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Accreditation, standards and diversity: an analysis of EQUIS accreditation reports

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The development of various national and supra-national accreditation systems is currently being discussed as a possible response to an increasingly internationalized and deregulated higher education sector. However, the establishment of such procedures may have unintended consequences, not least with respect to limiting the diversity of higher education. By studying a number of accreditation reports in the field of business administration (the EQUIS system), the paper discusses whether this procedure manages to balance the need for minimum standards with demands related to institutional diversity and development.

Introduction

A dominant characteristic of European educational policy in the 1990s is the systematic evaluation of higher education institutions undertaken as a consequence of indirect pressure from or after direct initiative by governing authorities. Increased internationalization of higher education and a more competitive education market has, in addition, contributed to an increased awareness of the needs of securing and developing the quality of education, both within and across national borders (Dill, 2000).

One response in this situation has been the development of national accreditation systems, especially in countries in Eastern Europe. Due to the Bologna declaration and the increased focus on the transparency of European higher education, there is also a growing interest in developing national accreditation systems that can ensure the standards and regulate a developing higher education market in other European countries (Westerheijden, 2001). Following this development, current discussions have centred on the need for some sort of supra-national accreditation procedures in Europe. A few such international accreditation systems already exist, and one of the most comprehensive and popular accreditation procedures that has been developed is that of the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) in Brussels. This organization has developed their own system for accreditation called EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System), particularly designed for business education.

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However, systematic quality assurance, in both national and international contexts, has raised the question of to what extent higher education institutions may become more standardized at the expense of institutional diversity and development. The possible standardization of higher education implies a dilemma between the need to establish a certain threshold level of quality as a response to deregulation and a growing internationalization of the sector and the wish to preserve the uniqueness and diversity of higher education. Balancing these needs is important when developing new accreditation schemes in higher education. The paper addresses this issue by an analysis of the recommendations and prescriptions for organizational change given in a number of EQUIS accreditation reports published in the period 1997–2001, thus indicating the degree of future 'uniformity' in this field.

The current study is a follow-up of an earlier study on the issue of quality assurance and standardization. Stensaker (2000) analysed all quality audit reports on higher education institutions in Sweden in the period 1995–1998. This study indicated that even if Swedish audit reports were found to have a special emphasis on issues like leadership and organization, a closer analysis revealed that different solutions and recommendations were proposed within these areas, implying that institutional diversity could be as likely an outcome as institutional standardization, at least in the short run.

However, an audit is not the same as an accreditation process. While the purpose of the former is very much related to improvement, the purpose of the latter is more related to that of accountability and control. Thus, one could expect that institutional diversity is much more likely to occur as an outcome of an audit. In the same way, one could expect that standardization is a much more important issue in an accreditation process. There are also other differences between the Swedish situation and the situation of the EQUIS system that should not be overlooked. The Swedish audit system was initiated externally by the government (implemented by the National Agency for Higher Education), which also represents the owner of the institutions. The main objectives of the audit were coupled to the desire to support the higher education institutions in their attempts to redefine their mission, activities and organization in the light of new expectations of both society and students.

The EQUIS accreditation system is based on other mechanisms. It was established with the following objectives: to provide market information, to provide an instrument for comparison and permanent benchmarking, to provide quality improvement and to award the European Quality Label. The EQUIS system focuses on limited types of higher education institutions and departments as it is designed for institutions that offer management education. EQUIS accreditation is offered to institutions that voluntarily choose to undergo the accreditation procedure (here understood as internally initiated). One could assume that differences in both background objectives of the two quality assurance procedures and differences between external and internal initiatives to undertake the process would lead to other results than found in the Swedish case. As an example, one could expect the EQUIS peer review reports to be more explicit and concrete in their recommendations, pointing out prescriptions for improvements closely linked to their specified quality criteria. This leads to a supplementary question: to what extent are the recommendations and prescriptions of the reports open to interpretation and negotiation at the institutional level?

This question is also of great importance outside the field of business education. The question relates to the issue of whether accreditation actually represents something new in the field of quality assurance or whether accreditation represents 'more of the same'. In a recent review of the impact of external quality monitoring in higher education, Stensaker (2003) has argued that the differences between various methods and procedures may be less significant than often believed, especially since many quality assurance systems seem to find some sort of balance between accountability and improvement. Thus, even if one could interpret the rising interest in accreditation in continental Europe as a reaction to established western European quality assurance procedures, emphasizing quality control at the expense of quality improvement, it is an empirical question whether this actually is true. Harvey (2002) also noted that although audit and accreditation, as well as quality assessment and standards monitoring, are intended to produce different types of outcomes or decisions, there is considerable overlap in the methods of data collection that inform these processes.

Accreditation: trying to balance minimum standards and institutional diversity

Issues of diversity seem to be of great importance for accreditation agencies. One of the oldest international accreditation agencies within business education, the American Association for Collegiate Schools of Business, established in 1916, claims that their 'accreditation assures quality and promotes excellence and continuous improvement' where 'diversity is a positive characteristic to be fostered, not a disadvantage to be reduced or minimised' (Association for Collegiate Schools of Business, 2003). Also the more recently founded EQUIS system of the EFMD pays much attention to issues of diversity. When describing the EQUIS system it is argued, for example, that the accreditation process 'needs to respect the diversity of national systems' (European Foundation for Management Development, 2003).

However, accreditation procedures are usually designed to exercise some control over the sector: they establish whether a programme or institution meets specified threshold minimum standards and thus may be warranted as *bona fide*. The standards may be input standards, such as staff profiles, buildings and equipment, library contents and so on, or process standards, such as adequate curricula, teaching contact time and assessment processes, or output standards, such as the academic achievement or professional competence of students at different levels. Output and process standards tend to be only directly assessed, if at all, when a programme or institution is revalidated or reaccredited. Although slightly misleading, accreditation processes, which essentially check standards and provide an operating legitimacy, are sometimes referred to as producing a 'quality label' for successful candidates. One has to ask whether such labelling represents a compliance with a predetermined norm or is flexible enough to acknowledge threshold standard achievement in a diverse system.

The EQUIS approach to this issue is to claim that in the EQUIS system there is a need to give 'diversity a framework' and to 'converge on best practise' (European Foundation for Management Development, 2003). Since all accredited objects should be compared with the same standard and since it is usually very important to acquire status as accredited, it is not hard to imagine that the accreditation process could also become a process of standardization for those institutions under scrutiny (Dill *et al.*, 1996; Brennan *et al.*, 1997; Amaral, 1998; Stensaker, 2000).

An analysis of EQUIS accreditation reports could shed some light on this issue by providing information on the degree of uniformity of recommendations and prescriptions for change in these reports. Such an analysis indicates how the European business education milieu values the work being done inside the institutions and, more importantly, how the milieu would like the institutions to develop. A high degree of uniformity in the recommendations proposed may be indicative of standardization. If less uniformity in recommendations is found this might indicate an accreditation procedure with more flexible and negotiable standards than is often believed.

If the latter is the case, an implication might be that it is possible to link accreditation systems and more improvement-oriented quality systems in one integrated process. Although accreditation is primarily about threshold decisions, many systems also attempt to link it to stimulating institutional improvement. However, even if accreditation systems do aim at institutional improvement and development along with the formal accreditation, there are indications that such systems are conceived as rather conservative and *status quo* oriented, emphasizing tradition more than innovation (El-Khawas, 1993; Amaral; 1998). The following explores whether the EQUIS system is such an integrated model.

The EQUIS system: characteristics and procedures

EQUIS is an international system of strategic audit and accreditation launched in 1997 by the EFMD aimed at institutions offering business education. The main objectives of the EQUIS system are to provide market information, to provide an instrument for comparison and permanent benchmarking and to provide quality improvement throughout Europe. Consequently, institutions choosing the EQUIS system can decide whether they want to go through an accreditation procedure or a more improvement-oriented audit procedure. The main difference between the two procedures is that it is only the accreditation procedure that leads to the award of the European Quality Label. The intention with the audit procedure is to test institutional performance and market position in the light of international standards, for example, to be used in further institutional improvement efforts.

The accreditation procedure consists of five stages.

1. Application: the institution needs to apply to EQUIS before entering the accreditation process (voluntary participation).

2. Confirmation of eligibility by the steering committee: the institution is only allowed to enter the accreditation process if it has a good understanding of the criteria used and has a reasonable prospect of success.
3. Production of a self-evaluation report: the institution should gain an understanding of its strategic position by assessing its strengths and weaknesses.
4. International peer review: a 3 day event during which the reviewers meet a variety of people representing the different activities and interests of the institution. The committee then recommend either full accreditation, conditional accreditation or non-accreditation.
5. A decision by the awarding body: the outcome could be accreditation for a 5 year period, rejection or conditional accreditation, currently defined as accreditation for a 3 year period with the requirement to submit an annual report on progress being made to address the issues raised in the quality assessment.

To achieve a full or a conditional accreditation, institutions must be able to demonstrate that they satisfy quality criteria in three equally important areas:

1. High international standards of quality in all areas defined in the EQUIS model, for example national standing, mission, strategy, faculty, personnel development and programmes.
2. A significant level of internationalization as defined within the EQUIS model, for example internationalization of student body, faculty and programmes.
3. Integration of the needs of the corporate world with institutional programmes, activities and processes, for example consumer orientation to corporate clients and well-developed contacts with the corporate world.

The accreditation procedure consists of six stages after the preliminary inquiry: (1) formal application, (2) eligibility, (3) self-assessment, (4) international peer review, (5) awarding body decision, (6) guided development. The main focus in this paper is especially concentrated around the fourth stage, the peer review and especially the outcome of the peer review visit, the peer review report (marked in Figure 1 with a circle outlined by a dashed line).

The fourth stage of the accreditation procedure follows the institutions submission of the self-assessment report (Figure 1). The peer review is usually scheduled to take place within 2 months of submission of the self-assessment. The review team is composed of four members, usually from different countries, three from the academic community and one corporate representative. One member of the team is familiar with the institutional environment of the school. The visit lasts $2\frac{1}{2}$ days, during which the EQUIS reviewers meet with a variety of people representing different activities and interests of the institution. At the end of the visit the chairperson orally presents the team's preliminary assessment and recommendations for future development. The chairperson then writes the peer review report, setting out the team's final assessment of the institutions against the EQUIS quality criteria together with its recommendations for future development and quality improvement, including advice on what remains to be done for the institutions to qualify for accreditation. These recommendations can be of two types.

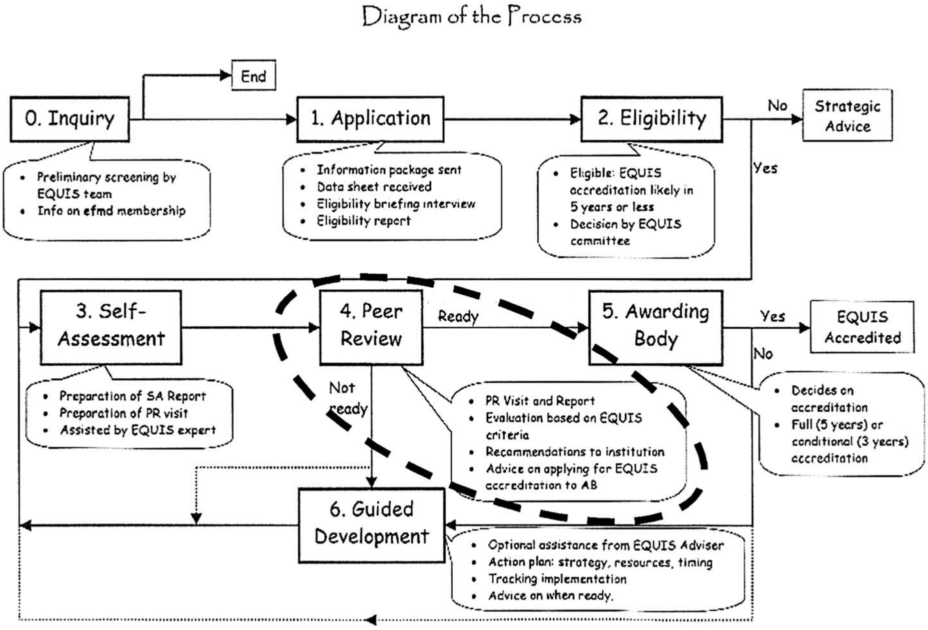

Figure 1. EQUIS procedure

- EQUIS recommendations. These are binding requirements or conditions that the school must satisfy in order to reach the level of quality necessary for EQUIS accreditation. The school will be expected to follow these recommendations.
- Non-binding recommendations by the peer review team. These are suggestions that the peer review team, based on the professional experience of its members, believes to be helpful for the institution to achieve its strategic objectives. The school is not obliged to follow these recommendations.

In cases were the team believes that the school clearly satisfies all EQUIS criteria and qualifies for immediate accreditation, it will recommend to the school and the EQUIS director that the report be sent to the awarding body for a decision on accreditation during its next meeting.

In all other cases, the peer review team will indicate areas in which progress is necessary and suggest steps that need to be taken before the institution will enter a period of guided development (stage six in the procedure) with the assistance of the EQUIS team to bring itself up to a level at which accreditation will be possible.

Data and method

Although the EQUIS system has only been established for a short time, 64 institutions have already gone through the accreditation procedure. As mentioned, this study concentrates on the fourth stage, the international peer review, and the methodological object of the study is the outcome of the reviews.

EQUIS Quality Areas	EQUIS Quality Criteria Categories
1. High international standard	**1. Mission/Governance/Strategy** **2. Students and Participants** **3. Programme Quality** **4. Personal Development** **5. Research and Development** **6. Contribution to the Community** **7. Faculty (i.e. academic staff)** **8. Resources** **9. Executive Education***
2. Internationalisation	**10. Internationalisation** - of the student body - of the faculty - of programmes
3. Integration with the corporate world	**11. Connections with the Corporate World**

Under the eleven **Quality Criteria Categories** there is a number of items in the **EQUIS criteria satisfaction checklist**

The category Executive Education has not been placed under any Quality Area in any of the EQUIS documents. The category has been placed under the Quality Area 'high international standards' by the authors.

Figure 2. The EQUIS system of quality standards

The total sample consists of nine external peer review reports. Three criteria have guided the selection.

- First, a spread of reports along the time axis so that both older and newer reports are analysed (covering the period between 1998 and 2002).
- Second, a spread of reports related to country, so that different cultural contexts are accounted for (institutions in six different countries are represented in the sample).
- Third, a spread of reports related to institutional status, so that both well-known and less known institutions are included in the sample.

The peer review teams are obliged to follow a certain accreditation procedure developed by the EFMD. The fundamentals of this procedure are the 11 EQUIS quality criteria (Figure 2). These criteria are organized under the aforementioned three quality areas: high international standards of quality, a significant level of internationalization and a degree of integration of the corporate world into programmes, activities and processes. The three quality areas are considered equally important in the accreditation procedure.

The accreditation reports have a standard framework: a so-called 'table of contents' consisting of the following.

1. Introduction. A description of when the review took place and by whom.
2. Overall assessment. A general description of the institution and the peer review group's overall point of view.
3. Recommendation. The peer review group's recommendation to the awarding body for or against accreditation.
4. Detailed analysis. The greatest part of the report and a detailed analysis following the EQUIS criteria framework with recommendations, observations, statements and remarks considering: context and mission, students, programme quality,

Table 1. Survey of the direct, indirect and total count of statements according to the EQUIS quality criteria categories

EQUIS quality criteria categories	Direct	Indirect	Total
Mission/governance/strategy	**8**	**30**	**38**
Faculty	**3**	**24**	**27**
Connections with the corporate world	**6**	**16**	**22**
Programme quality	3	14	17
Research and development	2	15	17
Internationalization	3	12	15
Personal development	2	11	13
Students and participants	*1*	*9*	*10*
Executive education	*0*	*10*	*10*
Resources	*1*	*5*	*6*
Contribution to the community	*0*	*4*	*4*
Sum	29	150	179

personal development, faculty (i.e. staff), research and development, resources and administration, connections with the corporate world, contribution to the community, international issues and executive education.

The following analysis compares and interpretes the textual content relating to each of the 11 quality standards in the reports' detailed analysis section. Attention is concentrated on the recommendations and prescriptions for organizational change and the peer review teams' written comments, remarks and observations. The analysis of the reviewers' additional comments and remarks is important as they provide a more nuanced or balanced picture of what the reviewers think of the institution in question beyond the direct recommendations. This has led to a methodological division in the analysis between written *direct* statements (such as recommendations, advice and prescriptions) and *indirect* statements (such as comments, remarks and observations). By counting the registered direct and indirect statements through the reports it has been possible to make a survey of statement frequencies.

In addition, a deep qualitative analysis has been conducted with the intention of going beyond the surface inspection of what is said and recommended to the underlying assumptions underpinning the assessments and recommendations given. The key to such an analysis is to include the context surrounding the recommendations and study any added meaning to given statements in the light of this context. This analysis will assist us in distinguishing between whether assessments and recommendations are derived by the specific challenges of a given institution or by 'global' presumptions of how a 'good' business school should be managed.

Towards uniformity?

By counting the direct and indirect statements in the peer review reports (Table 1) and registering the frequencies under each EQUIS quality criteria category, is it possible to identify some tendencies or patterns of statements in the material. Throughout the process of counting the statements a great deal of discretion has been used and the categories cannot be said to be mutually exclusive. At the same time, the counting has strictly followed the 'table of contents' in the peer review reports. This means that all the statements have been counted and placed as a score in the survey according to the quality criteria category sketched by EQUIS. Even if this procedure seems obvious, we will also illustrate below that this way of structuring the recommendations also implies some methodological problems.

It is clear that there is far from even attention to the categories across the different reports (Table 1). The range is from just four statements pertaining to contribution to the community and as many as 38 about mission/governance/strategy. The mean number of statements per category was 16.3, with a median of 15, which gives an indication of the skewness of the distribution of the statements.

In general there are a similar proportion of direct to indirect statements for each category, with the exception of the faculty category, which did not have many direct statements.

The objective of this paper is to study the EQUIS peer review reports searching for signals of standardization or uniformity. The differences in the proportion of recommendations in the various areas indicate a tendency towards uniformity. Focusing much attention on a few areas concentrates effort in those areas and tends towards ensuring a broadly similar core, albeit with the potential for a rather more diverse periphery. The main areas of concern, 'mission/governance/strategy' (38), 'faculty' (27) 'connections with the corporate world' (22) 'programme quality'(17) and 'research and development' (17) would suggest a generic organizational model to which there is an expected convergence.

The numeric data can also be viewed from another angle. The EQUIS model defines three areas as of special importance: 'high international standards of quality in all areas', 'internationalization' and 'integration of the needs of the corporate world'. The category 'connections with the corporate world' produced a high number of recommendation statements, thus being in line with the EQUIS procedure. However, the category 'internationalization' scores rather low on the statement frequency compared with the declared importance. This is rather surprising, not least due to the international profile and purpose of the whole EQUIS system.

A likely explanation is that the categories used by EQUIS only partially structure the work of the review teams. This is a methodological problem, both for the review teams and for those trying to analyse the EQUIS system. In the EQUIS checklist of criteria satisfaction used by the peer review teams issues like internationalization are difficult to sort out and identify as one specific category due to the close interaction with all the other criteria. Internationalization is outlined in the table of contents as a separate category and in the checklist nine specified criteria are also developed for review teams to check. However, internationalization is also represented *inter alia* as a criterion under the categories of research and development, students and programme quality. This means that some direct or indirect statements on internationalization could be registered under some of the other categories mentioned above and, as a consequence, issues concerning internationalization have a higher score than apparent in Table 1.

The EQUIS quality area of 'high international standards' is also a very wide area that is supposed to cover nine out of the 11 quality criteria categories outlined in Table 1. The result of the analysis shows that only a small part of this wide quality area gets high scores in the survey, namely 'mission', 'faculty' and 'connections'. More interesting is that four categories also have a very low score in the analysis. Although the other four issues ('contribution to the community', 'resources', 'students' and 'participation and executive education') are high on the political agenda in higher education in many countries, it seems that they are less emphasized by the EQUIS review team. Such a lack of priority is, at least, not advocated by EQUIS, since the aforementioned checklist covers 46 criteria under these categories, which makes them comparable with the other quality categories.

The result could actually mean that the institutional practice within these areas is in accordance with the EQUIS quality criteria and that institutions fulfil the standards. At the same time it can look as if the reviewers put more effort into assessing the categories with high scores, like 'mission/governance/strategy', not only because of the number of pages used in describing these issues, but also because many of the institutions analysed are actually praised for their efforts and actions taken in these areas. In other words, even if quality standards have been met in these areas, this has not prevented the review team from coming up with more recommendations. Thus, it seems as though some of the quality categories are much more thoroughly processed than others. This raises questions about the relevance of several of the areas for the accreditation statements. The EQUIS system provides the reader with an impressive list of quality areas to be covered with a great number of accompanying criteria, but it can be asked whether some of the categories have more of a symbolic value than real importance for the final accreditation.

The analysis and discussion above offers some indications of answers to the research question. It can be claimed that the results point in the direction of specific categories of statements and that there are a clear majority of statements within certain quality categories. As a consequence, there are arguably strong indications of uniformity or standardization due to the numbers of statements within certain categories of the EQUIS peer review reports.

Maintaining diversity?

Nevertheless, when one takes a closer look at the statements that have been made the picture changes a bit. A deeper qualitative analysis discloses that the peer review teams seem to have different opinions and agendas not only concerning what generally characterizes a 'good' business school, but also on the direction forward for those institutions assessed. Some examples from the reports can illustrate the point.

In report 1, the school is presented as a private institution that, according to the report, 'enjoys' total autonomy. The expression indicates that autonomy from the state is something the review group consider as a considerable advantage, an indication supported by the positive statement on how the school is governed: '[the school] is run like a company with the Board exercising an effective control function while leaving management responsibility firmly in the hands of the Rector and his team' (report 1, p. 5). However, somewhat later in the report the review group state that 'the formal processes within the school's management system were not easy to comprehend and left the peer review team with the impression that if everything seemed to work well it was not entirely due to the efficacy of the structure' (report 1, p. 6). The group go on to comment on the matrix organizational structure of the school as a problem of coordination and control, but suggest that the solution to this problem is not related to any organizational measures but to whom the school elect as the next Rector: '[The Board] has an essential role to play in maintaining the schools momentum through a judicious choice of the next Rector' (report 1, p. 7). In other words, the private corporation seems to be something of a role model for the peer group, suggesting that lots of discretion should be given the Rector when it comes to how problems and challenges should be met.

In report 4, the school is presented as a public business school under rather strong regulations from the national authorities. Compared with report 1, one could imagine that the peer review group would see this lack of institutional autonomy as a disadvantage. However, when describing how the school has responded to this limited autonomy, the review team characterizes it as an 'active innovator' (report 4, p. 8). Even if the group notes that 'by law and by cultural tradition, the decision-making process is closer to a democratic and bureaucratic mode than to a managerial and entrepreneurial mode' (report 4, p. 9), the team is still impressed by the quality and coherence shown by the school in 'fast moving educational markets' (report 4, p. 9). In this case, institutional autonomy is not seen as an important condition for more entrepreneurial activities. Even if the decision-making system seems to be more democratic than managerial, the review group is rather satisfied with how it works. At least no recommendations are launched for altering the decision-making system.

In report 7, the school presented is also a public business school. As with the former case the school is 'facing constraints' imposed by national authorities (report 7, p. 8). The review team do, however, state that national authorities also represent a major source of funding, and as such, act as an important supporter of the school. As in the former case, the review team judges the governance structure at the school 'as complex', with several layers of authority, many coordinating bodies and much student participation in decision-making (report 7, p. 8). Still, when assessing how this decision-making system works it is said that the 'systems function properly' with 'ample room for entrepreneurship' (report 7, p. 8). There are, in other words, no signs of the review team wanting more institutional autonomy and even if the decision-making structure is seen as complex, no suggestions for changes are made: 'The governance is complex yet effective and well integrated' (report 7, p. 16).

There are many other examples which cannot be explored in detail here. In short, a 'deep reading' of the reports not only discloses that institutional diversity and identity can be maintained but it can actually be strengthened as a result of the EQUIS procedure. As the three examples above illustrate, there are few radical changes proposed by the review team in the accreditation process and no signs of the review teams having a predisposed agenda on what constitutes a good business school. A check on the other reports in the sample supports this picture of a procedure that seems to support existing institutional traditions rather than changing them.

Conclusion

In many ways the EQUIS system seems to deliver what is promised, i.e. a focused review on a limited number of issues of importance for business education institutions (even if a student would perhaps have prioritized other quality areas than, for example, mission, governance and strategy when awarding a 'quality label' to a higher education institution).

As a consequence, one could expect that this focused review might support processes of standardization in the institutions accredited. A deep qualitative analysis of the recommendations given in the reports reveals, however, that the ideas on how to improve, change or renew the institutions are quite diverse. They contain both very normative and less normative statements and the direction of the proposed change also varies substantially. There are, for example, no signs that public business schools should adopt structures and practises of privately owned business schools. Typically, recommendations argue for 'more', 'strong', 'coherent' and 'clear' policies/decisions/actions in various areas but it is far from clear what this actually means for the given institution. As such, the recommendations given are rather abstract and general, with few hints on how they should be implemented (apart for recommendations that implementation is important).

There are, in other words, few organizational concepts operationalized and it is not obvious which 'clear' objectives should be implemented. Of course, more abstract recommendations such as those mentioned above could also be a sign of a field with much tacit knowledge on how to manage and organize business schools. On the other hand, a possible process of standardization would be hindered by the fact that few other higher education institutions are listed as 'role models' for those accredited. Thus, transfer of particular organizational practices may as a consequence be difficult. As such it seems like the EQUIS accreditation system indeed gives 'diversity a framework', perhaps to such an extent that one might wonder where the threshold level of quality is actually set. An interesting follow-up study here would, of course, be to examine external reports that do not recommend accreditation, trying to identify the level of the minimum standards.

Rather surprisingly, it seems that a comparison between audit reports and accreditation reports reveals more similarities than differences. As with the audit reports analysed by Stensaker (2000), the EQUIS reports concentrate on a limited number of issues, but where recommendations are diverse and multi-faceted and where there is a focus on improvement issues. The fact that even direct recommendations in the accreditation reports are very general and rather broadly formulated is yet another indication of the close methodological similarities between accreditation and audit. Since it is not obvious where the threshold level of quality is in the accreditation reports, the two types of procedures appear more similar than different. In the light of the recent establishment of new accreditation systems in Europe, this might be good news for those interested in combining accreditation with already established quality audit systems. Even if the label and formal objectives of the procedures is different, it seems that accreditation procedures in practise might also handle issues of diversity and improvement.

However, if there is less difference than usually believed between accreditation and other quality assessment procedures, one could also question the rationale for implementing accreditation procedures in the first place. For governments and independent agencies responsible for scrutinizing or developing the quality of higher education, this might be worrying news. If the accreditation tool has less 'teeth' than believed one risks building up procedures that might stimulate bureaucratization and increase the costs of evaluation without getting the added value of 'securing' quality. On the other hand, since the EQUIS system is a voluntary procedure for institutions to undertake, one might imagine that this has deterred some institutions from applying and that, for example, a mandatory system of accreditation would be more explicit and tougher in their review. Further studies on mandatory accreditation systems might shed some light on this issue.

Summing up, our impression is that the EQUIS accreditation system indeed fulfils some of the objectives sketched by EFMD, not least when it comes to stimulating institutional diversity. Whether the system reaches objectives such as providing market information and providing an instrument for comparison and permanent benchmarking could be questioned. While undertaking this study, we discovered, for example, that obtaining the external peer review reports from the institutions was a much more problematic task than imagined. The external peer review reports are the property of the institution and several institutions refused to hand out these reports to outsiders. In other words, it seems as if the 'market information' revealed is reduced to letting potential stakeholders know that the institution holds the European Quality Label and that the analysis leading up to that award should be kept from the public eye. The paradox that occurs then is that a procedure that should enhance transparency seems rather to close the institution to interested outsiders. Even if the argument for holding back reports was legitimate enough, i.e. that the reports contained sensitive information about strategy and business tactics, we rarely discovered any such sensitive information in the reports that we received (see also the quotations above which are typical examples of what might be regarded as 'sensitive information').

Thus, more openness concerning how an institution has obtained the quality award would, in our view, increase the legitimacy of the whole accreditation procedure. The issue of openness should also be something that other accreditation systems should be judged by, especially since arguments relating to stakeholder needs and market information are often used as a prime argument and rationale for implementing accreditation systems. When it comes to the EQUIS system as a tool for comparison and permanent benchmarking, the issue of openness is also crucial. To engage in comparative activities is problematic if institutions accredited regard each other more as competitors than potential partners for cooperation. The use of the peer review mechanism in such accreditation processes might, in addition, contribute to weaken the potential for benchmarking and comparison. Stensaker (1998, p. 210) has, for example, shown that peer review panels involved in evaluating higher education tend to emphasize their own agendas, experiences and internal discussions prior to the terms of reference of the evaluation. (Is the number of recommendations in the quality area of 'faculty' in the analysis above an example of such biased interests? This area is not given such priority by EQUIS.) This process also takes for granted that the peer review mechanism is exemplary, a view contested by commentators (for example, Harvey, 1996, 2003; Barrow, 1999). The dilemma is one of tension between peers as experts in the discipline and in evaluative matters. Most members of peer review panels tend to be experts in the discipline, but with little training in or a deep knowledge of the field of evaluation. This fact may shed some light on why accreditation is biased towards conservatism, but also the finding that audits and accreditations are more similar than different, since it is often the same experts that are part of both processes.

It has been argued that the emergence of numerous evaluation and accreditation systems have occurred due to active mimicking or policy borrowing from one country or setting to another (Schwartz & Westerheijden 2003). The spread of the so-called 'Dutch model' of evaluation in the 1990s can be seen as a typical example of such behaviour. When the setting up of various accreditation schemes now seems to be at the top of the political agenda in many countries (for example, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Ireland), it is likely that existing accreditation schemes may be used as role models and sources of inspiration. For those interested in learning from the EQUIS system, the most important lesson seems to be that it might be possible to establish accreditation systems with strong links to quality improvement but that accountability issues relating to transparency, openness and willingness to share information externally could be substantially improved. Since the rationale behind an accreditation system is to foster increased accountability, one could, somewhat paradoxically, argue that it is in this area that the need for improvement seems greatest.

The other less obvious outcome of the EQUIS analysis is that the reliance on peer review raises the danger of not only standardization but conservatism due to a tendency to focus on and support existing structures and decision-making systems as illustrated by the deep qualitative analysis. An issue for further research is whether this conservatism is also the main factor explaining the ambiguous and unclear recommendations given.

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