interdependent elements, such as human beings, teams, units and faculties. However, what challenges development and management in those elements is a high level of organizational loose coupling. Orton and Weick (1990, p. 208) define loose coupling among individuals, sub-units, ideas and organizations as well as between hierarchical levels, environments, activities, intentions and actions. How interdependent (coupled) or independent (loose) those elements are is dependent on the organization in question as well as on its environment (e.g. Orton and Weick, 1990). For example, Ray *et al.* (2011) suggest that within business schools, the level of fragmentation can be high due to the strong role of specialization. We suggest that this fragmentation can take place both horizontally and vertically. In a loosely coupled organization, perceptions of organizational situations can vary remarkably among deans, unit leaders, professors and researchers. Likewise, horizontally, different disciplines can even have completely opposite views.

The literature provides some evidence on what makes organizations loosely coupled. For example, causal indeterminacy, fragmentation of the external environment and fragmentation of the internal environment are mentioned (Orton and Weick, 1990, p. 206). In the academic setting, causal ambiguity is partly caused by the abstractness and intangibility of activities and of their “production materials” and output: scientific knowledge. Likewise, the fragmented external environment may create a fragmented internal structure. Typically, the expectations of a variety of stakeholders toward academic institutions – expectations related to research, teaching and society in general – are multifaceted and conflicting, thus leading organizational activities in many – even confusing – directions. Consequently, instead of coherent views or a joint vision of the organization, incoherent and conflicting local views in the organizational sub-units may prevail (e.g. Day, 1991) based on those sub-units’ individual network connections. This diversity of views is one reason for loose coupling among actors, and a reason why that loose coupling may be strengthened. Finally, internal fragmentation is (for example) due to the high level of individualism and autonomy characteristic of academic work. Additionally, there are often strong subcultures and collegial groups in the organization, typically formed around expertise areas, research groups, reference groups or disciplines. These strong subgroups generate formal and informal silos in the organization, further generating loose coupling (see also, e.g. Fusarelli, 2002; Meyer, 2002; Reponen, 1999) that can cause problems with finding common strategic or operational directions or sharing knowledge among actors in the organization. Local activities can be intensive and successful, but the common organizational area of working and interacting may remain weak. This weakness can also be seen as an ongoing conflict between gains in individual knowledge and gains in collective knowledge (March, 1991; McGrath, 2001), a deeply rooted dilemma in academic institutions.

According to Reponen (1999), in universities, the danger of loose coupling lies in knowledge being too fragmented, which leads to situations in which the organization is not capable of creating an entity that is sufficiently integrated for the needs of its stakeholders. From the accreditation point of view, these problems may induce curriculum fragmentation that will cause major problems in, e.g. fulfilling the assurance of learning (AoL) criteria set by AACSB standards. Internal silos can hinder knowledge transfer and cooperation, preventing faculty members from fulfilling the qualification criteria of the AACSB standards, for example. The root cause of this dilemma is that in quality assurance and accreditation-related processes, the need for interdependency between organizational actors tends to be higher than in traditional, individual-based research efforts, for example (see, e.g. Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012). Accreditation is not an individual but rather an organizational effort.

This organizational effort requires schools to change their ways of organizing and leading activities. It may be possible to compensate for the harmful effects of dispersed organization by enhancing leadership, focusing effort and building up shared values (Orton and Weick, 1990, p. 211) or even by creating routines to enhance common understanding of what is expected (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012). Internal fragmentation can be tackled by developing the dominant logic, culture, structure and system levels in the organization (Nätti and Ojasalo, 2008), and the accreditation process can offer many tools and much support for development. But, are academic organizations able to change?

In the following, the above defined organizational layers are used in this study as a starting point for our empirical analysis. The change process is analyzed at these levels, and related facilitators and friction forces caused by the specific context of BSs are defined as result of the study. However, it is important to note that presented levels of dominant logic, culture, structure and systems always influence each other and are always (at least partly) overlapping – although they are presented separately here for the sake of our analytical approach. Together, these viewpoints can form a holistic picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

2.1 Dominant logic

An organization's prior knowledge base is critical when development efforts are in focus. Namely, development is path-dependent (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) and based on the history of the organization. In practical terms, this means that new knowledge is embedded into the organization's prevailing knowledge base. The prevailing knowledge base, in turn, is likely to be strengthened; thus, knowledge tends to be filtered to "fit" into previous knowledge. This is why many organizations may find it hard to change and why many organizations might see a need for change but are unable to act to address this need (Bettis and Prahalad, 1995).

The concept of dominant logic is one way of describing the above-mentioned type of "knowledge filter," in which organizational attention is focused only on knowledge that fits into prevailing assumptions, while new knowledge, having renewing potential, may be ignored (Bettis and Prahalad, 1995). The dominant logic can be compared to genetic factors when making a medical diagnosis: "its influence is pervasive. It permeates the organization, yet it is invisible. It predisposes the firm to certain kinds of strategic problems and often interacts with organizational systems and structures in a complex way in causing these problems" (Bettis and Prahalad, 1995). Accordingly, Vogus and Sutcliffe (2012) use concepts of organizational mindfulness/mindlessness (see also Ray *et al.*, 2011), highlighting an organization's ability to stay alert to its environment and to change accordingly.

The danger of the dominant logic is that these mindsets are usually tacit and function to a large extent below the level of awareness. When these assumptions of the dominant logic become dysfunctional, an organization is not able to critically evaluate the relevance of its basic assumptions in the prevailing situation. Unworkable activities occurring at the customer interface might continue, and collective myopia might develop (Argyris, 1999, p. 5; Schein, 1985, p. 373). This might be especially prevalent within organizations that carefully segment activities,

keep functions separate and have professionals working in isolation (Day, 1991, 1994). In such cases, even though individual exploration may potentially bring useful knowledge to the organization, defensive behavior among the actors may prevent the development of that knowledge by hiding and/or ignoring information that challenges the status quo, avoiding public testing of basic assumptions, and tacitly communicating that the organization is not open to having mental models challenged at the individual or organizational level. Members of the organization tend to mutually reinforce their beliefs (Sterman, 1994, p. 313.). Even though changes may make good logical sense, existing emotional attachments may stimulate considerable resistance toward new initiatives (Roth, 2003, p. 45). The more effective the defensive routines are, the more effectively they cover up the underlying problems and the less effectively these problems are faced. Unlearning is needed, but this can be challenging in loosely coupled, highly institutionalized contexts such as higher education organizations.

2.2 Culture and values

Culture and values in the organization are strongly intertwined with the concept of dominant logic. However, the main difference from our point of view is that dominant logic can be considered an even more “fixed,” intrinsic and history-dependent phenomenon compared to culture and values. Organizational culture refers to the values and beliefs that are held by employees. Culture can be an important governing system because it mediates the behavior of individuals (e.g. Teece *et al.*, 1997). Culture and values are not easy to “manage.” Thus, the role of value structures as an initiator and moderator of changes makes this a timely topic for the understanding of organizational dynamics (Buenger *et al.*, 1996).

It is suggested that although “quality development, in essence, demands the development of organizational culture based on shared values, necessary competencies and new professionalism – Quality development in higher education is often limited to bureaucratic documentation, and disregards the development of quality as an organization’s holistic culture” (Ehlers, 2009, p. 343). In other words, it seems as if too often the cultural situation of the organization is either ignored or not sufficiently understood. The focus may remain on regulating and developing processes and/or outcomes, although by emphasizing cultural aspects, results could be more widespread and lasting (Ehlers, 2009). These processes might, for example, seek to develop open cultural environments to learn from mistakes, test new approaches and pay attention to what is actually happening (Ray *et al.*, 2011), just to mention a few examples.

2.3 Structure

Formal and informal organizational structure can have a remarkable influence on change. How hierarchical is the organization? What is the level of vertical integration? Is it more function or process oriented? Organizational design is more easily controlled compared to previously presented aspects of dominant logic and culture (Sorenson, 2003); however, by designing organizational structure wisely, deeper structures can also be influenced and developed because of facilitated interaction between organizational units and individuals. This advantage explains the popularity of processual organizational structures. Modern management practices aim at changing organizational structure and processes to achieve better integration, e.g. between different units and research teams (e.g. Grant, 1996). In practice, this integration may also occur through liaison positions, integrator roles or by implementing matrix organization (Slater and Narver, 1995). Structural solutions can help in wider utilization of knowledge assets, compensating for a strong tendency of loosely coupled systems to utilize knowledge assets locally, individually or team-specifically, not organizationally (e.g. Argote, 1999).

Organizational incentives (how and with what metrics results are measured, for example) are also an important element of organizational governance structure that has a remarkable influence on how people focus their activities and thoughts in academic organizations (e.g. Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012).

2.4 Systems

Facilitating knowledge transfer in its different forms has a remarkable role in development activities. IT systems can help in converting individual-bound knowledge into organizational knowledge in loosely coupled organizations, thus also helping to store that knowledge in the long run (e.g. Bose and Sugumaran, 2003; Blessing *et al.*, 2001; Ofek and Sarvary, 2001), which is an important capability when implementing a quality culture. However, it is worth pointing out that although development of such systems may be needed, that type of operational development is not itself sufficient to create deeper changes; to be beneficial, it must be accompanied by deeper analysis of organizational behaviors and human activities. There is no use in implementing an IT system that workers are not motivated to use.

If we state that an academic organization is characteristically a loosely coupled system with the challenges of loose coupling, can accreditation increase coherence in higher education organizations such as business schools? Does accreditation facilitate change? How is it possible to implement quality culture in academic higher education institutions? It is said that if the goal is to build more interconnected, tightly coupled systems, everything that encourages or inhibits inter-personal communication can have an influence (Roberts, 2000, p. 433). For example, basic assumptions and values in the organization have an important role in the likelihood of academics actively working together toward common goals or in their willingness to share knowledge to develop their organization (e.g. Bollinger and Smith, 2001, pp. 14, 16). Likewise, structural and incentive choices shape interaction. In the following empirical section, based on the empirical data gathered throughout the accreditation process and the interviews with selected members of the case school, we will take a closer look at different “levels” of development in an academic organization and how change happened (or did not happen) under the influence of accreditation.

3. Methodology – qualitative case study

Because there is still a relatively limited understanding of the phenomenon under study, we use a qualitative case study as our research method. We focus on generating a rich description of the phenomenon to interpret the complexities of the development process (Kvale, 1996, p. 11). The case study method is well suited because it enables us to form a holistic understanding of a relatively complex phenomenon (Yin, 2003, p. 2; Kovács and Spens, 2005).

As mentioned, the case in question is a business school pursuing AACSB accreditation during 2009–2013, and after obtaining accreditation in 2013, maintaining its accreditation actively by focusing on a variety of development activities. This BS is part of a university with several faculties; however, it possesses its own strong own identity within the university context. With currently close to 100 faculty members, this school is not among the largest; however, it forms a solid entity for research. The time-wise accreditation process is not too far away, and many development activities are still in the “work in progress” stage, which makes this case very informative.

The primary data include a comprehensive documentation of the school’s accreditation process, as well as altogether 12 thematic interviews with key persons in the accreditation process, who had been actively involved in the process throughout the years 2009–2018. The group of individuals therefore included those individuals who were thought to have a comprehensive understanding of the long process of altogether nine years.

The 12 thematic interviews were conducted individually, each interview lasting from 50 min up to one and a half hours (listed in the following table). These interviews were conducted within the school with key persons in the accreditation process and with two key executives of an accreditation organization involved in this school’s accreditation process. The analysis of the data was abductive: theoretical understanding and empirical analysis were also developed simultaneously (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Memos from interviews were read carefully and were coded according to chosen theoretical concepts. Saturation for the data was reached, as new viewpoints were not found at the conclusion phase of the data analysis.

The research method is also self-ethnographical in the sense that the authors have been involved in the accreditation process. Because of their position, they were able to access rich secondary data, including memos, e-mail correspondence and official documents throughout the development process (Table I).

4. Empirical analysis

4.1 Dominant logic – strong assumptions holding back change

Then there is fear of how does this affect me [...] am I good enough for the accreditation world [...] and does this infringe my academic freedom [...] so, I do just as I like, and now there is this system that tries to tell me what to do [...] and historically we have not had this tight strategic guidance [...] and I am not saying if this is good or bad [...] so there's a discrepancy with the idea that we together define the strategy, mission and objectives, and we together do things in the same system and same order [...]. (Professor 5)

As mentioned in previous quotes, accreditation challenges academic workers in many ways. In the following analysis related to the dominant logic of the organization, these themes are defined and described: strength of dominant logic, meaning of legitimacy in change, younger faculty members as change agents, and finally, discussion around academic freedom vs results-orientation.

4.1.1 Strength of dominant logic. It was mentioned in many interviews that academic institutions with strong path dependency and history do not change overnight. This observation highlights the strong core assumptions that exist in a BS, influencing the organization's ability to change. In addition, there seems to be an ongoing search for real internal incentives for change:

Still we have challenges, whether we are able to critically look at our own doings – are we capable of out of the box thinking? (Professor 3)

It is a problem that we are too slow to change. When the environment is changing, this is a problem [...] We do not have incentives that would feed fast growth. (Professor 2)

Although power struggles between units and individuals are recognized, a certain willingness to maintain consensus in the organization seems to strengthen this core of dominant logic and support the status quo. Employees are not used to questioning too much when it comes to prevailing assumptions:

We are quite consensus-oriented. Many of the ways we do things relate a long way back, and there is no change in sight in this respect. (Professor 2)

Person interviewed/position in the organization	Interview length	Interview date
Professor 1	1:05:27	May 5, 2017
Professor 2	1:34:05	June 1, 2017
Professor 3	0:51:52	June 2, 2017
Professor 4	1:12:53	June 5, 2017
Professor 5	1:02:07	September 8, 2017
Professor 6	1:21:23	November 2, 2017
Researcher 1	0:53:28	May 30, 2017
Researcher 2	0:53:47	September 1, 2017
Administration Representative 1	0:55:15	May 31, 2017
Administration Representative 2	1:11:07	September 7, 2017
AACSB Executive 1	0:28:17	April 8, 2014
AACSB Executive 2	0:39:12	April 8, 2014

Table I.
Thematic interviews

People also adapt to the system as time goes by, and their criticality toward organizational procedures takes on a milder tone (this is especially characteristic of new employees):

Nowadays I think the fact that the line organization does not take part in this, is not a problem for me anymore. Maybe it is just so that it is typical just to do things, here in BS. (Professor 2)

Additionally, after tackling initial challenges of accreditation and while focusing merely on its maintenance, strong dominant logic as a friction factor can be seen in a certain cautiousness about new initiatives in the school or as a tendency to “get stuck” in existing procedures:

Now our challenge is to decide, whether we need another “great leap”, or incremental improvements. (Professor 3)

[...] now there is danger that we get stuck in working on little things, when we should take another leap of attaining the true level of an international business school [...] there is danger that we just hone things better and better, when should take another development path [...]. (Professor 6)

Meaning of legitimacy in change. Although the strength of dominant logic is recognized, as seen above, the change that has taken place is also recognized:

[...] Now when thinking about this, I realize how there were loads of these old assumptions, old fears towards other units and their representatives [...]. (Professor 5)

[...] there is this strong [...] turning the head [...] and pushing away the fears [...] in a way getting rid of the deeply rooted ways of doing things and ways of thinking [...] in a way breaking institutions [...] the accreditation in a way breaks these existing ways of doing things [...]. (Professor 6)

Initially, when faced with the first phases of the accreditation process, the BS personnel felt that they were really challenged to think “outside the box” in a totally new way. This feeling even created some desperate feelings among the faculty members. The accreditation framework itself was seen as a legitimate one that was not questioned (AACSB was, after all, created by the business school community itself, and in that sense, it was more easily accepted by members of the organization than national accreditations, for example). In this downturn and moment of desperation, the BS management decided (they were apparently somewhat knowledgeable about the organizational culture to which key individuals had to be attached) to send a group of ten individuals from different departments to a one-week series of AACSB accreditation seminars where they could learn more about the AoL and the AACSB standards. This decision was apparently the first turning point toward the process of adopting new ideas, and the seminars clarified the meaning and intent of the standards for the BS members. Two years later, when the critical PRT visit was getting closer, this kind of “group travel” was repeated, which seemed to re-confirm to school representatives that the BS was on the right track:

In the beginning of the process, we were desperate, but the Singapore courses and preparation of SAP made the difference. Then, it all seemed clear why they think like this in AACSB. We got peace in our soul. (Professor 3)

[...] there were three phases [...] 1st legitimizing the big change [...] it was difficult to turn heads of influential people and institutions [...] 2nd working on the accreditation and producing all that required documentation [...] 3rd phase [...] it has now taken 3-4 years [...] it's about rooting things, about everyday practices, and building practices. (Professor 6)

It appears that while academic personnel are very critical whenever it comes to any kind of knowledge, the dominant logic that filters information flowing in from outside the organization must be addressed by looking at it from two perspectives. First, how trustworthy and legitimate the information itself seems, and second, who are the actors that “carry” the information into the BS, i.e. how legitimate and trustworthy the actors seem.

4.1.2 Younger faculty members as change agents. One other viewpoint that deserves attention is the above-mentioned divide between younger and older members of the faculty.

Concerning the accreditation initiative, the younger members were more eager to relate positively to the tasks at hand, whereas a nonchalant attitude and some levels of resistance in the early phases tended to come from the older members of the BS. However, as the BS moved toward achieving accreditation, these differences grew smaller and even disappeared:

Unlike in the old days, there is not that much difference how younger and older people relate to accreditation, it is a normal activity for all. (Researcher 1)

For many younger faculty members, accreditation might also create new roles in which they can develop their capabilities and thus progress in their careers and feel empowered:

The biggest change for myself [as a younger faculty member] has been that I became the responsible person for [...] and before (AACSB), many people did not even know who I was [...] and of course yourself, you know more people because you work with them. (Researcher 2)

4.1.3 Academic freedom vs results-orientation. Individuals in the organization seem to relate differently to their work because of the accreditation process. For example, people are more aware of the importance of a results-orientation, which has changed their basic assumptions:

Through the faculty qualification (from now on FQ) criteria, people have begun to understand and think, we must be able to bring results. (Researcher 1)

This understanding was strengthened by the fact that at the time, there were other influential factors, in addition to accreditation, that facilitated the results-orientation, e.g. university and national policy changes and increasing competition in the academic sector:

At the same time, the university funding model has also changed. These together [with accreditation] have increased the expectations for results in research, produced new results-orientated expectations for people, at the individual level. (Professor 4)

4.2 Culture – from internal fragmentation toward cohesion

4.2.1 Increasing coherence. Additionally, culturally, there is no question that accreditation has increased the coherence of the organization, as mentioned in many interviews:

People understood it's not a matter of management only but it is everybody's and affects everything [...] and nowadays it is totally different, so there is no resistance, instead people are proud of it and want to keep it [...] but in the beginning people thought it doesn't concern me [...] so there is a big change [...] accreditation has created a common direction for us, no single director has done that as strongly as the accreditation has done [...]. (Professor 5)

During the process, everyone became knowledgeable about accreditation. This enhanced the feeling of belonging amongst BS people [...] When we succeeded in AACSB, people were together proud of the accomplishment. (Administration Representative 1)

The units have had very different cultures and ways of thinking [...] we should do things together and we should harmonize the ways of doing things [...] it is very challenging [...] when we discuss in groups with representatives from different units, the thinking changes [...] accreditation makes it possible that we have this forum where people can discuss [...] and it would not happen in the old world that was very unit-focused [...]. (Professor 5)

There were critical events that can be seen as turning points, where this coherence was intensively developed among key persons from a variety of organizational units. These events were related to common training sessions or critical PRT visits related to accreditation, as mentioned in the previous section, or as another example, the common celebration party when the label was finally earned:

AoL was a big thing for us – we went to Singapore with a group of 10 people and that clarified key people's understanding of what the accreditation is all about. (Professor 4)

The rate of participation, the effort, has varied between departments and individuals. But when the PRT came, at the time of “inspection”, everyone prepped up their game, there was not really resistance then. (Professor 2)

4.2.2 Individuals as cultural change agents. Characteristic of the BS was that development initiatives and progress typically started with individuals rather than the organization. Strong initiators are needed to facilitate cultural change because the motivation to change things cannot be forced “from outside” in this type of environment:

Regarding the accreditation project, I was used in earlier organizations where I worked, that quality assurance was everybody’s business in the organization. In OBS, it was more about individual people. (Professor 2)

Without n.n., there would be no accreditation. This is absolutely clear. (Professor 1)

However, an individual’s ability to influence common culture is not based on a formal position. It was interesting to see that in this specific BS, it was considered essential that these initiators come from within the organization so that they would possess the “right kind of legitimacy” and would be sufficiently established members of the community. Thus, they seemed to have enough power to influence others. It seems the initiators must already have the trust and acceptance of other members of the organization. If such legitimacy is there, the initiators are then allowed a lot of freedom to “try and succeed”:

In BS, we must get certain individuals on board, the influence of some leader type of persons is essential. (Professor 4)

By contrast, new members, who are still considered “external” to the BS (despite having formal leadership positions in the organization), may encounter difficulties if they propose changes to ways of running development initiatives or to the organizational culture. One example of this was the challenge of a new (although otherwise highly experienced) member of the BS who tried to change the way the accreditation project was run; this person was ultimately discouraged from the effort:

In the beginning, I tried to introduce formal process management to the accreditation project but did not succeed. Had to accept that this was to be a team-led process. (Professor 2)

This observation can also lead us to the conclusion that what is considered suitable process management in other expert organizations/firms with formal procedures of project management, for example, might be “too much” in an academic institution and for people used to “academic freedom.” Legitimacy is important, but so is understanding that people are not ready to adapt overnight to a logic that is the opposite of what they are used to.

4.2.3 From individuals to groups – hot spots start to emerge. Around the active individuals with the right type of legitimacy, other individuals with similar interests then gather, and organizational “hot spots” for cultural change start to form. This type of process is also observed in the BS accreditation preparations:

Later in the process, the “tiger team” was formed for accreditation. Then slowly the accreditation work spread to the organization. (Professor 2)

The accreditation design team was big enough [...] everyone could do things with their expertise, for the common good, so you see your own contribution in the light of the big picture. (Administration Representative 2)

In the fragmented cultural environment, a common process can facilitate the harmonization of culture between units, although unit heads with legitimacy can have considerable influence at the unit level, as the following quotes show:

There are differences between departments in how they relate to accreditation, and this depends essentially on how the head of the department thinks. (Administration Representative 1)

It is the responsible persons in the five disciplines who decide in the end [...] so if this person feels very strongly about something, you have to be skilled in affecting their thinking [...] I don't think the cultures [in disciplines/departments] are extremely different although they vary, but rather it is about the individual characters who are different. (Researcher 2)

However, in spite of the strong influence of unit leaders, it is suggested that other actors involved (even some without such a formal position) can also exert influence by spreading the word and persuading actors in different units to join the project efforts and thus unify the culture:

[...] at the same time we [...] started to renew the education portfolio [...] and there was enormous internal lobbying and turning heads [...] I had to discuss dozens of times with people and remove fear and turn heads that this is not a threat but an opportunity [...] and this took time. (Professor 6)

4.2.4 From concrete to challenging. Regarding the changes that the accreditation brought about, the BS representatives feel strongly that the most important change brought about by the project may be the ways in which education and teaching are discussed and conducted and how people relate to education and teaching. This change also concerns curriculum management and ultimately led to dramatic changes in the education portfolio of the school: the school established a common bachelor program for the first time in its history:

Education management has changed. It is no longer a solitary job. This has been caused by accreditation, and also other things. (Professor 3)

Accreditation has brought systematics into our teaching, it has brought consistency. Especially those people who have done the pedagogical studies, have a far more in-depth understanding. (Researcher 1)

It is interesting to note that although accreditation can be seen as a trigger for change in many activities, the change process appears to progress from more concrete areas to less concrete ones and from tightly coupled tasks toward loosely coupled areas in the organization. It is easier to build coherence in education with clearly defined tasks and responsibilities supported by AoL, whereas in research, building coherence is more challenging and is a "work in progress" because research remains solitary at this school, where strong research groups are not a tradition. However, it was suggested that all other areas, such as research, could also be influenced by the "lessons learned" from education development:

We have changed our ways of working in education, but in strategy and research not that much. (Professor 2)

[...] It is not enough that we measure individuals, it should be something more [...] like in education its AoL [...] it should be some kind of framework in which we would develop research [...] not just measure results, but how we do research [...]. (Professor 5)

We must use AACSB to enhance the internal feeling of collectivity at BS. This unity can be used to boost research – "We should use [accreditation team's] example of getting into the international contexts and positions, also in research functions and amongst researchers". (Professor 1)

[...] Now we have moved to doing things together in education, so why would we not see similar development in research as well [...] when people get to know each other and know what they do, so this opens up possibilities [...]. (Professor 5)

One of the most important things in accreditation is that it has thought us how to make changes.
(Professor 6)

4.3 Structure – breaking down the silos?

4.3.1 Accreditation as a trigger for lowering barriers. The respondents had reasonably uniform views on what had changed in the organization of the BS and what had not changed. We could observe that the accreditation project had clearly changed the BS's educational structures and its curriculum management processes:

[...] change in how the starting points are learning goals on the program level, not course level.
(Professor 3)

Within the BS, the cooperation among people from a variety of units – cooperation that was required to succeed in accreditation – can be seen as the main driver of change. The accreditation project did not initially change the internal organizational structure of the BS, but it required cooperation between individuals across organizational borders, which, in turn, did lower or even break down barriers between departments:

The cooperation has changed [...] each discipline cannot just plan everything on their own, how they want [...] we plan the common courses together with all programs, and all disciplines do notice how this helps the students and also our own operations, so that everyone does not do everything all on their own. (Researcher 2)

Organizational borders are lower between departments than before, especially in education, but also in research. (Administration Representative 1)

Accreditation has had a big role in getting people to know each other. This has also resulted in some new research initiatives. (Professor 4)

For example, in 2013, a common, interdisciplinary bachelor program was established, which was a huge leap toward more intensive cooperation in teaching. Accreditation was the main trigger of that change. The weakening of borders started with activities focused on cooperation in education, which led to people from different departments knowing each other better than before. Subsequently, in the past few years, there have been increasing signs of new cooperation in research. In summer 2017, the BS management team decided to propose to the university that the BS would move from a structure of six departments to three. However, the process of change seems to be unreasonably slow. All this has occurred over the course of almost 10 years.

Accreditation also changed the curriculum development and management processes, making them more transparent and understandable to a wider audience, who can now see their role in the organization as teachers and developers:

Accreditation brought about a big difference in the systematic development of education, it brought systematics to doing things. (Researcher 1)

However, in the data, it became evident that if there are conflict situations, unit-level silos become explicit and unit members start to “defend” the benefits of their own unit.

4.4 Systems – bringing transparency into academic freedom

Regarding systems development at the BS that is under scrutiny here, the respondents paid very little attention to developing an Intellectual Contributions Data System (ICDS), which can be seen as the most important IT-system development related to accreditation. This was surprising because the BS and its people have invested substantially in developing the ICDS over several years, and the development work is still ongoing. The system was developed by people on the accreditation team and with technical assistance from the university's

information sciences department from 2015 onwards. The BS decided to develop the ICDS system in-house instead of buying commercial software from the market. The ICDS is based on the faculty qualifications (FQ) requirements of AACSB accreditation and is used to collect data from faculty members' various contributions to research, teaching and society. There was one observation, however, recognizing that this type of development is an ongoing process:

[...] we still have to develop in how we collect all this documentation, we do not have this in good enough order yet [...] so we would have a data bank through which we could share better together, and this does not yet exist [...]. (Administration Representative 2)

The essential function of the FQ requirements is to ensure that each faculty member is competent to teach students in business school programs. In practice, this means that each faculty member must show the "currency" of their qualifications and knowledge in each five-year period with the help of this IT storage. The FQ requirements and related measurements must be developed by the school itself, in accordance with its mission, and on the basis of AACSB accreditation standards. The FQ requirements for the BS were initially developed during the process in 2011–2013 and were updated during 2015–2016 to fulfill the renewed accreditation criteria of AACSB.

The ICDS system can be seen as the embodiment of the FQ requirements. As these requirements are typically among the most difficult issues to define for schools pursuing accreditation, that is, whether the school has enough qualified faculty at the school and in each program and whether an individual is considered competent or not, it would be expected that this issue would have gained (in general) more attention from the respondents. However, in an individually oriented and loosely coupled organization, people are not necessarily willing to "report" their individual contributions in this way. Of course, in these interviews, it could be that the group interviewed approached such a systemic development more positively, considering their leading position in the organization. Now, years later, it is interesting to see how these issues are also being addressed in the area of the BS' research activities.

However, there were a couple of interesting observations that support our other findings, namely, that there were, especially in the initial phases of the project, concerns among faculty members that their intellectual contributions might not be sufficient for them to be considered "academically qualified" and that this system would "reveal" that problem:

The [accreditation related] information systems issues have caused some concern. (Professor 1)

Whether we had enough academically qualified faculty was a concern at some point. (Administration Representative 1)

Because the issue of individual personal qualifications and competence is such a fundamentally important theme in an academic organization, it might be expected that people would, to a larger extent than in other types of organizations, possibly blame the ICDS or accreditation for finding them insufficiently competent. There were also positive observations in regard to defining clearer criteria for FQ in general:

Faculty qualifications criteria brought consciousness. People think that there must be results. On the other hand, there are also other changes affecting this. (Researcher 1)

5. Conclusions

The emergence of international accreditations has increased positional competition among business schools (see, e.g. Alajoutsijärvi *et al.*, 2018). This, in turn, has put increasing pressure on schools to develop their different functions as well as the competences of the individuals and groups of individuals they employ.

While many have studied organizational change processes in professional organizations, there are fewer examples of studies that focus on university organizations, especially business schools. In this study, we sought to answer questions concerning the effects of accreditation on business school development. First, we asked how development activities occur at different organizational levels (systems, structure, culture and dominant logic)? Second, what types of facilitative or friction forces are identifiable in this specific academic context that either boost or inhibit development activities?

Through an extensive analysis of our data, our aim was to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the development of professional organizations, especially business schools, and offer managerial advice for leaders working in them.

Regarding the development of a business school through the influence of an accreditation standards framework, we find that the pursuit of accreditation changes the development path along which a business school “travels.” An accreditation journey changes the everyday activities of the school at all four levels of the organization. This change happens regardless of the strong path-dependency of a BS, which was recognized by the school’s individuals themselves, as well as at the level of the whole organization. People and groups within the organization feel challenged when new ways of working and new ideas are introduced, even though the need for change is recognized. Simultaneously, there are self-critical views regarding the ability to change existing habits, typically generated throughout the history of the organization, and the slow pace of realizing the needed improvements can also be challenging.

Related to the dominant logic of an organization, through the accreditation process, the individual actors become more aware of the underlying values, beliefs and assumptions behind their own behavior as well as that of the overall organization. Recognizing these underlying assumptions enables questioning them and facilitating the change needed. Some features of the organization thereby transform from the unconscious to conscious, from dominant logic to cultural attributes.

Based on our evidence, the introduction of accreditation criteria, especially the FQ requirements, challenge the deeply rooted understanding of “academic freedom” or “independence.” The introduction of minimum FQ requirements for the research output for each individual brings an increased level of consciousness and transparency into individual faculty members’ work. This, in turn, allows greater collegial scrutiny of everyone’s research output, unlike before. This changes the dominant logic of an organization.

Individuals may have a great impact on how and at what speed development activities occur. Our findings suggest that younger members of the organization may embrace the role of change agents, challenging the existing dominant logic of the organization.

Introducing such a legitimate external framework as quality assurance system, into a characteristically loosely coupled higher education organization, may have significant effects on increasing coherence within the organization. The accreditation journey may facilitate the advancement of the working culture of the school by strengthening the links (coupling) of the actors. New relationships and working partnerships are created across sub-units and individuals. Our findings support the notion of a higher level of interdependency (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2012) required by accreditation processes than what the BS is normally accustomed to. This changes the culture of the school.

Through strengthened coupling and reduced fragmentation, the earlier sub-unit structures of the school under scrutiny in our study were replaced by new structures during the period of analysis. The introduction of new FQ criteria as well as the faculty sufficiency criteria of the accreditation standards affected the merging of small departments into larger units.

Finally, the process also resulted in introducing new and changed information management systems for the BS. The emerging need to collect information on the intellectual contributions (as defined by the accreditation standards) of each faculty member and analyze those factors annually as part of the curriculum management and faculty development processes resulted in

the creation of a software system developed in-house. This, in turn, resulted in higher awareness of the “we must bring results” attitude among faculty members.

The friction and facilitative forces within the BS seem strongly attributed to individual actors and, to a certain extent, their closest colleagues, team members and colleague-friends. Furthermore, the forces change and take on new forms in the different phases of the process. As one example, the friction forces, represented most typically by senior individuals within the school who were initially opposed to the pursuit of accreditation, were suppressed further during the process by the increasing level of determination of younger faculty members, thus driving the process forward successfully. In some cases, initial opposition also turned into a facilitative force. Ultimately, when approaching the goal, i.e. earning the AACSB accreditation, there were interpretations that it was no longer considered appropriate to be in opposition, at least not publicly. Furthermore, new facilitative forces emerged through the increased communication and cooperation culture, resulting in new initiatives in the area of research as well as education.

Regarding the interplay and interdependency of the four levels of the organization, changes in one level may result in changes in other levels. The above-mentioned overlapping of the different levels was visible in our findings, most importantly in that deeply rooted, unconscious behavioral patterns and assumptions concerning the highly individualistic culture often labeled “academic freedom” were made visible, thus providing opportunities for conscious analytical discussion and ultimately change in the school’s culture. As an example, the school representatives found advantages when they made a collective effort to design education programs, rather than doing so as individual, fragmented pieces of a puzzle. This, in turn, increased the cooperation and connections between individuals and resulted in new research cooperation efforts.

Another example of overlap is the finding that the introduction of a data system built in-house to collect information about research and education contributions increased the level of knowledge about each individual’s “productivity” within the school. The higher level of transparency regarding results led to a change in the BS culture, emphasizing the idea that certain minimum requirements concern everyone in the organization, regardless of the “rank” or position of an individual in the school hierarchy.

In conclusion, regardless of the typical path-dependency of academic organizations, an accreditation process significantly affects the business school development in all four levels of the organization – dominant logic, culture, structures and systems – through changing the everyday activities. Individual actors become more aware of the underlying values, beliefs and assumptions behind their own behavior as well as that of the overall organization. Deeply rooted understanding of “academic freedom” is challenged. New relationships and working culture are created across sub-units and individuals. Introducing FQ criteria may lead to department mergers. Accreditation data systems bring transparency into academic work, increasing the consciousness and result orientation among individuals.

This study contributes to the currently limited theoretical understanding of the development a professional organization through accreditation, adds to the understanding of practical consequences on the level of an individual organization, as well as offers managerial suggestions for business school leaders. Future research avenues might include expanding the data set and continuing the analysis, to further analyze the accreditation process related phenomena in business schools around the different regions and business education markets globally.

5.1 Managerial implications

Our study of an individual business school’s accreditation process offers food for thought for deans, faculty and managers of business schools, especially those pursuing or maintaining a business accreditation. The study also offers insights for accreditation agencies, in shedding light to accreditation processes within individual schools, often not visible to outsiders.

For business school and accreditation agency leaders the key takeaways are as follows.

First, bringing in legitimate actors (accreditation agency and its representatives) from the outside of the organization is a powerful tool to promote change in a business school type organization. Both the accreditation standards represented by AACSB in the case school, as well as the accreditation agency representatives (e.g. the Peer Review team) are perceived as legitimate high-level actors, building trust and encouraging change and the needed developments within the school.

Second, the AACSB accreditation framework and standards can be used by BS leaders to promote cultural change, including new cooperation activities across disciplines, sub-units and individuals. An accreditation process is a collective effort, requiring participation of individuals in many group-based activities. Setting up of the AoL practices by the AACSB standards requirements is an excellent example of this. Within the case school, this led, e.g. to new initiatives in research cooperation across sub-units.

Third, introducing a FQ framework (and typically some kind of data collection and management system to administer the framework), as necessitated by the AACSB standards, increases transparency on each faculty member's performance as well as the accomplishments of the sub-units of the school in relation to each other and can enhance performance-orientation in the organization. Furthermore, as happened in the case school, the framework may introduce new types of individual performance requirements that had earlier been overlooked in an autonomy-driven organizational culture.

Finally, an organizational change, promoted by the introduction of accreditation standards, may also result in unexpected outcomes. This is due to the revelation of issues previously unsurfaced by the existence of dominant logic within the organization. Through this the culture – the school's way of doing things may change, as well as, e.g. the structures of the organization.

To conclude, entering an accreditation journey may result in logical and to be expected results, but also in outcomes that the organization and the individuals could not expect in advance. From the managerial perspective it is a remarkable possibility to implement and introduce new and empowering managerial practices and culture to the academic institution.

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