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The Power of Accreditation: Views of academics¹

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Accreditation in higher education is examined by drawing on the experiences of academics and managers in Britain, the United States and Canada. The qualitative comments are used to deconstruct the notion of accreditation. Accreditation processes, it is argued, are not benign or apolitical but represent a power struggle that impinges on academic freedom, while imposing an extensive bureaucratic burden in some cases. Accreditation can also act as a restraint on innovation and run counter to pedagogic improvement processes. There is a taken-for-granted underlying myth of an abstract authorising power, which legitimates the accreditation activity. This myth of benign guidance is perpetuated by the powerful as a control on those who provide the education and represents a shift of power from educators to bureaucrats.

Introduction

The paper draws on many years' experience of analysing external evaluations of quality and standards. It is important to note that quality and standards are not the same (Harvey & Knight, 1996). The analysis draws on the views of those who have been involved in accreditation in Britain, the United States and Canada: countries that have had forms of accreditation for decades. These views will, at a surface level, help to identify the perceived benefits and problems of accreditation. However, those same views, when critically deconstructed, will also raise fundamental issues about accreditation.

Overall, the view underpinning this paper is that Europe is rushing into accreditation and that the approach being taken is based on naïve views of what accreditation is and what it can achieve. More fundamentally, there is an underlying but unspecified and unexamined set of taken-for-granted that legitimate accreditation. Accreditation is neither neutral nor benign; it is not apolitical. Quite the contrary, the accreditation route is highly political and is fundamentally about a shift of power

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but a shift concealed behind new public management ideology cloaked in consumerist demand and European conformity. The paper intends to demonstrate this.

Also, accreditation is not a process somehow set aside from audit, assessment, or standards monitoring such as external examining. Accreditation uses methods and has purposes that overlap with audit, assessment and external examining.

Accreditation

Accreditation may be of programmes or institutions. Accreditation is the establishment or restatement of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, programme (i.e. composite of modules) or module of study.

Institutional Accreditation

Institutional accreditation effectively provides a licence to operate. It is usually based on an evaluation of whether the institution meets specified minimum (input) standards, such as staff qualifications, research activities, student intake and learning resources. It might also be based on an estimation of the potential for the institution to produce graduates that meet explicit or implicit academic standard or professional competence.

Institutional accreditation or re-accreditation, in Europe for example, is usually undertaken by national bodies, either government departments or government-initiated agencies or quangos, that make formal judgements on recognition. In the United States, with a large private sector, accreditation is a self-regulatory process of recognition of institutional viability by non-governmental voluntary associations. However, despite the voluntary nature of the process, there has been a funding link through eligibility for federal aid.

Programme Accreditation

Programmes may be accredited for their academic standing or they may be accredited to produce graduates with professional competence to practise, usually referred to as “professional accreditation”.

Accreditation (and re-accreditation) of courses in North America tends to focus on professional areas. The six non-governmental voluntary associations recognise provision in institutions that have been found to meet stated criteria of quality. In addition there are about fifty disciplinary associations that *inter alia* judge whether the study programmes appropriately prepare graduates to enter a profession.

This is very similar to the role played by the professional and regulatory bodies in the UK, who also control access to the profession by making accreditation of the programme a prerequisite for graduate entry. Perhaps more draconian than their US counterparts, some bodies in the UK set and grade their own examinations (Harvey & Mason, 1995).

The newer accreditation in Eastern European countries such as Hungary, the

Czech Republic and Slovakia has, at least initially, opted for programme accreditation in all academic fields (Westerheijden, 2001). This appears to be designed principally to provide academic rather than professional accreditation in the wake of the Soviet era. The mushrooming of new programme accreditation proposals in some Western European countries, linked to bachelor's–master's conversion, also predominantly appears to be academic accreditation.

Licence to Practise and Accreditation

There is a distinction between graduating from an accredited programme and having a licence to practise. In some cases, these are coincident, especially for graduates from some postgraduate programmes. Sometimes an undergraduate degree in a specified subject is a prerequisite for progression to a postgraduate course or diploma in that area. In some cases *any* good undergraduate degree is a prerequisite for further professional training; for example, in law in the UK there is a one-year postgraduate conversion course that non-law graduates take before joining the Law Society postgraduate qualification programme.

In many professional areas, graduation from an appropriately accredited academic programme is a preliminary step and full professional certification, and thus a licence to practise, follows only after some period of work experience.

Accreditation Criteria and Decisions

Accreditation has been described as a public statement that a certain threshold of quality has been achieved or surpassed (Campbell *et al.*, 2000; Kristoffersen, Sursock & Westerheijden, 1998). However, one might argue that accreditation is more about minimum standards (be they academic, competence, service or organisational (Harvey, 1999)) than about the quality of the process. Nonetheless, accreditation decisions are, or at least should be, based on transparent, agreed, predefined standards or criteria (El-Khawas, 1998; Sursock, 2000). However, not all accreditation criteria are as transparent as they might be, as some of the comments below suggest.

Accreditation is a binary state: either a programme or an institution is accredited, or it is not (Haakstad, 2001, p. 77). However, the absolute of this binary state is blurred or softened by a “holding” decision that permits, in effect, progression to accreditation. This ranges from accreditation subject to further action, through probationary accreditation to permission to reapply for accreditation.

Focus of Accreditation

Accreditation may be focused on inputs, process or outputs or any combination of these. Programme accreditation tends to focus on inputs such as staffing, programme resources and curricula design and content. Sometimes it addresses the teaching process and the level of student support. Occasionally programme accred-

itation explores outcomes such as graduate abilities and employability. In some cases, the medium of delivery might be the key focus, especially when it differs from the norm.

The US Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), for example, only gives new teacher training programmes pre-accreditation status. Full accreditation follows only when the academics make the case that the “professional education program has succeeded in preparing competent, caring, and qualified professional educators”, that is, once students have been through the programme. Here the focus for full accreditation is on the outputs of the programme. This is not untypical of professional programme accreditation undertaken in the UK or US (Harvey & Mason, 1995; Westerheijden, 2001).

Institutional accreditation tends to focus on the overall infrastructure, especially the physical space, along with the information technology (IT) and library resources and the staffing. It might address this from the point of view of the overall student learning experience. In addition, institutional accreditation might focus on financial arrangements and viability, governance and regulation and administrative support. Where an institution offers distance or online learning, the medium of delivery might be a focus of accreditation procedures. Increasingly, the US regional institutional accreditation agencies are focusing on outcomes and effectiveness.

Rationale

Accreditation is primarily about control of the sector; this is much more explicit in accreditation than in other external quality processes such as audit, assessment or external examining. Although accreditation involves compliance and indirect accountability, its main function is to maintain control of the sector and the programmes offered. Improvement is a spin-off from accreditation processes, which some agencies emphasise more than others. Institutional accreditation is designed to ensure that institutions of dubious merit do not become established as *bona fide* higher education institutions. Accreditation also monitors the sector to ensure that accredited institutions continue to fulfil the expectations of a university or college. A key concern is the need to control “for-profit” organisations, whose motivation is different from the public sector.

In many countries with a predominant public sector higher education system, there is little or no institutional accreditation *per se*, but there has been a growing tendency, fuelled by new public management ideology, to require institutions to demonstrate accountability for public funds. Although this is not the same as accreditation, in the extreme, failure to exhibit satisfactory accountability can result in “de-accreditation” in the form of closure or merger of unsatisfactory institutions, as has happened in the further education college sector in the UK.

Accreditation at the programme level is also about control. In Eastern Europe, academic accreditation of programmes is about ensuring adequate standards, a function fulfilled, in effect, in the UK (and some other Commonwealth countries) by the external examining system. Although the latter is not accreditation *per se*,

unsatisfactory examiners' reports might lead to the closure or sanctioning of a programme either by the institution management or as a result of other forms of external monitoring such as external subject review or academic audit.

Professional accreditation is even more about ostensive control. It is about an external agency maintaining control of a subject area that links into professional employment, especially where to practise requires certification separate from academic qualification. Although such bodies provide guidelines with which successful accreditees comply, these guidelines are manifestations of the organisation's control of the sector. Sometimes this control is grounded in legislation, such as the British General Medical Council's regulatory function. Sometimes, despite having no regulatory power, the professional body is so well established in the profession that it is impossible to gain work in some areas without it, such as chartered engineering status to work for British local authorities.

Accreditation Methods and Mechanisms

Accreditation involves a set of procedures designed to gather evidence to enable a decision to be made about whether the institution or programme should be granted accredited status. The onus is on the applicants to prove their suitability; that they fulfil minimum criteria. Methods by which this evidence is gathered overlap with methods used in audits, assessments and external examining. The component methods include self-assessments, document analysis, scrutiny of performance indicators, peer visits, inspections, specially constituted panels, delegated responsibility to internal panels often via proxy entrustment to external examiners or advisors, stakeholder surveys (such as student satisfaction surveys, alumni and employer surveys), direct intervention (such as direct observation of classroom teaching or grading of student work). Indeed, although accreditation is distinct from audit, assessment and external examining, there is a degree of overlap in the object, focus, rationale and methods of these different external processes (Harvey, 2002; Stensaker, 2003) (Figure 1).

Nuances

Accreditation has three nuances. First, accreditation is a process applied to applicant organisations. Second, "accreditation" is the label that institutions or programmes may acquire as a result of the accreditation procedures. Third, underpinning the first two, accreditation is an "abstract notion of a formal authorising power" (Haakstad, 2001, p. 77), enacted via official decisions about recognition (the accreditation process). It is this underpinning abstraction that gives accreditation its legitimacy. Ironically, this abstraction, frequently taken for granted, is not a traditionally intrinsic aspect of accreditation. As Jones (2002, p. 1) has pointed out, "The original audience for accreditation was the academy itself. The process did not arise in response to concerns about quality expressed by external audiences."

This third nuance chimes with the issue, alluded to throughout the foregoing, of

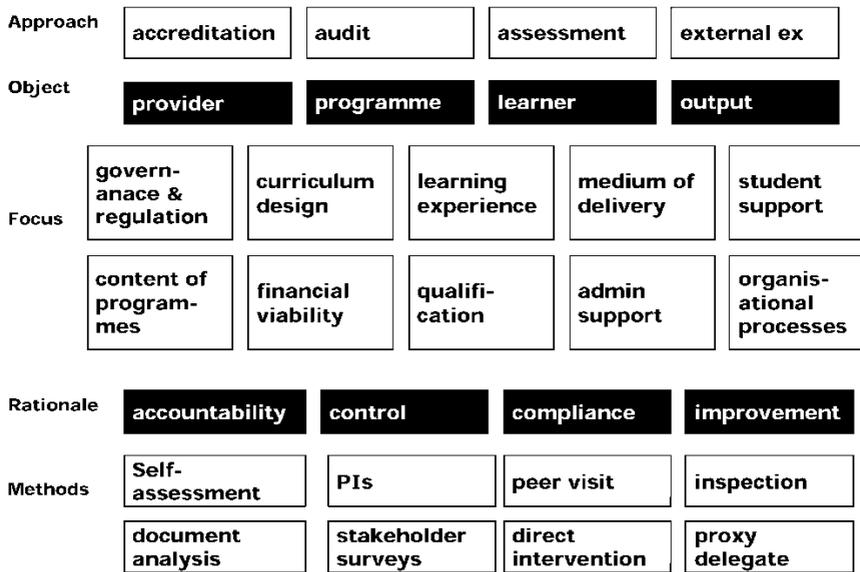


Figure 1. External quality monitoring: Approach, object, focus, rationale and methods. (Adapted from Harvey 2002).

the underpinning ideology and politics of accreditation. It leads to an investigation of the power relationships embodied in the accreditation process. An examination of the perceptions of those who have engaged with accreditation of various types reveals surface views about the benefits and drawbacks. A second-order examination of the comments will, though, also uncover the political and ideological dimensions.

Professional and regulatory bodies (PRBs) play three roles (Harvey & Mason, 1995). First, they are set up to safeguard the public interest. This is what gives them their legitimacy. However, professional bodies also represent the interest of the professional practitioners and here they act as a professional association or trade union (including legitimating restrictive practices), or as a learned society contributing to continuous professional development. Third, the professional or regulatory body represents its own self-interest: the organisations act to maintain their own privileged and powerful position as a controlling body. This is where control legitimated by public interest becomes confounded by control based on self-interest.

Views of Participants

The following views are derived from what little literature there is on participants' views of accreditation and the responses of 53 academics and administrators who have been involved in accreditation processes. This group are mainly from the UK, with some US, Canadian and Australian input. The qualitative perceptions were gathered online via email correspondence (including follow-up discussions to clarify specific areas). The majority of respondents comment on subject accreditation rather than institutional processes and their comments relate to 24 different disci-

pline areas, as well as accreditation of learning and teaching practices *per se*. Quotes are included but for reasons of confidentiality the source is assigned a number, and the remainder of the reference relates to country and the subject area the respondent is talking about. As far as possible, the quote is contextualised, without making it too long, and at times ostensibly deconstructed, using Barthesian semiological notions of denotation, connotation and “myth”, the latter informed by prevailing ideology (Barthes, [1957] 1970). Symbols (signs, words, gestures, fashion) have a surface, first-order, denotation. “Rose” is a word denoting a kind of flower. But also symbols connote something else (a rose may connote passion). The second-order connotation is contextual: sometimes a rose might connote the British Labour Party. But underlying each connotation is a third-order myth. A rose connoting the British Labour party represents the myth of benign nationalism. Others have taken Barthes further and more pointedly linked the “myth” to prevailing ideological frameworks (Hall, 1973).

Institutional accreditation is more of an issue in the US than the UK and a general overview of the US process suggests

The institutional reaction is varied. Highly selective institutions or programs are less likely to be affected (they always pass). Institutions and programs applying for the first time are most concerned about winning approval. ... a great deal depends on the caliber of the external review panel and their ability and sensitivity. (R41, US, general)

Programme accreditation in the UK is enormously varied and about a hundred regulatory and professional bodies are involved in some form of accreditation of higher education programmes in British higher education institutions (Harvey & Mason, 1995).

Of our 23 departments 18 have some form of accreditation by PRBs and some departments have a great deal more than others. Over the last five years, accreditation appears to have grown enormously and seems to be assuming greater importance. We probably average about 6–10 accreditations per year. (R44, UK, general)

Necessity: Employment and marketing

Many respondents were of the view that professional accreditation was either necessary for professional employment or enhanced the job prospects of their graduates. However, for most respondents this necessity was closely linked to a concern that the marketability of programmes in some areas is closely tied to accredited status and that failure to achieve accreditation would be problematic:

My impression from the central administration is that accreditation (the kitemark rather than the process) is highly valued: students are looking for an accredited programme, therefore the absence or loss of accreditation would cause great anxiety from the point of view of student recruitment. (R16, UK, engineering)

For some respondents, programme accreditation was not just necessary or a marketing device to get more students but something that attracted better students.

The recognition element can be substantial, both in terms of institutional internal

recognition (= if accredited, must be good, so we'll support it) but especially in attracting increasingly capable students from a wider pool of applicants. We see that gradual development in our programs. Sometimes, it is simply essential for your students to be able to enter the field being prepared for without extra hurdles. (R46, Canada, psychology)

One US respondent, though, asked, "were accreditation not tied to federal funding or professional licensure, would your institution or program seek it anyway?" (R33, US, general). Another US respondent seems to suggest that perhaps they would:

I think the self-study provides an opportunity for the institution to conduct a formative evaluation and identify both strengths and areas for improvement. The accrediting team can offer a more summative evaluation and an objective external perspective that can potentially strengthen the institution. (R36, US, general)

The assumption here is that there is an objective external view that is the province of the external accrediting body. The "objectivity", though, may be tempered by the controlling function of the organisation, itself possibly a function of its own self-interest, as noted above.

Uniformity

A significant and often repeated rationale for programme accreditation in some areas is uniformity across the sector.

My personal view is that it is a valuable process in that it means that to some degree a psychology degree means roughly the same thing across the sector. Psychology is a broad field—without accreditation it is likely that many institutions would have addressed only selected aspects of the field. (R17, UK, psychology)

The presumption is that uniformity is important and desirable and thus that all courses should cover the same content. This assumes that covering the same course content equates with uniformity of learning and understanding of the subject area. The question remains, though, whether the demand for uniformity is the professional body safeguarding the public, representing its members' interests or reinforcing its own status.

The assumption is that there is an external guiding hand that knows what's best and that academia has to conform to it. An alternative view is less benign.

Sometimes it seems to be about how powerful the agencies are—the professional body or the institution and I've had experience of it going both ways ... In relation to psychology, it initially resulted in inflexibility in relation to residential schools—mandatory to get a named degree. And this disadvantaged women with childcare needs. We then renegotiated after much feedback and because student voted with their feet (didn't sign up) and we then found money to provide an alternative, and an on-line experience was developed. (R8, UK, psychology)

Do we read this as safeguarding of the public or is this inflexibility born of the society invoking its public security mission to reinforce its political power and omniscience?

What would it matter if undergraduate psychology students on different degree courses took different syllabuses taught in different ways? Tony Gale (2002), former Honorary General Secretary of the British Psychology Society (BPS), argues that, given that a first degree in psychology does not give you a licence to practise, the society accredits undergraduate courses for political reasons that have little to do with public security or pedagogy.

In 1967 rebellious heads of department met at Brown's Hotel in Mayfair, to protest against the Society's [BPS] move towards a national curriculum. The Society wanted to specify not only a curriculum but also the teaching time allocated to every element in it. The heads argued that university departments should maintain their autonomy and decide themselves what and how much they should teach. They believed the bureaucratic tail was seeking to wag the academic dog. But they lost the battle. For many years the Society has accredited the psychology degree and has awarded GBR (the graduate basis for registration) to approved degrees. (Gale, 2002, p. 356)

Academic or Practitioner

This leads to the relative influence of academics and practitioners in each other's realms. "There is often a clear tension between academic priorities and professional ones in say engineering or social work" (R30, UK, general).

I think they [accreditation processes] are valuable when:

- they focus on the professional rather than the academic side of the programme (though it has to be acknowledged that the boundary is usually fuzzy);
- they explicitly acknowledge that the students are being educated and not just trained for a profession;
- they are conducted by peers (i.e. have at least one academic on the panel alongside the practitioners);
- they ask to see only strictly essential documentation;
- they are willing to respect and take on trust the expertise and judgements of, for example, external examiners.

They can be harmful and irritating, though, when the opposite of any of the above happens. I think it is a matter of particular concern when professional bodies try to overrule academic judgements on academic matters, for example, curriculum design and content and assessment of academic aspects of the course. (R35, UK, speech and language pathology, pharmacy, engineering)

The principle concern here seems to be the perceived infringement of practitioners into the academic realm, notably requiring specific course content, making demands about teaching and learning approaches, as was noted with psychology, and even questioning assessment judgments.

For example on your accounting degree, they [the professional body] require specific areas to be covered in, say, economics but the economist who teaches the subject may not think so and this at times causes a problem. However, if you take the professional requirements for recognition to be the minimum standards then it might be useful. However, quite often the professional standards are not [about minimum standards]

and they focus on ensuring that students do not get through too easily rather than requiring them to have well-rounded development. (R4, UK, accounting)

The tail wagging dog analogy, used by Gale (2002) above, recurs in comments of three other respondents:

RICS, like so many other institutions, seem to be allowing the bureaucratic tail to wag the dog. (R27, UK, fine arts valuation)

We had a particular problem with one Engineering institution ... and we got into a tail wagging dog situation. (R16, UK engineering)

Meeting awarding body requirements can galvanise centres into improving numerous aspects of their programmes, but can also end up with the tail wagging the dog. (R3, UK, general)

It is curious that these respondents should all use exactly the same phrase about programme accreditation, implying a clear perception in the sector about confusion of the locus of decision making. It is also interesting that the analogy is used rather than any direct statement made about where the power should lie. Indeed, only one respondent, an administrator, actually directly talked about accrediting bodies and academics struggling for power. It is almost as though it is a taboo subject. Even the different political agendas embedded in the accreditation process rarely seem to get publicly aired. The following is unusual in being blunt about the politics:

I have been involved in visiting boards myself on behalf of the RIBA [Royal Institute of British Architects] and Architects Registration Board and actually chaired one to [another university]. When I was chairman I suddenly became aware of how many hidden agendas were in existence and as we rejected the views of both the RIBA Education chairman and their full-time officer as to what we should say about the school (before the visit took place), I was not asked to chair a visit again. (R9, UK, architecture)

The tension occurs mainly in three areas; programme content, programme delivery and bureaucratic requirements. The issues around delivery are particularly about contested control and consequent inhibition of innovation. Bureaucracy is as much about synchronicity of processes as it is about burdensome workloads and unnecessary requirements.

Content

The issue over programme content is not so much the specification of what subjects should be taught but how restrictive that specification is perceived. Academics tend to think that externals/practitioners need only specify what is an essential core that would enable a student to become a practitioner and then leave it to the academy to develop a coherent educational programme delivered in a manner that they consider is pedagogically sound.

The APA [American Psychological Association] procedure invites programs to define

themselves then justify their choices and show they achieve their goals. I find this much superior to an accreditation process that says your program must have X, Y and Z in it. (R46, Canada, educational psychology)

Delivery and Innovation

Some respondents thought there was potential in accreditation to rethink and develop innovative ideas.

We have been a leader in program innovation ... We have found that our accreditation agencies have been quite supportive of these efforts and, in fact, have provided a wonderful forum for us to share its innovations with the broader academic community ... We have found that early restrictions provided by accrediting bodies experienced (+/- 10 year back) have made way for support of meaningful program innovation. (R50, US, management)

However, despite the potential there was no guarantee, for various reasons, that this would happen. The structural constraints and the membership of visiting panels impacted on innovation.

Depends entirely on the organisation and indeed the panel who visits. My experience has been RIBA good and developmental, as are RTPI [Royal Town Planning Institute]. The Institute of Environmental Health—a real pain—they are policing things not developing. The opportunity [to rethink programmes] again depends—especially on the nature of the guidelines and degrees of discretion. Environmental Health is compliance; the others much more developmental. (R7, UK, architecture and environmental health)

Respondents were particularly concerned about situations where accreditors went beyond content and made requirements about delivery:

The Geological Society had just taken upon itself a new role as watchdog over professional qualifications for geologists, and [my university] was in the vanguard ... We believed that we had to do it to retain credibility and that it was indeed just a hoop to jump through. We even see accreditation as a force for stasis, because it prevents us from accrediting innovative new courses that we might want to run (problems with rigid fieldwork requirements, etc.). (R43, UK, geology)

The terminology here is instructive: “watchdog” and “hoop to jump through” imply not only the compliance requirement of the latter but also that the organisation set itself up as a controller of the discipline although no evident public interest is served by the requirements.

Other respondents also implied that the control function inhibits innovation:

All your questions triggered immediate recognition. Particularly the danger of constraining new developments and fixing a national curriculum in concrete. (R18, UK, psychology)

At present any innovations I make, which I see as positive, I must always share but not in a constructive manner ... more in an “asking permission” type situation. I can see that this might restrict others who may see that they must continue to comply in a middle-of-the-road fashion. (R37, UK, education)

In seeking permission the last respondent denotes a process of supplication. However, the second-order connotation is a lack of trust of the academic and the underlying Barthesian, third-order, “myth” is that there is a body that indeed has the knowledge and wisdom to grant permission.

Some respondents cited the variability of the visiting panel as a reason for inconsistency in effecting innovatory change:

The RIBA visit was always a clubby sort of thing and you were either in or out of the club. The panel coming to visit us next week is almost entirely made up of thrusting young professional climbers from the south east of England, who have the time to be on endless RIBA committees. They will have little idea of how we are working in the hothouse of education today and almost certainly will never have heard of the RAE! They will concentrate almost exclusively on “Design” and ignore the rest of the course. (R9, UK, architecture)

A holistic view was provided by a respondent who argued that the accreditation process was cyclical and this impacted on the innovative potential of accreditation.

The bottom line is that there seems to be a cycle—first the educational process gets behind “real life”, if the Body is on the ball it writes a report, generates a new specification, etc. The profession’s education process catches up, the Body can then stagnate for a bit, and so on. [Innovation] depends on the Body and which bit of the cycle you are in. Until 1993, nothing much had changed in medical education for 100 years. A relatively radical document changed all that. Problem-based learning is alive and well and so are graduate entry courses. But much of that comes from government imperatives—new medical schools, workforce issues, etc. (R5, UK/Australia, medicine)

Here, the external body is reduced to anything but knowledgeable and wise. Indeed it is seen as essentially pragmatic and propelled into action by historical necessity.

Bureaucracy and Burden

A recurrent theme was the amount of work involved in some programme accreditation. A problem accentuated by rigidity of requirements, perceived at best as heavy-handed bureaucracy and at worst as an unnecessary degree of control.

Well, it is obviously a bit of a “chore”, especially when the PRB insists on receiving documentation in its own prescribed formats and won’t accept “substitute” documents, addressing the same issues or needs, that the university or programme already has for its own purposes. But we are working towards trying to come to some mutual understanding with PRBs on this, and trying to find ways of involving PRBs (a representative) at relevant in-house “quality” events such as (re-)validations, reviews, audits or whatever as an alternative to a separate formal visit, for example. This sometimes works. (R22, UK, various subjects)

Others, noting the amount of work required, were less negative in the connotations of their remarks:

Yes valuable—although one has to put up with the inevitable requirements for oodles of paperwork (since we had lots of that, it was not problematic!). (R32, UK, education)

The connotation of “oodles” is benign; someone who has oodles of food has a joyous surfeit and this is re-presented in the parenthetical comment. The implication being that, if the process is worthwhile, the paperwork requirement is an appropriate price to pay.

Going further, one respondent talking of the process in biomedical sciences noted,

I cannot think of any alternative procedure that could ever be as effective as a one-day intensive look at the syllabus, facilities (laboratories, library, etc.) and staffing. This is streamlined, mutually beneficial to all concerned, encourages innovation, and yet is acceptable to the IBMS [Institute of Biomedical Science] and the Health Professions Council. (R21, UK, biomedical sciences)

Despite the apparent compatibility in the biomedical sciences setting, an issue that annoyed many respondents was that of synchronisation between external agencies:

Here I do have strong views. I think the accreditations institutions, RAE, QAA, and anyone else subjecting the universities to continuous assessment processes should agree once and for all—in consultation with universities—the format in which information should be kept and presented for all purposes. Then it is just the question of pressing appropriate button (literally on the screen) to retrieve information for a particular exercise. We do have all necessary information all the time and yet every time an assessment takes place we spend weeks or months preparing the documentation. (R2, UK, engineering)

The lack of synchronisation and the incompatible documentation are indicative of the desire for different agencies to control their corner of the quality and standards monitoring process and, again, one might ask whether this is in the public interest or the monitoring organisations’ self-interest?

Alliance

Curiously, at first sight, given the tensions explored above, academics sometimes make use of the professional or regulatory body to support their own ends. Knowing the power of accreditation in the marketplace, they ally themselves with the professional body. Sometimes this alliance is used to conserve existing practices and sometimes to make demands on institutional resources. Gale (2002) noted that

as the teaching of psychology spread from a handful of old universities to the whole higher education system, heads have found Society accreditation a useful political tool. They have used the threat of withdrawal of accreditation by the Society as a means of securing enhanced facilities for their undergraduate programmes.

Respondents on both sides of the Atlantic remarked on this:

There are some disadvantages to accreditation. It is expensive and sometimes accrediting teams will make recommendations that cause money to be shifted from unaccredited programs to accredited ones so that the accredited ones can retain their accreditation. This is an unfortunate consequence. (R34, US, general)

[Programme teams] find professional body accreditation provides a “bulwark” against

senior management initiatives to reduce resources. (R1, UK, personnel and staff development)

Accreditation is most valued by those who are closest to not having it (the marginal) and by those who know how to use it creatively to conduct innovative self-evaluations or to strong-arm funders with “what the accreditors say we absolutely need to retain accreditation”. (R33, US, general)

The apparent curious alliance is resolved relatively easily. Not only is this a manipulative ploy based on academic self-interest, using whatever support comes to hand, especially in resource-straitened times, but professional bodies are not mutually exclusive of academics. Indeed, they sometimes seem to be controlled by them:

Some employers seemed to be critical of the actions of the Engineering professional bodies in raising the academic requirements for full chartered status, partly to enhance the status of their profession (in relation to other professions) ... For some employers, the fact that the engineering institutions (i.e. the professional bodies) are dominated by academics reinforces this emphasis on educational needs rather than the needs of the industry. (Little *et al.*, 2003)

However, there is another element of the alliance between accreditors and academia that is extremely important in the United States. The accrediting agencies provide a unified voice for higher education in discussions with government.

All of the regional accreditors, as well as the Council on Higher Education Accreditation have offices in Washington and they, along with the national associations like ACE, AAHE, AAC&U, AASCU get together to lobby on behalf of institutions. It is much more effective for that group that lives in Washington to speak for the more than 3,000 colleges and universities in the country—it is hard for them to speak with anything like one voice! ... So the accreditors appear before Congressional committees and hear all the criticism of higher education and try to blunt it as effectively as they can. This is how they become the first line of defense for colleges and universities as we deal with the federal government. (R34, US, general)

Accreditors thus play an important role as a windbreak for institutions against the changing political winds of fortune. It ensures a degree of autonomy for American institutions in the face of a legislature that, for example, increasingly wants to control and judge the outputs of higher education in the same simplistic manner that it applies to high school education.

Specialist Activity

What emerges from the responses is that accreditation is a game for specialists; it is not something that engages the majority of staff or, to any significant extent, exercises the students. For the latter, accreditation means the kitemark rather than the process. It is about uniformity of curricula, as one medical student noted: “we all need to be doing the same syllabus”. Part of the controlling element of accreditation is that it does not engage everyone and retains an element of mystification.

For my colleagues and students this will be a mysterious ordeal, which they barely

understand except that schools are closed down or get into serious trouble as a result of bad visit reports. (R9, UK, architecture)

There is also poor training and awareness of professional body issues given to mainstream lecturing staff. (R47, UK, health)

Power

Accreditation is a struggle for power and it is not a benign process. Nor does it engage all those involved. It is also not a pure process of identifying those who have met (and continue to meet) minimum criteria to join the club. The evidence from the UK and North America shows clearly that accreditation is just one of a raft of ongoing processes that demand accountability and compliance as managerialism continues to bite into academic autonomy and undermine the skills and experience of educators. Accreditation is yet another layer alongside assessment, audit and other forms of standards and output monitoring.

The Accreditation–Improvement Paradox

The quality debate in higher education has, for a decade, attempted to engage with the apparent incompatibility, in practice, of the accountability function of external quality monitoring and the hoped-for improvement function (Vroeijenstijn, 1995; Middlehurst & Woodhouse, 1995). This is mirrored in the analyses of voluntary accreditation in the United States. Graham, Lyman and Trow (1995) argued that the accreditation process is fundamentally flawed because the process of certification and assurance to the public of the soundness of the institution's practices is incompatible with the improvement of an institution's performance based on its continual assessment and evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses. The certification function invariably overwhelms improvement because the process leads to the production of a public relations document that overstates the institution's strengths and conceals its weaknesses. This is precisely the opposite of what is needed if the improvement function is to be served by accreditation.

Although the surge towards accreditation in many parts of Europe is not being delegated to self-interest membership bodies in the main, there remain issues of bureaucratic self-interest. Self-perpetuation and a growing desire to control are characteristic of all types of quality monitoring agencies, especially those with control remits. Furthermore, as the American experience shows, accreditation is not distinct from quality issues and there is nothing to suggest that accreditation will not be wrapped round with audit, assessment and other forms of quality evaluation. As the edifice grows and becomes more specific and directive, so academic alienation increases; staff perceive a lack of trust and their own academic judgement being undermined. The resultant perception of deskilling and diminution of autonomy and freedom to make pedagogic decisions creates a context of compliance and, ultimately, as has been seen in other areas of quality control, game playing,

manipulation and subversion of the process (Barrow, 1999). Improvement is a long way down the agenda, if it is really on it at all.

Most frustration is expressed at the loss of control of the pedagogic situation and the potential for improvement. Although educators may not be aware of the specific concerns of a professional practice workplace, practitioners are equally unaware of the learning process. Teachers, if not “up to date”, understand the principles of the professional realm they teach about; it is far from evident that professionals representing accrediting agencies are so well versed in the principles of pedagogy.

Conclusion

However, the concern is not so much whether accreditation is a benign protector of the public interest or a process to sustain the self-interest of the accrediting agency. Nor, indeed, whether processes are bureaucratic or restrictive and inhibit innovation. Important as these concerns are, they are indicative of a more deep-seated ideological presumption summed up in Jon Haakstad’s (2001) third nuance of an “abstract notion of a formal authorising power”. Repeatedly we saw references to jumping through hoops, tails wagging dogs, asking permission and the like. Even one of the strongest supporters of accreditation, who noted that “a one-day intensive look at the syllabus, facilities and staffing... is streamlined, mutually beneficial to all concerned and encourages innovation”, made it clear that the process needed to be “acceptable” to the professional and regulatory bodies.

The underlying, third-level, myth is that of the abstract authorising power that legitimates the accreditation activity. Yet, although taken for granted, this myth of benign guidance is perpetuated by the powerful as a control on those who provide the education. Accreditation is fundamentally about a shift of power from educators to managers and bureaucrats. It accentuates the trends already evident in the UK towards “delegated accountability” (Harvey & Knight, 1996) but reverses the delegation trend in most of the rest of the Europe. To understand staff perceptions of accreditation, the starting point of this paper, requires a holistic view that sets the control function of accreditation within the wider context of higher education as a public good. It is necessary to dig beyond the surface legitimations of European unity and consumerist rhetoric to reveal the power processes and the ideology that legitimate the control function of accreditation. Only then can we approach accreditation openly and critically.

Note

1. This paper is based on a more detailed presentation by the author at the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education Seminar on Accreditation in Rome in December 2003.

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