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### Taking stock and looking forward

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Besides the UoC, Sharine has supported other Dutch-Caribbean higher education institutions with quality improvement efforts and their pursuit of accreditation. She provided various courses and workshops in the (higher) educational field locally and regionally, particularly related to curriculum development and teaching and learning skills. She participated in quality assurance and accreditation training activities, conferences and workshops regionally and in Europe. Sharine is a certified internal quality auditor and also served as external auditor for the accreditation organisation NVAO. Her current research interests are focused on quality assurance, quality management and accreditation.

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independent assessment of the Bologna Process in 2009/2010. His current research includes evaluation of 'excellence tracks' in Dutch higher education. Some recent publications were: 'Next Generations, Catwalks, Random Walks and Arms Races: conceptualising the development of quality assurance schemes', in *European Journal of Education* (with Stensaker, Rosa, & Corbett, 2014); 'Employability of professional bachelors from an international perspective' (with Kolster, 2014) and 'Quality Assurance in the European Policy Arena', in *Policy and Society* (with Enders, 2014).



## Proposal

### **Title: Comparing internal influential factors affecting accreditation processes in Dutch and Dutch-Caribbean universities: enablers and barriers**

#### **Abstract**

Obtaining accredited status is of great importance for programmes offered in universities, regardless of their scale, location on this globe and developmental status. However, there are few studies on this in small universities in the global south. During 2009 – 2014 a study was conducted on internal influential factors affecting progress and outcomes of accreditation processes in Dutch-Caribbean universities, compared with two Dutch higher education institutions. In this paper findings are presented based on a qualitative multiple case study of accreditation processes in the University of Curaçao contrasted with Utrecht University and HZ University for Applied Science in the Netherlands. Commitment of internal and external stakeholders is a universal enabler, but some other internal factors had different effects in Curaçao and the Netherlands. These findings shed light on the enablers and barriers affecting accreditation processes and how to address the challenges encountered, particularly in small universities.

#### **Text of paper:**

#### **Introduction**

In the Netherlands, programme accreditation was introduced in 2002, in the framework of the Bologna Process. A uniquely bi-national accreditation agency, NVAO, was founded together with the Flemish community of Belgium. This signals the European outlook of Dutch higher education policy. In the Caribbean part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, globalising higher education made gaining accreditation from the NVAO necessary too, in combination with the political authority located in The Hague. Relatively low per capita income, small island societies and small universities with limited resources there represented additional challenges. In this paper the internal enablers and barriers affecting accreditation processes in the largest of the three national universities in the Dutch Caribbean, the University of Curacao (UoC), will be identified, comparing them with two higher education institutions in the Netherlands, the University of Utrecht and HZ University for Applied Sciences.

#### **Background**

Quality assurance for higher education in the Netherlands started in the mid-eighties (Frederiks et al., 1994). The focus initially was on improvement and no legal consequences were coupled to external quality judgements; weakly performing institutions were granted unlimited time for improvement. In 2002 a shift took place with the introduction of an accreditation system directed to accountability as well (Brussee et al., 2005; Douma, 2009; van Kemenade, 2009).

In the former Netherlands Antilles, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century the educational system replicated the Dutch. Over time, the many shortcomings of this non-contextualized educational system were identified, didactically and content-wise (Isabella, 2011). It was not until the



late 1990s that educational changes were implemented at primary and secondary level (Department van Onderwijs, 1995; 1999). Besides the aim to adapt to the Bologna Declaration, the higher education policy in Curaçao is directed to ensuring that highly skilled professionals are trained locally to counteract brain drain, to meet national highly qualified human resource goals, to increase access to local higher education institutions, to make opportunities for continuing education available to citizens already in the workforce, to meet changing demands in the local labour market, and to guarantee seamless transfer of local secondary school graduates to higher education in the Netherlands (Commissie Hoger Onderwijs, 2002).

The establishment of the UNA/UoC<sup>1</sup> in 1979 was meant to create more local graduates at higher educational level, to contribute to sustainable socio-economic development of Curaçao (Commissie Hoger Onderwijs, 2002). This university is therefore a key vehicle for national capacity building (Isabella, 2011; Narain, 2004; Duits, 2005). The UoC is the only higher education institution in Curaçao legally regulated (Antilliaanse Overheid, 2004).

As of 2003 the UoC initiated its accreditation processes, as it had been agreed that the higher education institutions in the former Netherlands Antilles and Aruba should meet the same accreditation standards as in the Netherlands (Departement van Onderwijs, 2001; UNA, 2005). In 2005 the NVAO was officially assigned with this responsibility.

### **Theoretical framework**

To identify internal organizational factors that may affect the progress and outcomes of organizational change processes, three organizational theories were explored. Organizations can be analysed as open systems, in interaction with their environment, and they can function as learning entities acquiring, sharing and developing (new) knowledge (Amidon, 2005; Boddy, 2008; Carnoy, 2005; Dill, 1999; Donaldson, 2001, 2008; Giesecke & McNeil, 2004; Hooiberg & Choi, 2001; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Mead, 2000; Senge et al., 2001). This illustrates the connection between open-system theory, contingency theory and the theory on learning organizations.

Higher education institutions are changing organizations (van Ameijde et al., 2009; Baer et al., 2008; Carnoy, 2005). The global competitive environment and focus on 'knowledge economy' require them to be highly adaptive to the evolving, competitive world. Higher education institutions are expected to connect contemporary global quality demands to their local possibilities to attain accreditation.

From this point of view, quality as a transformation process and hence, the concept of quality as a result of change, is most relevant. The emphasis in the transformation view is on improvement and change rather than on stakeholder or product focus (Douma, 2004; Harvey & Newton, 2004). In line with this perspective, a link between assurance and improvement is evident (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Westerheijden, 2013). Harvey and Newton (2004) state that there should be an improvement function connected to quality monitoring mechanisms and procedures to encourage institutions to reflect and to further develop (see also: Dew & Nearing, 2004; Douma, 2009; Lomas, 2004).

Lomas (2004) asserts that quality assurance activities make higher education institutions find out whether their academic programs are comparable with those of other institutions,

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<sup>1</sup> Until November 6, 2013 the *University of Curaçao, Dr. Moises Da Costa Gomez* (UoC) was named University of the Netherlands Antilles (UNA).



meet national expectations and international demands. More precisely, Martin and Stella (2007) state that if a higher education institution wants to become part of this highly competitive world it has to prove it meets international quality standards by being accredited.

Over the years external quality assurance has evolved towards a system that is legally managed by the national government, externally driven, uses internationally recognized external quality agencies, and results in public reports based on summative judgments (Douma, 2004; Westerheijden, 2013). In many cases both the internal and external functions of quality assurance (improvement and accountability) are to be served by a single accreditation system. Governments tend to implement such a quality tool to guarantee that graduates are indeed highly qualified and equipped to contribute to the nation's sustainable development, as is done in Curaçao.

### **Potential internal influential factors**

From the three theories mentioned above, five internal factors potentially affecting change processes such as accreditation processes were derived:

- ✦ Organizational structure: The division of tasks, authorities and responsibilities should be in accordance with the delineated roles and accountabilities lines defined by the organizational structure (Mintzberg, 1981; Donaldson, 2001).
- ✦ Leadership and management style: Leadership in academic settings involves, amongst other tasks, developing a vision on quality assurance and accreditation, promoting this institutional vision, encouraging its implementation and ensuring that this vision is seen and used for continuous quality improvement. Accordingly, managers at the different levels of higher education institutions ought to play a prominent role as steering officers (Baer et al., 2008; van Ameijde et al., 2009).
- ✦ Quality culture: The existence of a quality culture within an organization refers to the commitment of all involved to responsible, long-term goal oriented work, meeting and exceeding pre-set quality standards and to be reflective about that, thereby creating a 'culture of evidence' at all organizational levels (Ewell, 2007; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Lomas, 2004; Sursock, 2011).
- ✦ Available resources: Insufficient resources can obstruct the implementation of quality control and quality improvement actions and therefore hinder the accreditation process (Baer et al., 2008).
- ✦ Internal quality assurance policy: the previous potential influential factors can all be addressed as part of internal quality assurance policy (Douma, 2004; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Lomas, 2004). A quality assurance policy plan outlines, among other things, the internal quality assurance system and the lines of authorities and responsibilities among the involved stakeholders and is usually arranged so as to comply with the quality standards of the external quality agency, illustrating the link between internal and external quality assurance.

### **Methodology**



This study consisted of:

- *Exploratory phase: pilot case study*, including ‘*organizational self-ethnography*’ at the UoC and ten *exploratory interviews* with staff members of accrediting organisation NVAO and of NQA and QANU, the two main evaluation agencies in the Dutch Kingdom. Together with the literature review, the exploratory phase contributed to the research model (figure 1).
- *Explanatory phase*: identifying the *potential* enablers and barriers during accreditation processes in the three universities and detecting the variables which *actually* impacted on the progress of such processes and their effect on the results (*comparative analysis*).

Data were triangulated from multiple sources to improve the validity of findings (Eisenhardt, 1989): *participatory observation* in the UoC, *document analysis* of institutional and departmental documents and 23 *semi-structured, in-depth interviews* with staff members at different organizational levels in all three higher education institutions (Isabella, 2014).

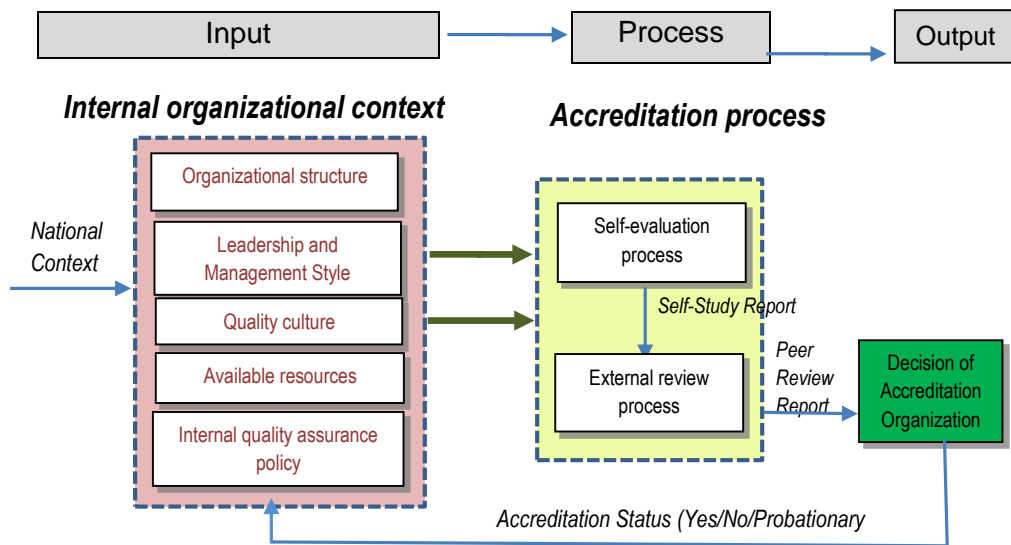
Table 1 presents the three universities. UU stands out as a contrasting university in many ways; HZ has double the student population of the UoC, yet the number of educational programs offered is quite similar. Since UoC offers both academic and professionally oriented programs, comparison with one academic university (UU) and one professionally oriented university (HZ) seemed justified.

**Table 1 Quantitative data of the studied universities**

	<b>UoC</b>	<b>HZ</b>	<b>UU</b>
<b>Age of existence</b>	33	25	375
<b>Student population</b>	2100	4200	30.500
<b># Faculties/ Academies</b>	5	7	7
<b># Educational programmes</b>	26	28	214
<b># FTE Academic staff</b>	53	312	2900
<b># FTE Non-academic staff</b>	50	125	2400
<b>Budget 2011 (in millions €)</b>	21	43	749

Reference date: September 2012

Figure 1 presents the research model. Five independent variables (internal organizational factors) are expected to encourage or—if absent—hinder the process and outcome of accreditation (dependent variables).



**Figure 1 The Research Model**

Each independent variable is operationalized in indicators with measurable components. On the basis of high or positive values of most of its indicators an independent variable is *expected* to have a positive influence on the process of accreditation, i.e. a *potential* enabler (+). In case of low or negative values of (most) indicators, it was classed as a *potential* barrier (-). Whether it *actually* has the expected impact depends on the results of the analysis. If an indicator does not actually influence the progress of the accreditation process, it is marked as neutral (0) (Isabella, 2014).

### Research findings

Gathering information by the three data collection methods, the actual influence of each indicator on accreditation processes was assessed. The mechanisms underlying the functioning of the indicators were unravelled and finally the actual enabling factors were identified (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2009).

All compared universities achieved mainly positive accreditation results (Hogeschool Zeeland, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b; HZ University of Applied Sciences 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d; Utrecht University, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012a, 2012b; University of the Netherlands Antilles, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d). In only a few cases accreditation was not gained directly, yet these programs were granted a recovery period. At UoC three programs obtained probationary accreditation for three years and one had to be re-assessed by the NVAO.

Table 2 summarizes the overall results of the analysis, displaying the role each indicator played during the studied accreditation processes.

**Table 2 Actual influential factors in UoC, UU and HZ**

Variable	Indicators	UoC	UU	HZ
Organizational structure	Organizational chart	0	0	0
	Decision-making structure	0	+	+
Leadership and Management style	Role of institutional leaders	0	+	+
	Management at faculty level	+	+	0
Quality Culture	Care for quality	-	+	+
	Shared responsibility, ownership, cooperation and collaboration	-	+	+
	Commitment of internal stakeholders	+	+	+
	Norms, values, traditions, customs, people behaviour	-	0	0
	Communication channels and interaction among internal stakeholders	-	+	+
Available Resources	Human resources	-	+	+
	Financial resources	-	+	+
	Facilities	0	0	0
Internal Quality assurance policy	Document Internal Quality Assurance Policy	0	+	+
	Internal Quality Assurance System	0	+	+
	Quality structure	0	+	+
	Involvement of stakeholders	+	+	+
	Involvement of external experts	+	0	0

Legend: + = actual enabler; - = actual barrier; 0 = neutral.

Only two enablers were identified in all three higher education institutions: 'commitment of internal stakeholders' and 'involvement of stakeholders'. In addition, there are two indicators that in all cases did not have a negative effect even though not all elements of an enabler were present: 'organizational chart' and 'facilities'. These indicators proved not to be relevant for the progress and results of the accreditation processes. So, they could be disregarded in future studies.

In contrast to the Dutch universities, UoC had to deal with 35% of indicators as barriers, obstructing the progress of accreditation. Nevertheless, at the end of the research period the accreditation goal was obtained for the large majority of UoC's programmes. Further research is needed to identify how exactly the 24% of its indicators acting as actual enablers neutralized the force of the potential barriers. This study demonstrates that the actual enablers, i.e. management at faculty level fortified by high commitment and involvement of internal stakeholders and the extensive involvement of external experts, were more dominant than the hindering factors. The Dutch cases actually had the advantage of many more enabling indicators (UU 76%; HZ 70%). Except for the organizational structure, the remaining variables mainly contributed positively to their accreditation processes. No actual barriers could be identified in these two universities.

In all three cases the organizational structure proved to have no direct influence on accreditation processes. Furthermore, commitment of leaders and managers proved a determinant indicator, underpinning the enabling effect of the variable 'leadership and management style'. This variable appeared to be of eminent importance. The driving force of institutional leaders and managers at faculty level, enabled development of a quality culture, enabled effective and efficient management of the (limited) available resources and successful implementation of internal quality assurance policies to meet accreditation directives, and ultimately successfully achieve and maintain accredited status. Inspiring, enthusiastic, supportive, highly committed and involved leaders and managers proved crucial.





In addition, 'quality culture' had a significant influence in the Dutch cases, which can be explained by their many years of experience with external quality evaluation; at UoC no quality culture was perceived.

In UoC, the lack of human and financial resources obstructed timely and effective implementation of certain quality improvements, causing, among other things, delays in accreditation processes. Thus, this variable was actually a barrier; this was not the case in the Dutch universities.

The variable 'internal quality assurance policy' had a varying effect on the progress and outcomes of accreditation processes. In the Dutch cases it was an enabler, while for UoC most of its indicators acted as barriers. Apart from the availability of an institutional quality assurance policy document, the remaining indicators were not (yet sufficiently) in place in UoC. This too explains the previously described difference in the degree of existence of a quality culture.

During the comparison two variables which had not been included in the research model became manifest. They appeared to be more important than some of the identified variables in the research model.

The additional internal factor was the *learning experiences* with external quality evaluation processes in UU and HZ. In these universities the elapsed time since the first evaluation experience positively contributed to a more fluent progress of accreditation processes. Probably, several other indicators were controlled by this variable. In the UoC lack of experience caused major delays.

The *review panel* is the other, though external, factor with considerable impact on accreditation outcomes at UoC, UU and HZ. A match between the review panel and the programme creates a friendly atmosphere during the site visit, enhancing the chance to achieve a positive accreditation result. The fact that a local work field expert was added to the review panels of UoC's site visits was indeed meant to guarantee that the national and internal contexts received due consideration, since these contexts largely differ from those known to reviewers from the NVAO.

## **Conclusion**

We assumed that each identified independent variable would influence progress and outcomes of accreditation processes. The research findings however disqualified this preliminary, simple assumption. We concluded that a compensatory relationship among the independent variables is more realistic than an additive one. Actually, high interrelatedness among the independent variables was verified. None of the independent variables can really operate independently.

In figure 2 a schematic causal model of the variables is presented. This figure illustrates the interdependence among the influential factors. Global contexts affect national higher education policy, which in many cases is the prime source for requiring accreditation. The five identified independent variables relate to each other, yet not all have the same kind of impact on accreditation processes and on accredited status. Since the impact of available resources, internal quality assurance policy and quality culture is less prominent their effect is presented in figure 2 with dotted lines.

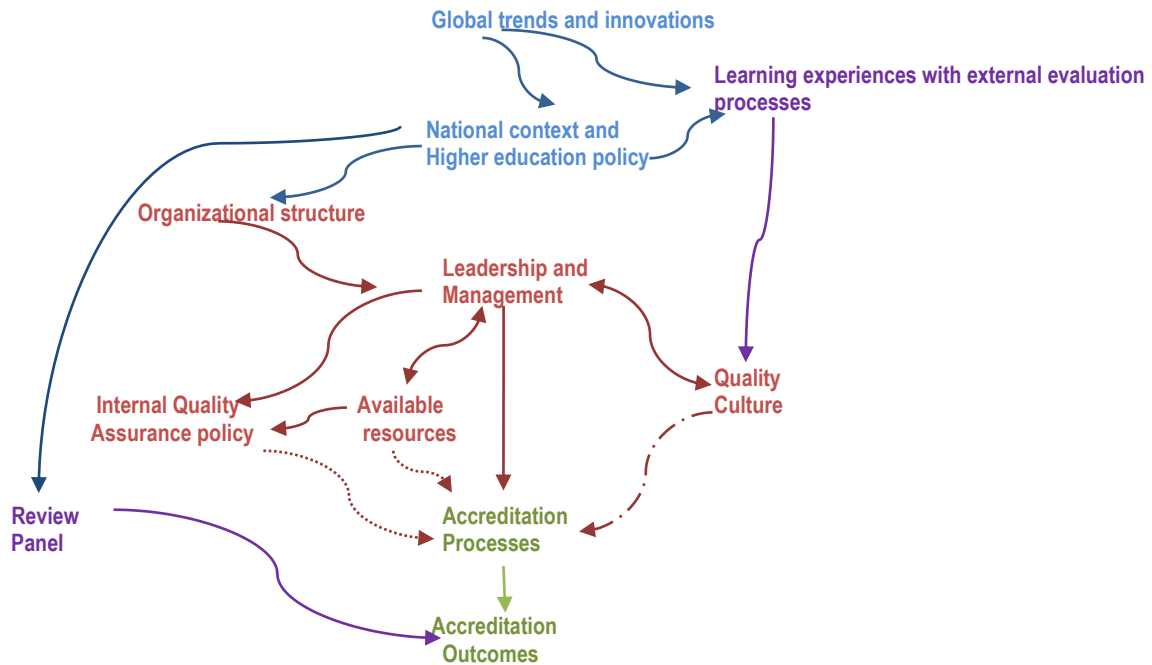


Figure 2 Schematic overview of causal relationships affecting accreditation processes and outcomes

Emerging from the comparative analysis, one additional internal variable appeared influential, viz. the learning experiences with external evaluation. Experience contributes to quality awareness and in time to a quality culture. As an additional external variable, the review panel and its relationship to the program also affects the accreditation outcomes. However, in-depth studies are needed to verify if indeed these two additional variables have the impact that this study suggests.

We conclude that a complex picture emerges of how accreditation processes and outcomes are affected. To reach the highly coveted aim of accredited status, successive stages of quality improvement must be completed, which in turn depend on several variables and the interrelatedness between them, leadership and management style in particular.

We could finally conclude that for UoC, exemplifying universities in the global south of this world, it is more difficult to tie down global mandates to local possibilities, resulting in different impacts of some factors on accreditation processes than experienced by universities in the Netherlands, in the global north.



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