

The Power of Accreditation: views of academics

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- **Accreditation**
- **Views of academics**
- **Conclusion**

Introduction

- **The paper draws on many years' experience of analysing external evaluations of quality and standards.**
- **NB: Quality and standards are not the same thing.**
- **The paper will draw on UK and North American views of accreditation.**

Political

- **Underpinning view: Europe is rushing precipitously into accreditation.**
- **Approach is based on naïve views of accreditation.**
- **Unspecified and unexamined set of taken-for-granted that legitimate accreditation.**
- **Accreditation is highly political and is fundamentally about a shift of power concealed behind a npm ideology, cloaked in consumerist demand and European conformity.**

Accreditation

- A public statement that a certain threshold of quality has been achieved or surpassed.
- Decisions *should* be based on transparent agreed, pre-defined standards or criteria.
- Accreditation is a binary state. But there is often a provisional status.

Accreditation types

- **Institutional accreditation**
 - Licence to operate
- **Programme accreditation**
 - Professional accreditation: competence to practice. Long-term in UK and US
 - Accredited for their academic standing: newer accreditation in Eastern European countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia and the new Western European approaches to b-m

Process

- ‘ We will have a subject accreditation visit every week. We have a permanent office to co-ordinate these visits. It is going to be very costly. The accreditation will last eight years and then we are supposed to go through the whole cycle again. However, we expect the methodology will only last one cycle. ’

(Comment on the new Flemish system)

External evaluation

Approach accreditation audit assessment external ex

Object provider programme learner output

Focus govern-
ance &
regulation curriculum
design learning
experience medium of
delivery student
support

content of
program-
mes financial
viability qualifi-
cation admin
support organis-
ational
processes

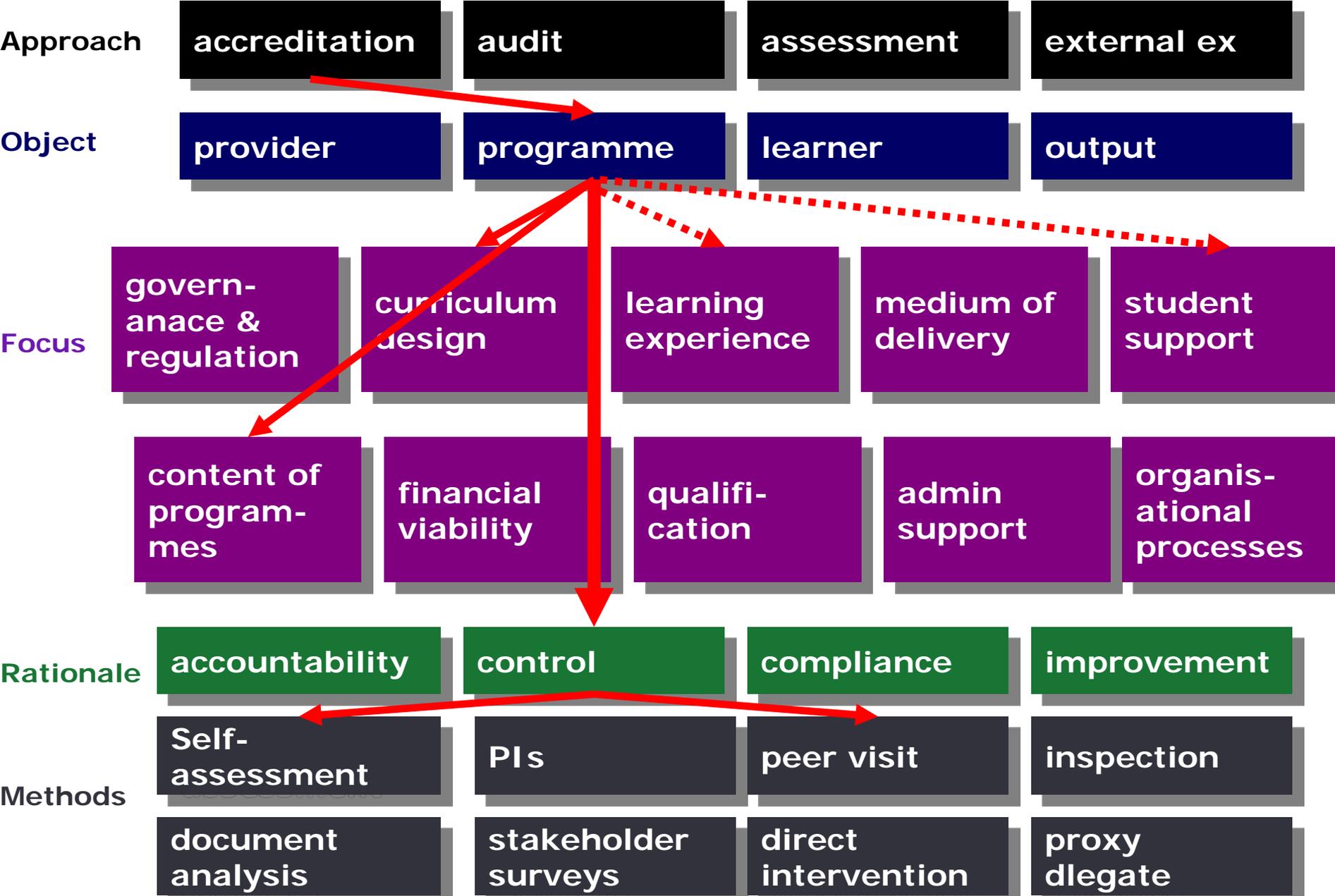
Rationale accountability control compliance improvement

Methods Self-
assessment PIs peer visit inspection

document
analysis stakeholder
surveys direct
intervention proxy
delegate

External evaluation

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External evaluation

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Nuances of accreditation

- 1.** accreditation as a *process* applied to applicant organisations.
- 2.** accreditation is the *label* that institutions or programmes may acquire as a result of the accreditation procedures.
- 3.** underpinning the first two, accreditation is an '*abstract notion of a formal authorising power*'
(Haakstad, 2001, p. 77)

Abstraction

- The underpinning abstraction gives accreditation its legitimacy.
- The abstraction, frequently taken-for-granted, traditionally is not an intrinsic aspect of accreditation.
 - 'The original audience for accreditation [in the US] was the academy itself. The process did not arise in response to concerns about quality expressed by external audiences....' (Jones, 2002, p.1)

Professional and regulatory bodies

PRBs play three roles (Harvey & Mason, 1995).

- 1. They are set up to safeguard the public interest.**
- 2. Some professional bodies also represent the interest of the professional practitioners**
- 3. They represents their own self-interest.**

Views of academics

Respondent sample

- **Literature (meagre)**
- **Views of 53 academics who have been involved in accreditation (UK and North America)**
- **e-mail survey**
- **most comment on subject accreditation**
- **relate to 24 different disciplines**
- **quotes** (semiological analysis in the paper).

Necessity

- Professional accreditation was either necessary for professional employment or enhanced the job prospects of their graduates.
- However, this necessity was closely linked to the marketability of programmes and a concern that failure to achieve accreditation would be problematic.
- For some, accreditation was something that attracted *better* students.

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)

External objectivity

The assumption 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.

Uniformity

A significant and often repeated rationale for 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)

Uniformity

The presumption is that uniformity is desirable and thus that all courses should 'cover' the same content.

It is about complying/measuring up to external requirements (in terms of coverage and resources).

(R17, UK, psychology)

professional body safeguarding the public, representing its members' interests or reinforcing its own status?

External guiding hand

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.

Power

- ‘ 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)

Power

Tony Gale (2002), ex- 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 practice, the society accredits undergraduate courses for political reasons, which have little to do with public security or pedagogy.

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)

Process

‘

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)

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Tension

Mainly in three areas;

1. programme content,
2. programme delivery — contested control and inhibition of innovation
3. bureaucratic requirements — burden, unnecessary requirements and synchronicity of processes.

A few example quotes from the paper...

Innovation

‘ Let me be frank. I believe accreditation to be a dead hand discouraging innovation and restricting students in what they do. I would far prefer to work in the non-accredited courses (e.g. BSc) than in the accredited ones (BEng) because they can be so much more exciting. Sorry, but that is my considered opinion after 13 years as a professor of engineering. ’

(R19, UK, engineering)

Stasis

‘ The Geological Society had just taken upon itself a new role as watchdog over professional qualifications for geologists... Not all our courses could actually be accredited because the Society put some very stringent requirements on the fieldwork component of an accreditable course.... 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. ’

(R43, UK, geology)

Control

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.

Lack of synchronisation

The lack of synchronisation and incompatible documentation is 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?

Specialist activity

'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)

Power struggle

- **Accreditation is a struggle for power and it is not a benign process.**
- **Nor does it engage all those involved.**
- **It is not a pure process of identifying those who have met (and continue to meet) minimum criteria to join the club.**
- **UK and North American evidence shows that accreditation is just one of many processes that demand accountability and compliance in the face of managerialism.**
- **Accreditation/managerialism undermines the skills and experience of educators.**
- **Accreditation is yet another layer alongside assessment, audit and other forms of standards and output monitoring.**

Conclusion

- **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, whether processes are bureaucratic or restrictive and inhibit innovation (although important).**
- **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'.**
- **There are repeated references to jumping through hoops, tail wagging dogs, asking permission and the like.**

Conclusion (continued)

- The underlying, third-level, 'myth' is that of the abstract authorising power, which 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.

Conclusion (continued)

- **To understand staff perceptions of accreditation — the starting point of this presentation — 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 legitimates the control function of accreditation.**
- **Only then can we approach accreditation openly and critically.**

Thank you

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