

# Using international accreditation in higher education to effect changes in organisational culture: A case study from a Turkish university

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## Abstract

International accreditation is now a significant yet controversial issue in global higher education. This case study looked at the experience of an intensive English language preparatory programme within a university in Turkey going through an accreditation by a foreign institution, and assessed to what extent the project managed to foster changes in its organisational culture. While it was clear that most felt the accreditation had a significant impact, there was much less clear evidence of changes in organisational culture.

## Keywords

Accreditation, culture, education, international, organisational change

## Introduction

Accreditation of educational institutions and courses now forms a key part of quality assurance around the world (Stensaker, 2011). It was in this context that the private university in Turkey in which I work sought accreditation in 2010 of its intensive English language programme (hereinafter referred to as the Prep Class). As part of an overall initiative to improve standards and to help internationalise the university, management decided to pursue international accreditation of the Prep Class by the US-based agency, the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA). At the heart of the CEA's accreditation procedures are the various standards against which applicants are measured by completing a self-study report and undergoing a two and a half day site visit. These standards are promoted as benchmarks of good professional practice and as such form a threshold of quality which students, staff and third parties can trust (CEA, 2014). In December 2011, my university's Prep Class became the first programme in Turkey to be accredited by the CEA.

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As the leader of the steering committee which managed the accreditation process, I witnessed many developments within the Prep Class which I considered to be improvements. Nevertheless, I was at times dismayed in equal measure by the apparent failure of accreditation to effect change. I also had my doubts as to whether the initiative achieved substantive permanent changes in the culture of the Prep Class. I therefore set out to investigate how much success the accreditation process had in inculcating changes in the organisational culture of my institution.

This study asked the following question: is using international accreditation in higher education an effective way to promote changes in organisational culture? In seeking to answer this question, I aimed to relate the experience of the accreditation of my Prep Class to some of the general ideas outlined in research about accreditation and change management in education, as well as to provide, albeit in a small way, some findings that could be useful for other institutions in the same or similar contexts undergoing such initiatives.

## **Literature review**

### *Accreditation in education*

There remains some doubt as to what exactly accreditation means or stands for. The websites of the various accrediting bodies overwhelmingly mention 'quality' and 'standards' (see, for example, CEA, n.d.; EAQUALS, n.d.; QAA, n.d.). Yet the meaning of these terms and how accreditation is supposed to provide them is the subject of much debate. At first sight, quality may be equated with a sense of excellence or best practice – even with a notion of perfection. Although the discourse of many accrediting bodies implies this to a greater or lesser extent, the use of defined standards in accreditation schemes connotes more often a sense of minimum threshold or fitness for purpose (Harvey, 2002, 2004).

The most damning criticism of accreditation is reserved for its apparent inability to have a positive effect on outcomes in an educational context. In their study of higher education teachers in the Netherlands and Flanders, Van Kemenade and Hardjono (2009) conclude that ultimately accreditation has little effect on improving the quality of education. Moreover, it creates significant bureaucratic obligations and takes up too much time. Many others bemoan the lack of real evidence for the success of accreditation in educational improvement (e.g. Shah, 2012; Tamir and Wilson, 2005).

It has been claimed that improvement, in the context of accreditation, is simply something that is assumed to happen if institutions comply with the standards of the accrediting body (Harvey, 2002). As such, accreditation becomes process-dominated and tending towards what can be documented as high quality rather than quality itself (Engebretsen et al., 2012). Moreover, compliance with a set of standards promotes mere conformity rather than necessarily high-quality outcomes (Engebretsen et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, for all the negative issues raised with regard to accreditation, there are positive elements that some have noted in the literature. Most accreditation schemes within the education field involve a period of self-study by the institution with reference to a set of standards, which act as a benchmark or quality threshold, however ill-defined that notion may be in reality. This 'duality' between the self-study and the standards is the context for the institution to embark on an extended period of self-learning (Fertig, 2007).

### *Change management and accreditation*

One thing that many agree on is that genuine educational innovation that has lasting positive effects is extremely challenging (Fullan, 2003). It is possible to view accreditation as a whole programme

of systemic educational innovation. By working through standards during the self-study process, institutions have the opportunity to design and implement a suite of individual initiatives in the hope that improvement occurs. Done correctly, there is a chance that such systemic reform can be a powerful tool (Supovitz and Snyder Taylor, 2005).

In examining this, one needs to consider the overall approach to innovation. Most approaches can be categorised as being on a continuum between a 'fidelity' approach (100% faithful to the original plan), and a 'mutual-adaptation' approach (subject to changes by reference to local context) (Fullan, 2003). As a method of bringing about improvements, accreditation cannot be achieved with either a pure fidelity or pure mutual-adaptation approach. By way of example, the CEA (2013) notes that its accreditation scheme 'is not intended to impose a rigid uniformity of educational objectives, operations, or theoretical content upon a program' (p. 15). Yet at the same time an institution must, for instance, carry out systematic performance evaluations of staff in accordance with Faculty Standard 7 (CEA, 2014: 16). Although the details of the policy on this are left to the institution, it would not be acceptable for it to decide, say, that formal systems of performance evaluation are not an effective tool in the context of that institution and a more informal, holistic approach should be adopted. The balance between these two poles in any change management project can often be ill-defined and is a particular difficulty in accreditation. The problem is compounded by the fact that the change agents implementing these innovations to render their institution compliant do not necessarily understand precisely how much leeway they have in interpreting requirements.

This raises the issue of change agents generally, who are identified as key but problematic components in any innovation (Wallace, 2003). In an accreditation, the change agents are likely to be a small cadre of experienced staff who are given the task of steering the institution through the process. One of the cited reasons for the failure of accreditation to contribute to genuine improvements in education is that these change agents are responsible for the 'peer exploitation' identified as a negative element in accreditation (Van Kemenade and Hardjono, 2010: 263). However, accreditation is not only used as a framework in which to improve institutions. It also forms part of the ever-increasing globalised battle for students and qualified staff. Accredited status acts as a kite mark (Harvey, 2004) and is a key weapon in internationalisation for many institutions. For universities such as my own, it opens opportunities for student and faculty exchanges with foreign institutions, as well as acting as a 'guarantee' of quality where otherwise prospective foreign students would have almost no objective and reliable information on the programme.

Some have also characterised these developments in terms of the commercialisation of education. Deem defines this as 'new managerialism' by which neo-liberal economic and business practices have gradually permeated United States and European education and are now spreading over the globe (see Deem, 2001; Deem and Brehony, 2005; Deem et al., 2008). It could be said that globalisation has helped to create an atmosphere in which standards promulgated by accrediting bodies may be seen as instruments of this 'new managerialism'. Some even go so far as to argue that accreditation is a form of cultural imperialism in which 'Western' concepts are being exported globally through international accreditation (Hou, 2011).

### *Accreditation and change management – the centrality of culture*

At the heart of much change management literature and central to this study is the issue of culture. Culture is defined by Dimmock and Walker (2000) as the beliefs, attitudes and values common to a group of people. Many commentators measure the impact of an educational innovation according to how well the culture of an organisation can be changed. In other words, the true measure of success is whether teachers' beliefs and values are changed (Fullan, 2003).

In this regard, using accreditation as a way of achieving lasting change would appear to be somewhat counter-intuitive since it is repeated time and again in the literature that one of the principal criticisms of accreditation is that it focuses too heavily on process rather than on improvements at classroom level. Moreover, the idea that top-down impositions of ideas on individuals are demotivating and unlikely to have the desired effect has become almost received wisdom in education. However, Guskey (2002) challenges the idea that teachers' beliefs and values need to be changed *before* there can be practical improvements in the classroom, and instead proposes that commitment to a change will happen only *after* teachers have seen it working in practice. If Guskey is correct, accreditation could potentially provide an effective structure for change by setting out a framework in which there are relatively clear steps to take for compliance with standards (without being 100% prescriptive). Following this, teachers may see improvements and then 'buy into' some of the prevailing ideas promulgated by the professional body promoting accreditation.

Guskey's work is echoed by research conducted by Rowan and Miller (2007), who examined various control strategies for implementing change. They found that the greater the control by external experts of an innovation, the more identifiable changes were recorded. In the light of this research and contrary to other criticism, it could be that a well-managed and suitable accreditation project could indeed lead to changes, which themselves could prompt positive cultural developments along the lines suggested by Guskey (2002).

Finally with regard to the cultural aspects of accreditation, we turn to the subject of whether cultural values promoted by an accrediting body in one context can be successful in another context. Any discussion of culture on a national or organisational basis is fraught with difficulties. Nevertheless, it is difficult to reject outright the idea that there exist a number of apparent cultural differences between various regions around the globe. Indeed, a number of studies concerned with English language teaching have reported such differences either directly or indirectly (see e.g. Cheng and Dörnyei, 2007; Morrison and Tang Fun Hei, 2002; Wette and Barkhuizen, 2009).

The work on culture of Dimmock and Walker (2000) has, justifiably, come under attack for generalisation and stereotyping as well as for using flawed research. However, in the Turkish context, it is hard to ignore some of the ideas in their work, which do appear to offer help in explaining some of the problematic issues which arose out of my institution's accreditation. Turkey is a deeply patriarchal and hierarchical society. While its history of military interventions into politics gives a political context for some of Turkey's current problems with state centralisation of education, the whole history of the republic is one of state-controlled education with a strict hierarchy within its administration (Çayır, 2009).

In addition, the importance of good working relationships between colleagues is striking in Turkish organisations, which supersedes almost all other considerations (there is no Turkish word for 'colleague' – only the word 'friend' is used). Tradition also continues to play an important role in society and this has to some extent been used as a tool by the state and post-coup regimes to promulgate Turkish 'national' values and identity. Therefore, on the face of it there are possibly quite deep differences between the Turkish context and the culture from which the standards of an accrediting body such as CEA emanate.

## Summary

Accreditation is a controversial topic and has come under considerable criticism, with its credentials as a tool for fostering improvement being seriously challenged (though there is scant empirical data either way in this regard). Moreover, while educational change management literature confirms the notion that change will only occur when the ethos or culture of individual teachers changes, there are arguments that accreditation can be used as a way of kick-starting this process.

Finally, there is much debate as to the importance of the cultural aspects of the accreditation movement. The fact that accreditation is increasingly carried out on an international basis means that themes concerning societal culture and the apparent imposition of 'Western' neo-liberal educational and management values onto the rest of the world must also be considered.

## **Methodology**

### *Research strategy and design*

A naturalistic and interpretive approach was taken to the research question: is using international accreditation in higher education an effective way to promote changes in organisational culture? The approach to data collection was largely qualitative, although some quantitative data were also collected which were principally used to assist in the subsequent collection of qualitative data. I decided to use a case study approach as a good way to address situations where staff felt conflicted by accreditation, appreciating some of the good things it was perceived to have brought but questioning others. The purpose of the case study was to test or at least illuminate some of the themes raised in the literature and this could be achieved notwithstanding the fact that the context of this case study did not fit completely with the contexts of other institutions.

As the researcher, my own position in the institution almost certainly had an effect on the research. As the leader of the steering committee tasked with managing the accreditation application, I took a frontline role in promoting the project and managing work streams. Moreover, by the time the case study was implemented, I was the Academic Assistant Director of the School of Foreign Languages. This meant that participants in the case study were being interviewed by a more senior management representative with an investment in the project, which carried with it the risk that responses were conditioned by what participants thought I wanted to hear. I addressed these issues explicitly with participants during the case study. In reality, there was no alternative to conducting the research as an 'insider', and the disadvantages of this could be traded-off against the advantages of having intimate knowledge of the process and what happened over the project (Yin, 2003).

### *Participants and sampling*

The research began with the design of a questionnaire to be completed by all 51 members of the faculty who were working prior to the application for accreditation and who were still staff members. Following administration of the questionnaire and some preliminary analysis of the themes arising out of responses, I created a list of participants who had indicated willingness to be interviewed further as part of the research. I then added to the list a number of individuals I intended to invite to take part: some had held administrative positions during the accreditation process that gave them both inside knowledge and experience of dealing with faculty members outside of the accreditation team. Others were foreign native-English-speaking staff members who could bring an 'outside' perspective to some of the cultural issues. The remainder were teachers in the programme who did not hold specific roles in the administration or the accreditation project team. I also wanted as broad a range of age and experience as possible.

I devised a list of 13 potential interview candidates who I thought would provide a broad spectrum of opinions and experience. This comprised members of the management team (including the Director of the programme), individuals who had administrative roles involved with planning the curriculum and assessment practices, and native-English-speaking teachers and Turkish teachers who had no administrative roles. Of the 13 invited to interview, 10 accepted. Biographical information about the interviewees is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Schedule of interview participants.

Participant	Position
A	Administrator/programme teacher; 5+ years of service
B	Administrator/programme teacher; 5+ years of service
C	Programme teacher; 5+ years of service
D	Programme teacher; 4 years of service
E	Programme teacher; 5 years of service
F	Administrator/programme teacher; 5+ years of service
G	Programme teacher; 5 years of service
H	Programme teacher; 4 years of service
I	Programme teacher; administrator during part of accreditation period; 5+ years of service
J	Administrator; 5+ years of service

### Questionnaire and interviews

A short questionnaire was drafted, piloted and distributed. A total of 43 responses were received out of a possible 51. The results of the questionnaire were also raised with interviewees as a means of triangulating the data. In preparation for the interviews, a list of issues was formulated initially by reference to the literature and then amended in the light of analysis of the questionnaire data. This was then used as a way to generate the interview's principal themes. From this, a number of prompt questions were constructed, as well as a preliminary list of codes with which the interview notes would be subsequently analysed. These prompts were designed to stimulate responses from interviewees although it was made clear to all respondents that they could raise any matters they wished. Audio recordings were made of the interviews.

Following the conclusion of each interview, a detailed note was prepared about the conversation and sent to the interviewee for comment. Where required, subsequent amendments were made to the note, which were then agreed by the participant.

Following completion of all interviews, the list of codes was revised further to reflect issues that had arisen through the course of the interviews. Minor revisions to the codes were then made on a number of occasions during the analysis of the interview drafts. Text analysis was undertaken by reviewing the interview notes in the light of the list of codes, with each point made by respective interviewees being manually coded. This process continued in grouping the responses into thematic areas. Finally, individual coded excerpts from all interviews were 'clustered' on a spreadsheet by code area, allowing me to compare responses by reference to individual codes and general themes (Bell, 2005).

## Findings

### Questionnaire data

*Demographics/background.* Thirty-eight of the 43 respondents were Turkish nationals, with the remainder coming from English-speaking countries. Their teaching experience ranged from 4 years to more than 20 years, with a mean of 8 years. Thirty-three were teachers on the programme with no administrative responsibilities. Nine respondents were administrators who also taught on the programme and one respondent had no teaching responsibilities. Only five had previously worked in institutions with an educational accreditation, and only one of those had worked in an accredited programme in Turkey.

*Accreditation in general.* A clear majority (40) claimed to have understood the purpose of the Prep Class becoming accredited, while clear majorities either strongly agreed or agreed that accreditation is a good way both to raise educational standards (33) and improve management (39).

*Effect of CEA accreditation on the day-to-day business of the Prep Class.* Forty respondents felt that accreditation had led to significant changes to the day-to-day workings of the Prep Class. Keeping written records, professional development, performance management and the provision of extra-curricular activities were all felt by a majority to have changed.

A little over half the respondents felt accreditation had resulted in more administrative work, while 19 tended to think that accreditation had not had a direct impact on their classroom experience, with nine teachers uncertain. Moreover, the majority were uncertain if accreditation had resulted in higher quality teaching in the Prep Class.

More transparent working practices, better professional development and future career opportunities were generally felt by over half of respondents to be benefits of having gone through the accreditation process. Nevertheless, in response to whether working conditions were better because of accreditation, the majority were uncertain.

*Organisational culture.* Twenty-three respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the standards promoted by accreditation fitted easily into the organisational culture of the Prep Class although 13 were uncertain. Only seven disagreed with this notion. In contrast, a strong majority disagreed with the idea that the working practices promoted by accreditation were inappropriate for the Prep Class. The majority (24) of respondents felt that the accreditation process was flexible enough to take into account the organisational culture of the Prep Class although 16 were uncertain. Moreover, most disagreed with the suggestion that they had no ability to influence the changes implemented as part of the process. Likewise, only four agreed with the notion that foreign accrediting bodies should not accredit programmes like the Prep Class because their organisational cultures are too different.

### *Interview data*

*Knowledge/perceptions of accreditation.* Of all the interviewees, only the Director of the Programme claimed to have known much about accreditation generally before the process started, and none had heard of the CEA before the programme applied for accreditation (In the discussion that follows, letters in parentheses refer to individual interviewees as described in Table 1). When asked about the purpose and ethos of accreditation, only two interviewees failed to mention 'standards'. When asked whether such standards were standards of best practice or minimum acceptable levels, seven spoke of concepts that could be associated with minimum standards in the sense of guaranteeing a minimum quality of service. However, five agreed with the idea that accreditation was also related to fitness for purpose. 'Quality' was brought up by many but without any defined sense of what that in fact meant. One respondent did, however, note that all such concepts were subjective and culturally defined: 'it depends on how the institution sees itself' (J).

In general, interviewees gave the impression that they thought the programme's attempt to become accredited was daunting, and overall there was a lack of knowledge about what specifically was expected at the outset of the application. Interviewees felt more confident about the reason for making the application for accreditation. Six mentioned improving standards and five talked about raising the programme's reputation. Nine of the 10 interviewees felt that accreditation was a way of promoting professionalism although there was no clear consensus amongst them as to what professionalism meant. The notion of 'doing your job' was raised by four, and isolating

your personal from your professional life was noted by three. Although most interviewees believed the Prep Class to have been 'professional' to some extent prior to the accreditation, issues relating to a certain lack of transparency and systematism were noted by four people. Interviewees unanimously agreed that overall the accreditation had been a success, subject to a number of issues as reported below. Five people also noted the value of the self-study period.

*Impact in the classroom.* Most interviewees when asked did not identify any major gaps between the practices of the Prep Class and what was required by the CEA. It was, however, a common theme that the accreditation process had not had a significant impact on what happened in the classroom. Seven questioned whether it had a material effect. Two attempted to hazard a guess that accreditation had a positive impact on learning outcomes, but without being able to offer any evidence to support their view. Better continuing professional development (CPD), increased transparency for students and improved technology were all referred to by interviewees on a number of occasions, but the benefits in class were termed as either indirect or not easily quantifiable.

*Impacts on administration.* Interviewees were unanimous that accreditation had a material and positive effect on the administration of the Prep Class. Nine of those interviewed spoke of increased transparency/openness in operations. Increased accountability was also mentioned. Six people noted that new feedback mechanisms, increased teacher input into administrative matters and more developed review procedures had given teachers a 'voice', as noted by one respondent:

at the first annual review I found myself talking to someone to whom my opinion would matter. (E)

Several also mentioned positively the fact that processes were now documented, whereas this had been haphazard before.

On the negative side, five interviewees noted that new procedures had not always been followed through to the fullest extent. A number mentioned the Prep Class staff performance management system (introduced as a result of a CEA requirement) as an example of a process that had not been fully successful.

*Impact of accreditation on interviewees personally/on staff members.* All but two of the interviewees mentioned the fact that the accreditation process had increased their workload. The interviewees who reported the highest increases in their workload were administrators in the programme who carried the burden of designing and/or implementing a great number of new policies and procedures. That said, those administrators all felt that despite the hard work accreditation caused, the end result was overall a positive one. None of the interviewees reported feeling disconnected from the process. Those interviewed did not report any outright rejection of the process by other staff members. Most when asked noted that the faculty as a whole supported accreditation in general, although there was some neutrality or resistance to change.

*Perceived changes in organisational culture.* Only one interviewee felt that there was not a gap to a greater or lesser extent between the organisational culture of the Prep Class and the culture apparently promoted by the CEA. Of the issues identified as difficult to achieve/adapt to 'culturally', staff appraisals, giving feedback, and documenting processes were issues mentioned multiple times by numerous interviewees. Some interviewees brought up the idea that Turkish culture tended to blur the lines between personal and professional lives and that this contributed to the difficulties many staff had with giving and receiving feedback. A number also noted that Turks do not traditionally document things and do not have defined policies and procedures, all of which made many of the CEA requirements challenging.

Eight interviewees felt that at least some cultural changes had occurred on an organisational level as a result of accreditation. A number mentioned CPD as an example, with one believing that if CPD provision was now withdrawn, there would be objections by staff. Nevertheless, a number of interviewees expressed the feeling that some of the changes were superficial, signifying not a change in organisational culture but staff just following rules. When asked explicitly, eight of the interviewees said that the organisational culture had not changed very much, somewhat contradicting some of their previous comments.

The perceived increased transparency that accreditation had brought was mentioned by several interviewees as a benefit. In addition, when asked whether the accreditation with its prescribed standards had affected their feelings of autonomy, four who expressed an opinion stated that they felt more autonomous as a result and nobody felt that they had forfeited any autonomy by working in compliance with CEA standards.

Finally, interviewees were explicitly invited to consider the idea that as a foreign organisation, the CEA was imposing cultural norms through accreditation. Seven accepted this characterisation and only one rejected the notion outright. However, while acknowledging that the CEA was imposing values that may be different to that of the host culture, eight of the interviewees felt this was a positive thing, with the CEA simply acting as a guide for what the Prep Class wanted to achieve anyway. None professed to feel resentful about this.

## Discussion and analysis

### *Staff perceptions of accreditation*

Questionnaire respondents clearly felt accreditation could be an effective way to raise standards both in the classroom and in the management of educational institutions, and the theme of 'standards' was echoed by most interviewees. It was clear that most interviewees had not previously considered the conceptual basis of accreditation. However, when this was addressed with them, most agreed with the idea that rather than thinking of such 'standards' representing excellence or even best practice, they tended to think of them as guarantees of quality or minimum standards, as well as being indicators of fitness for purpose, echoing similar points made by Harvey (2002, 2004). The potential contradiction between participants' ideas that accreditation is both concerned with educational improvement and an indicator of reaching a minimum quality threshold was to some extent reconciled by a number of interviewees stressing the value of the self-study period. Fertig's (2007) characterisation of accreditation as a duality between meeting standards in the context of a significant period of self-analysis and improvement found support in this research.

While most felt that accreditation helped promote 'professionalism', when interviewees were asked to define this concept no clear consensus arose. One suggestion on a number of occasions was the idea of 'doing your job', which had an undercurrent of fulfilling the expectations made of you. 'Doing your job to your best level' (F) was seen by some as a virtue rather than necessarily a duty. Ideas such as being able to separate one's professional life from one's personal life, transparency and systematism (e.g. documenting all processes) were all mentioned as examples of 'professionalism', and accreditation was cited by many as a way of improving these things.

None of the interviewees were hostile to the project or its aims, although some doubted the outcomes. Likewise in the questionnaire where, while respondents were not universally satisfied with all aspects of the project, nearly everyone felt some positive things had come out of it. Any sense of staff becoming alienated and resentful – the 'peer exploitation' referred to by Van Kemenade and Hardjono (2010: 263) – was almost entirely absent. The burden of the project fell most keenly on those with administrative duties, but despite them reporting feeling the pressure from time to time, none took a negative view of the overall initiative. Finally, although

some commentators have emphasised the idea of accreditation promoting uniformity and stifling innovation and risk-taking (Frank et al., 2012; Harvey, 2004), almost none of the data from this study supports these ideas. On the contrary, questionnaire respondents disagreed that they had little ability to influence change or that local context was ignored, and a number of interviewees reported feeling more autonomous as a result of accreditation.

### *Outcomes of the Prep Class accreditation*

Accreditation clearly had a major impact on life at the Prep Class. However, some distinct themes arose from the research about the outcomes of accreditation. First, it was clear from the interviews that while most had given no thought to how to measure the success of the accreditation project, when asked about this, interviewees invariably talked about measuring outcomes. Their focus on learning outcomes reflected a clear split between how participants felt about the impact of accreditation on what happened in classrooms and how it affected the administration of the institution. Reflecting some of the principal criticisms of accreditation in the research literature (see for example, Bell and Youngs, 2011; Dill and Beerkens, 2013; Shah, 2012; Stoll, 1999), the questionnaire results showed a clear ambivalence with respect to whether or not it had made any significant difference in class. This view was amplified by the interviewees, who often noted a general sense of things having improved from an educational point of view but without being able to provide specific examples. While CPD and increased use of technology in class were mentioned multiple times as impacts of accreditation in the classroom, these were often noted as having *indirect* benefits on learning outcomes, supporting Harvey's (2002) argument that many simply assume that improvement will happen if standards are followed. When explicitly challenged, most interviewees conceded that accreditation had little direct impact in the classroom.

By contrast, interviewees unanimously supported the idea that accreditation had positively affected the administration of the Prep Class. The documentation of processes, increased transparency and more formal and effective feedback channels were all mentioned by many of the interviewees as benefits. Somewhat confusingly, despite interviewees emphasising improvements to how the Prep Class was run, questionnaire results indicated ambivalence to the question of whether working conditions in the Prep Class had in fact improved. This may be the result of a number of extraneous factors related to staff policies controlled by the university upper management over which the Prep Class has no direct control, or it may simply be that although staff had welcomed a number of improvements, there remained some dissatisfaction overall. Nevertheless, taking all the research data in totality, accreditation is seen to have had a positive administrative impact, far greater than appears to have occurred in the classroom. This mirrors the experience reported in several other research projects (see e.g. Bell and Youngs, 2011; Harvey, 2002; Shah, 2012).

### *Possible cultural impediments to the success of the project*

There is little evidence of cultural resistance to the accreditation project. Most questionnaire respondents disagreed with the idea that the working practices promoted by accreditation were inappropriate or too culturally different. Although many were uncertain, more than half of the respondents thought that the standards fitted easily into the existing organisational culture. Likewise, interviewees did not feel any cultural gaps were insurmountable. There was perhaps a reluctance to concede that cultural impediments existed because that implied potential criticism of the existing working practices and organisational culture. Whatever the reason, data suggest that participants were loath to ascribe possible failures to cultural problems. As such, there is little evidence that the notion of cultural imperialism was a negative factor in the accreditation. While

Deem (2001) and Hou (2011) paint a picture of neo-liberal Western business practices spreading out around the globe, participants in this study showed no indication that this idea constituted an issue of great importance. Certainly, there was no evidence of alienation or resentment in this regard. Moreover, it could be said that this apparently prevailing attitude could provide support for Guskey's (2002) ideas that a certain degree of coercion from management and/or change agents can be a way to change beliefs *after* improvements have been implemented (see later).

Nevertheless, a number of cultural impediments to the project were discussed by interviewees. One particular point made by an interviewee seemed to underlie a number of issues raised by many participants: 'There is a patriarchal culture in Turkey and pretty much every institution has it to a greater or lesser degree' (E). All participants who expressed a view agreed with this notion. The issues of feedback and staff appraisals based around self-reflection were mentioned as particularly difficult, as were requirements to document and create transparent processes. Arguably, this sense of patriarchy lies at the heart of both. In a Turkish context, any admission of weakness, pre-supposed by self-reflection and accepting feedback, is particularly problematic. Moreover, where Turks traditionally look to a 'strong leader' to guide them, the notion of giving peer feedback or criticising the existing regime or procedures (e.g. in a programme review) can be anathema. It is expected, for example, that only a colleague sufficiently senior in the hierarchy can give feedback. Turkish bureaucracy and public life are characterised by opaqueness and arbitrary rule changes and so transparency, standardisation and creating paper trails to document processes are all somewhat alien concepts. Compounding these issues, as previously mentioned, is the paramount importance of personal relationships at work in Turkey, where professional criticism is often taken personally and staff may have difficulty separating their work and personal lives.

### *Did accreditation lead to changes in organisational culture?*

While the data support the idea that a great number of changes occurred in the Prep Class, most of the interviewees conceded that organisational culture had not changed for the most part. The lack of impact of accreditation in the classroom has already been noted. However, even when considering administrative changes which most respondents conceded had much more of an impact, a number of them agreed with the suggestion that people were just following the rules. Yet interviewees also made contradictory points about this. Perhaps demonstrating the complexity involved when addressing anything from a cultural standpoint, a number did note that they felt *some* cultural shifts had taken place. The importance accorded to CPD was mentioned in this regard, with one interviewee going so far as to say 'if we suddenly abandoned the CPD office I do think we would get a lot of objections from people who wanted training' (J). Another staff member noted never having previously thought of giving a seminar to colleagues but that, following accreditation, the changing atmosphere with regard to CPD had been a factor in convincing them to do so. Likewise, the obvious enthusiasm for the review and feedback meetings displayed by some of the interviewees demonstrates to some extent changes in culture. Finally, the sheer number of times the word 'transparency' arose during interviews is testament to the importance interviewees accorded this concept, and it seems possible that moves to make the Prep Class more transparent have resulted in some cultural developments.

## **Conclusion**

This was a small-scale study with only a few participants in a specific context, considering complex issues such as culture. It would therefore be dangerous to attempt to draw wide-ranging conclusions from it. That said, the results do throw some light on existing research and provide food

for thought for other institutions going through similar processes. Nevertheless, a great deal more research from different contexts over different time periods would help to move the debate forward. Most importantly, empirical studies attempting to measure the impact of accreditation initiatives on what happens in class and on learning outcomes would be a most helpful way to progress, although the difficulties of doing so are clear.

### *Implications of the study*

While it could not be claimed that participants supported Harvey's (2004) view that accreditation is mostly concerned with conformity or even uniformity, those who took part did see accreditation as very much related to minimum standards and fitness for purpose, rather than excellence. Likewise, almost all the collected data support the notion that accreditation has a much larger effect on administrative and management processes than it does in the classroom, the implication being that accreditation is not necessarily the sharpest tool with which to try to make a direct impact on the learning outcomes of students. Interestingly, there was not much sense from participants in the study of large-scale resentment of the accreditation process. Staff felt they understood the reasons for going through the process and also took the view that accreditation could be an effective tool if used properly. This cuts across some of the literature which often concentrates on feelings of exploitation reported by staff. Although there is evidence that some in the Prep Class did not wholly support the process, it seems that fear of the unknown rather than outright resistance to the process was more likely to have been the cause of this. As such, rather than the problem centring around the concept of accreditation, the issue seems rather to revolve around the quality of the implementation. In fact, those who reported the most significant burdens in this study were also those who were keen to emphasise the beneficial aspects of the process.

It would appear that no firm conclusions can be drawn as to whether the Prep Class' accreditation led to material changes in organisational culture. Nevertheless, some potentially important conclusions can be tentatively made about how staff felt about the process on a cultural level. Some commentators have proposed that owing to the fact that international accreditation is imposing cultural values, there is inevitably going to be resistance which will limit the impact accreditation can have with regard to changing organisational culture. However, participants in this study reported no such feelings of resentment. On the contrary, there is a strong undercurrent in the data that despite a number of difficulties caused by cultural issues, it could not be claimed that international accreditation necessarily fails because of insurmountable cultural differences. Indeed, many participants in the study actively embraced the values promoted by the accreditation. The fact that, arguably, it failed to change organisational culture to a large extent was therefore probably due not to significant cultural resistance but to other factors.

In conclusion, the evidence that accreditation brought about changes in the organisational culture of the Prep Class is rather scant. That said, many participants had some confidence that the organisational culture could change for the better over time. Moreover, most felt accreditation had brought significant benefits, even if these were concentrated in specific areas. If the data is correct, it would imply that the indirect benefits of accreditation may be more important than the direct benefits when it comes to changing staff beliefs about how an educational institution should operate. Finally, while there can undoubtedly be benefits of going through it, changing organisational culture is a complex business and not something that can be achieved in a standardised way by every institution going through the steps set out by the accrediting body. At least one interviewee tried to be realistic about how much accreditation could achieve, in suggesting that

Some are too idealistic and expect ... some sort of utopia after accreditation. (C)

This would seem to be an important point to bear in mind when considering what might be achieved by the accreditation process.

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