

## **Building a Learning Organization: The Role of International Accreditation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The change of higher education institutions (HEIs) to learning organizations is at the core of their ability to remain relevant, innovative and resilient in the face of a rapidly changing global environment. The processes by which learning become institutionalized in organizational structures, however, remain largely unexplored. International Accreditation is the means of standardizing the education and programs offered by the HEIs. This opinion article argues that international accreditation, commonly perceived as a compliance exercise can be a strategic means of developing organizational learning for universities and colleges. Accreditation systems, when used beyond certification pursuit, engage reflective practice, evidence-based decision-making and sense making across academic and administrative departments. They enable cross-institutional benchmarking, data-informed improvement and mutual commitment to quality enhancement. International accreditation, the article argues is a meta-learning system: one that builds organizational intelligence, aligns governance with learning goals and institutionalizes feedback loops for continuous improvement. Yet to realize this potential, there is a need for a shift in paradigms, from viewing accreditation as an episodic audit to embracing it as an ongoing process of inquiry, adaptation and renewal. In so doing, colleges and universities can transform accreditation into a living path to sustainable excellence and institutional learning.

**Keywords:** Learning organization; International accreditation; Higher education institutions; Organizational learning; Quality assurance; Continuous improvement; Institutional transformation; Reflective practice; University governance; Organizational intelligence.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The higher education environment has been going through radical changes in the last twenty years. The forces of globalization, technological discontinuity, demography and a fast-changing workforce demand have presented an unprecedented need to transform institutions of higher education into agile, adaptable and learning organizations[1]. According to Stenmark and colleagues, the longstanding interest in higher education scholarship in the area of organizational learning and the transformation of the institution into a learning organization has existed for a long time [2]. Nevertheless, despite the decades of focus on the organizational development theory, there are still numerous HEIs whose structure is disintegrated and siloed, which restricts the ability of the institution to learn and change. A learning organization has become a popular concept due to the seminal book authored by Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, which describes learning organizations as a place where individuals are constantly increasing the number of patterns they can create of the outcomes they really desire, where new and broadly extended patterns of thinking are cultivated, where collective aspiration is liberated, and where people are constantly learning to see the entire system as a whole. Whereas this conceptualization has motivated educational leaders throughout thirty years, the implementation of the concept in sustainable institutional practice has been difficult.

At the same time, internationally accreditation has become a notable tool of setting the educational standards worldwide and guaranteeing the international standard of HEIs. Key international accreditation organizations such as the QAA International, EQAA (European Quality Assurance Agency) and the QAHE (International Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education) have published elaborate frameworks of institutional and programmatic assessment[4]. Nevertheless, institutional leaders encounter accreditation as compliance pressure: a time-consuming, resource-intensive audit that yields a certificate at the end of it, after which normal operations are restarted more or less as usual. This article suggests a re-definition of the international accreditation as a strategic platform of creating organizational learning. This view of accreditation instead of considering it to be an instance of compliance, frames it as a meta-learning system, a systematic process of inquiry that, when used effectively, involves reflective practice, evidence-based decision-making and across-academic and administrative unit cross-functionality. This argument is presented in five parts with the first section defining the theoretical principles of learning organizations in higher education; the second section is the exploration of the current paradigm of accreditation as a compliance exercise; the third section is the articulation of how accreditation could be used as a learning system; the fourth section is the exploration of how accreditation could institutionalize organizational learning and the fifth section is the proposed framework of paradigm shift towards accreditation as a continuous inquiry and renewal.

## **LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

### **Defining Learning Organizations**

The learning organization is a radically new version of institutional role and mission. In a conceptualization earlier than this one, Garvin defines a learning organization as an organization that is adept at designing, obtaining and sharing knowledge and at adjusting its behavior to the presence of new knowledge and new understandings[5]. This definition focuses on the two aspects of knowledge earning and behavioral adapting the ability to not only receive information but convert knowledge to organizational conduct.

Senge has developed a model that considers five key disciplines that define learning organizations: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning[3]. The foundation is the concept of systems thinking, which allows leaders and practitioners to perceive the cause and effect interrelationships of the organizational parts but does not consider problems in isolation. Personal mastery is the dedication of individuals in the lifelong expectancy to learning. Mental models are associated with studying and questioning the assumptions, as well as beliefs, that guide organizational thinking. Shared vision establishes a feeling of cohesion on shared goals. Team learning facilitates the knowledge building and solving of problems throughout the organization.

In the case of higher education institutions, in particular, this framework has a special meaning. The universities and colleges are organizations themselves that focus on learning and creation of knowledge; however, as organizations, they tend to act contrary to the principles of learning. It has been observed by researchers that whilst the managers of universities are likely to consider organizational learning as a means of enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of the institution, scholars may connect organizational learning with possibilities to explore new ideas and experiment with new practices [6]. This diversity of stakeholders is the characteristic of the complexity of HEIs as the teaching, research, service, governance and administrative activities have to be synchronized in accordance with academic autonomy and disciplinary diversity.

## Obstacles to Organizational Learning in Higher Education

Regardless of the theoretical attractiveness of the learning organization models, Stenmark and the co-authors observe that, there exist varied interests with regard to organizational learning between various stakeholder groups in higher learning institutions [2]. There are a number of institutional obstacles to institutionalizing learning in HEIs:

- **Disciplinary Silos:** Academic disciplines possess unique epistemologies, methodologies as well as professional cultures. This diversity, though fruitful to intellectual investigation, may be destructive of institutional learned knowledge and bar cross-disciplinary learning[7].
- **Hierarchical Governance Structures:** Conventional university governance and its division of intellectual and administrative roles, may make information flow difficult and minimize the cross-functional interaction on which organizational learning depends[2].
- **Episodic Change Initiatives:** Universities often pass through cycles of strategic planning, curriculum redesigns and operational restructuring as discrete time-limited projects and not as ongoing continuous improvement processes. It is an episodic method that reduces long term learning and synthesis of knowledge.
- **Institutional Amnesia:** When staff change positions or institutions, organizational memory the stored knowledge within systems, processes and shared understanding can be lost and institutions started to solve the same problems over and over again without the advantage of historical learning[8].
- **External Accountability Resistance:** Academic culture has historically been hostile to external assessment and standardization, seeing these approaches as a form of threat to academic freedom. This opposition may make it difficult to establish systematic quality assurance and continuous improvement mechanisms[9].

The identification of these barriers is critical background on how accreditation, when redefined can become a counter force to these trends.

## THE CLASSICAL PARADIGM: ACCREDITATION AS COMPLIANCE

The international accreditation was the reaction to the necessity of quality assurance and standardization of higher education especially when the educational systems were becoming more internationalized. The Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which was last revised in 2015, provides some basic guidelines on assessing institutional and programmatic quality[10]. These standards include: internal quality assurance processes, external quality assurance processes and quality assurance agencies requirements[10]. Large international accreditation agencies are currently working on an international basis and include agencies like QAA international, EQAA and QAHE providing institutional and programmatic accreditation to universities across the world[4],[11],[12]. The accreditation cycle is normally comprised of a number of steps; institutional self-assessment, self-assessment report submission, external experts review, visit to sites, assessment reports and finally, decision as to accreditation status.

In its superior current form, accreditation is more of a compliance check exercise. The institutions draft documents showing that they match the set standards and are reviewed and accredited either with the full accreditation, conditional accreditation with performance improvement requirements or they are not accredited. Although this model plays crucial roles of accountability, it often acts as a one-off event: a one-time occurrence, and not a process[13] per se.

Accreditation in such a paradigm is felt as:

- **Resource-intensive:** Accreditation of institutions requires a lot of staff time and financial resources to prepare accreditation documentation and in most instances the institutions withdraw staff to organize accreditation[13].
- **Compliance-focused:** The main motivation is the recognition of the accreditation criteria to retain institutional status and legitimacy, as opposed to the internal enhancement of the process[13].
- **Externally motivated:** These ones are motivated by outside demands and regulatory need instead of institutional belief in the value of the process[9].
- **Cyclical as opposed to non-continuous:** Accreditation takes place at certain intervals (usually 5-10 years as per the accreditation body) and is accompanied by minimal improvement activity in-between accreditation periods.
- **Certificate-based:** The accreditation certificate is the most apparent product of any accreditation and is used by institutions to market and gain legitimacy[13].

This model, even in setting standards of quality at the baseline and developing accountability mechanisms, does not utilize much unexplored potential of institutional learning and transformation.

## **REIMAGINING ACCREDITATION: FROM COMPLIANCE TO LEARNING**

### **Accreditation as Structured Learning System**

The argument that accreditation can be, and indeed should be, a learning system starts with the fact that most of the processes inherent in the rigorous accreditation processes are learning processes in their essence. With reference to the self-assessment aspect: the institution will be required to undertake a systematic study of the strengths, weaknesses, standard and performance data alignment. Instead of only striving to get to the accreditation certificate, as Dirbashi puts it, institutions ought to see the process as a chance to reflect on themselves and develop [13].

Self-assessment when done with an authentic purpose of institutional understanding and not simply compliance compliance is a reflective practice-a methodical process of having practitioners inquire questions of their practice that results in improved sense-making and understanding [14]. Reflective practice is widely accepted in the field of professional practices in the sense that it is considered as a pillar to knowledge advancement and practice enhancement[14].

On the same note, the external peer review aspect of accreditation will establish a formal system of benchmarking against other institutions and benchmarking against best practices. Benchmarking as a process of seeking and adopting the best practices that would significantly improve, allows institutions to acquire an unbiased view of their performance relative to other institutions, and allows them, according to Jeffreyson, to dig into performance weaknesses to determine ways of improving their performance [15]. The learning organizations are characterized by cross-institutional comparison and peer-based institutional learning[3].

### **Accreditation as Embedded Evidence-Based Decision-Making**

Evidence-based decision-making is one of the key features of learning organizations. By imposing institutions to gather, examine, and report data on the outcomes of student learning, the institutional performance, utilization and quality of resources, the accreditation process establishes a system of systematic data use. Evidence-informed practice is a decision-making methodology that considers the available evidence of the best quality and critical

thinking [16]. When the accreditation processes demand institutions to collect learning outcome data, examine findings, reveal the disparities between performance and objectives and put evidence-based interventions in place, they form the structures of evidence-based practice. The informational basis of organizational learning is the continuous gathering and evaluation of institutional data in the form of student achievement data to program evaluation outcomes to the effectiveness of resources allocation.

### **An Institutional Sensemaking in the form of Accreditation**

Through accreditation processes we are able to sense make meaning out of institutional experience, the way organizations do make sense of their experiences, challenges, and opportunities. The process of creating self-assessment reports, faculty and staff discussions on the topic of institutional alignment with the standards and the discussions as a result of questions posed by the peer reviewers are all sensemaking activities. In the process, tacit knowledge is made explicit; individual knowledge converges to collective institutional knowledge; and fragmented activities are understood as part of an overall whole.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING MECHANISMS THROUGH ACCREDITATION**

### **Making Reflective Practice an Institution**

When the accreditation processes bring faculty and staff into systematic reflection concerning their work that explores their assumptions, challenges current practice, measures the match between their proclaimed values and real practice, and envisions other options, they institutionalize reflective practice. Instead of reflection being an individualized, intermittent phenomenon, accreditation cycles open up collective reflection, structured, and scheduled. This institutionalization is major since, according to Sherwood and colleagues, Reflective practice offers practitioners with a systematic approach to questioning their practice that results in deeper insight and makesensemaking [14]. In addition, reflective mindset is based on presence and interaction in the moment-to-moment events in his or her work. Professional development is a habitus of the mind, referred to as reflective practice [14]. Institutions can make reflection an embedded organizational habit by instilling accreditation as a process of continuous and not occasional occurrence.

### **Cross-Institutional Cooperation and Benchmarking**

The accreditation, especially when using international frameworks, opens the possibilities of effective cross-institutional cooperation. Peer reviewers introduce foreign views and experiences to other institutions. In certain settings, accreditation procedures consist of peer learning networks or improving initiatives. These mechanisms help the institutions to access practices and approaches of other organizations which happen to be in a similar situation globally. Learning organization development as a benchmarking component, helps institutions to establish attainable performance expectations, performance gaps and areas of improvement priorities. In the best case, it can be applied as an instrument to aid institutions in assessing and ranking prospects of improvement [15].

### **Aligning Governance to Learning Goals**

Another vital role of learning organizations is congruence between governance systems and organizational goals[3]. The processes of accreditation have unavoidable institutional governance roles in institutional mission and strategic goals, resource allocation and quality assurance mechanisms by boards, senates and administrative councils. The adoption of accreditation as a learning system is a process that would initiate a continuous discussion on the sufficiency of governance and development of governance structures that can facilitate learning priorities. This could involve, among others, the formation of specific committees to manage ongoing

improvement, formation of cross-functional teams to resolve institutional issues that were identified after the analysis of data, or the reorganization of decision-making to provide evidence-driven strategic decisions.

### **Feedback Loops: Making them Institutional**

Probably, most fundamentally, accreditation processes develop formal feedback loops, which facilitate ongoing organizational learning. Student learning outcome data will act as a feedback to educational effectiveness. The reviews of programs give feedback concerning the programmatic relevance and quality. An external view of institutional functioning is provided by the external peer feedback during the accreditation visits. Feedback on employer and alumni give information on the fit between education preparation and workforce readiness. When these feedback processes are systematized and measured on a regular basis, discussed as a unit and applied to make improvement decisions-they are what Senge refers to as vital to learning organizations: integrated information flow systems, interpretation and response systems[3].

### **Cultivating Organizational Memory**

Organizational memory is created and maintained through the institutionalization of accreditation as a continuous process with some documented results, lessons learnt. A documented institutional learning record is created in self-assessment reports, accreditation reports, institutional response document and improvement initiatives. The documentation has several uses: it stores institutional knowledge when there is personnel change; it gives record of improvement direction when accreditation cycles are taking place; it allows detection of regular problems that need more systemic consideration; and also it serves as evidence of commitment to learning to internal and external stakeholders[8].

## **FROM META-LEARNING SYSTEM TO SUSTAINABLE EXCELLENCE**

The overall impact of the above described mechanisms of the reflective practice, evidence-based decision-making, benchmarking, governance alignment, feedback loops and memory institutionalization is that accreditation is a meta-learning system: a system of learning about learning, about organizational functioning and about effectiveness. It is meta-level in that it does not just take place in individual classrooms or academic programs but all throughout the whole institution looking and enhancing the mechanisms of the learning processes being supported and structured.

Accreditation, being a meta-learning system, is described as the ability of an organization to gain organizational intelligence, which is the capacity to know oneself as an organization, to learn through experience, to respond to environmental changes and to seek goals with greater efficiency. High organizational intelligence in the organization makes organizations flexible in responding to challenges, resilient when faced with disruptions and able to make lasting improvements[2],[3].

To make the accreditation potential as a learning system, institutions need to make a fundamental paradigm shift in terms of how they think and approach accreditation. This change entails replacement of:

- **Episodic to continuous:** The accreditation cycles as discrete events to accreditation as an on-going process of inquiry and improvement.
- **Fidelity to promise:** The recognition of accreditation as part of externally imposed compliance drill to adopting it as part of self-improvement and excellence mechanism by the institutional side.
- **Audit to dialogue:** Accreditation as unilateral assessment to peer dialogue concerning mutual commitment to quality and learning.

- **Cert. to process:** Since accreditation is mostly a credential to the value that is seen in systematic review and improvement.
- **Institutional autonomy to collaborative learning:** Defensive positioning on the external review to openness to the external views and learning with peers.

There are a few conditions of this paradigm shift:

- **Leadership commitment:** Leaders of the institution need to have leadership that is honest in regards to accreditation as a learning process and convey the same to the campus fraternity. In the absence of a true leadership dedication, the accreditation will still be carried as a compliance cost in its wake[13].
- **Resource allocation:** It is important that the institutions should allocate adequate resources to facilitate continuous improvement processes that have been identified by the processes of accreditation, rather than acquiring accreditation documentation.
- **Cultural change:** The institution will need to instill a culture of self-examination, openness to outside feedback, perception of data as a source of learning and continuous improvement as a value that is sustained and not a cycle.
- **Structural integration:** Accreditation process and its enhancement should become part of regular planning, budgeting and governance processes instead of being perceived as a distinct activity.
- **Stakeholder involvement:** Faculty, staff, students and other stakeholders should learn to view themselves as members of institutional learning and not as the objects of institutional assessment.

When accreditation is re-aligned as a learning system and institutional practices changed in line with it, then it is a route to sustainable excellence. Sustainable excellence is not a one-time high performance; it is a continued guarantee of enhancement of quality, dynamic to the needs of stakeholders and development in line with the changing environment[13]. Although setting minimum requirements, the ESG standards can be used as a tool towards excellence instead of minimum compliance. Such standards that include policy covering quality assurance, program design and approval, student-centered learning and assessment, student support and services, teaching and learning resource and institutional governance create a framework through which the institutions can engage in continual improvement[10].

## LEARNING BASED ACCREDITATION-INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

In institutions that have managed to reform accreditation as a learning system, there is usually a major institutional change. Decision-making becomes evidence-based and is incorporated with planning and budgeting. The integration of a closer cooperation between departments in terms of solving institutional challenges occurs. Academic and administrative processes are more aligned in accordance with shared learning objectives. The memory of the institutions is retained as records of what is being learned. The faculty and staff gain better insight into their contribution to overall institutional processes. The demonstrated dedication to excellence is the foundation of the external recognition and reputation as opposed to the accreditation credentials. According to Arghode and colleagues, HEIs have to become learning organizations that are both learning agile and leadership agile the capacity to learn by experience and change approaches, as well as imbued with flexibility in leadership growth and succession[1]. The redesigned form of accreditation as a learning system offers formal processes that build both types of agility.

Even the external accreditation bodies should change in order to accommodate this paradigm shift. This involves:

- **Change in framing:** Accrediting agencies would be able to change their value proposition that was based on minimum standards assurance to institutional excellence and learning support.
- **Process design:** The accreditation processes may be done in such a way that they focus on learning and improvement as opposed to compliance and judgment. There are innovative accreditation bodies, which have come up with processes which explicitly aim at improvement, as opposed to accreditation decisions[13].
- **Peer learning networks:** Accrediting bodies can enable peer learning networks through which institutions can exchange practices, issues and advancement with any other institutions that are fairly situated.
- **Acknowledgment of the learning processes:** Accrediting bodies can acknowledge and rewards those institutions who demonstrate their drive to follow up continuous learning and improvement over time, rather than compliance at the time of accreditation review.

### **DISCUSSION: PROBLEMS AND CONSIDERATION OF IMPLEMENTED EFFORTS**

Although accreditation has a good rationale in terms of providing a learning system, there are multiple obstacles that make implementation difficult:

- **Time and resources:** Authentic constant improvement is time consuming. Without extra resources, institutions that are stretched to the limit by budget constraints and manpower shortages may find it difficult to maintain the improvement activities during interaccreditation periods[13].
- **Stakeholder skepticism:** Not all faculty and staff will buy the idea that accreditation can truly be turned into a vehicle of learning rather than a compliance exercise, especially when the history of the institution involved in accreditation has involved accreditation processes that have been an experience of pure burdens.
- **Diversity in the methods of accreditation bodies:** The different accreditation bodies have different mandates and frameworks under which they work. Institutions that want to receive international accreditation have to manoeuvre through possible disparate accreditation philosophies.
- **Issues of measurement and evidence:** Evidence-based decision-making necessitates the sound and reliable information regarding learning and institutional operations. The creation of valid measures, the constant monitoring and accurate interpretation of results are the technical challenges, which are still under development[17].
- **Transfer of knowledge across generations:** The growing strength of learning cultures and documentation practices as institutions implies that there is a challenge of making sure that newer faculty and staff are aware of the rationale and history behind how the institutions make decisions and carry out their activities[8].

The following framework can be taken into account by institutions that want to introduce learning-oriented accreditation:

#### **Phase 1: Preparation and vision-building.**

- Discuss the principles of learning organization and accreditation with the stakeholders as possible learning vehicles.
- Create vision of learning-oriented culture within the institution.
- Ensure commitment and resources are secured by the leaders.

#### **Phase 2: Process redesign**

- Reasonableness of current accreditation process and institutional quality assurance structures.
- Incorporate accreditation and continuous improvement processes in routine planning processes.
- Implement data collection and analysis processes that are to be continued.

- Form interdisciplinary groups of evidence-based improvement.

### **Phase 3: Implementation and involvement**

- Perform a primary overall self-evaluation in line with accreditation guidelines.
- Involve faculty and staff in activities of reflective practice.
- Make scheduled improvement on basis of evaluation.
- Start routine (annual or biannual) evaluation and revision of improvement initiatives.

### **Phase 4: Phase of integration and institutionalization**

- Incorporate the results of accreditation in the strategic plan of institutions.
- Make sure there is investment in facilitating improvement activities.
- Prepare reports about learning and improvement pathway.
- Create the culture of continuous improvement as a part of everyday work.

## **CONCLUSION**

To be effective and responsive in the fast changing environment, higher education institutions must transform themselves into learning organizations. Even though theories of organizational learning provide helpful paradigms, the practical implementation of the concepts of learning-organization is usually challenging. International accreditation has the potential to help the organization entrench organizational learning when it is handled in a strategic manner and it is rigorous as well as offering a practical path to meet the requirements of the organization. The learning-organization processes involved in accreditation are structured self-review, gathering and analyzing of evidence, external benchmarking, and aligning governance with quality goals as well as continuous feedback. When these processes are put in place in the true sense and the process continued, the accreditation will be a meta-learning system that enhances institutional capacity, organizational intelligence and continuous improvement. In order to do this, institutions need to change their attitude of regular compliance to ongoing questioning and renewal with the help of dedicated leadership, sufficient resources, a culture of evidence-based improvement, combination with institutional planning, and significant stakeholder engagement. Once viewed as a continuous learning system, accreditation is the way towards sustainable excellence and long-term resilience to allow institutions to adapt to evolving expectations of society and implement their mission in a more efficient way.

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