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► **To cite this version:**

Rana Sawaya, Donabelle Zakkour Tabchoury, Marc Bonnet. Riding the Roller-Coaster of the Accreditation Process at Higher Education Institutions through Employees Engagement. *Theory and Practice of Socio-Economic Management*, 2018, 3 (2), pp.36-52. hal-01907980

HAL Id: hal-01907980

<https://univ-lyon3.hal.science/hal-01907980>

Submitted on 19 Dec 2018

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Riding the Roller-Coaster of the Accreditation Process at Higher Education Institutions through Employees Engagement

Rana Sawaya, Donabelle Tabchoury & Marc Bonnet

Abstract

At the present time, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are increasingly engaging in the accreditation process. The complexity of the accreditation process imposes on HEIs the urgent need to maintain sustainability. The pertinent literature reveals that employee engagement is an enduring praxis that helps organizations to gain sustainability and resolve organizational challenges such as the lack of cohesion so often observed in academic communities. This paper describes how a private University in the Gulf region, through promoting job autonomy and inciting engagement among its administrative staff and faculty members, has tried to successfully maneuver beyond and rode the accreditation roller-coaster.

Key words: Higher Education Institutions, Sustainability, Accreditation, Administrative Staff, Faculty, Employee engagement, Job autonomy

In the twenty-first century, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) moved from a vivid backdrop into a complex and uncertain era. To compete in the market, to comply with quality requirements, and to face internal and external challenges universities started riding the accreditation rollercoaster. Nowadays, more than 8300 HEIs are accredited by the accrediting commissions in the USA (CHEA, 2016). HEIs around the world believe that national or international accreditation is their legal means to provide assurance to the community and to demonstrate their high-quality education (El-Khawas, 2001; Trapnell, 2007; Urgel, 2007). However, the complexity of integrating the multifaceted accreditation standards confounds many HEIs.

The accreditation process poses several challenges. Some of the challenges of the accreditation process are seen as low risk and others as high risk. First, the accreditation standards can mislead HEIs with “many decorations” and can lack rationality (Fullan, 2007). Ultimately, the output, the focus and the rationale of quality improvement will be uncertain (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Second, HEIs should map the accreditation standards with the performance of daily activities to avoid a higher level of bureaucracy (Harvey, 2004). It contemplates “efficiency” over “effectiveness” by applying quantified indicators (McDavid & Huse, 2015). Julian and Ofori-Dankwa (2006) argued that American accreditation is likely to

paralyze schools in their ability to adapt to environmental changes, leading to a kind of “accreditocracy.” Third, accreditation will demand from HEI a long-term commitment which imposes on them the prospect of a future affiliation with the accreditation commissions (Roller et al., 2003). Fourth, universities while carrying out the accreditation process are experiencing a “hidden knowledge” that might negatively affect their performance (Fullan, 2014). Fifth, accreditation may decrease the level of creativity at HEIs, thus impairing them in their efforts to meet students need (McDavid & Huse, 2015). Sixth, the accreditation journey may lead to the emergence of conflicts between the various departments, for example, the marketing and public relation committee value for accreditation is to attract more students, whilst the curriculum committee value for accreditation is to enhance the learning outcomes. Accordingly, accreditation different poles necessitate a change process that HEIs should be prepared to adapt to. Oakland & Tanner (2007) revealed that success level of plans to change may reach as low as 10%. As described by Van de Ven (1986), this low level of success during the management of change can be linked to four fundamental challenges: “a human problem of managing attention” - “a process problem in managing new ideas” - “a structural problem of managing part-whole relationships” - “a strategic problem of institutional leadership.” The success of adapting to an innovative change within organizations is highly affected by the employees’ contribution (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2015; Fang, Tsai, & Chang, 2005).

This paper will shed light on overcoming the human problem challenge at HEIs during change through engaging the administrative & academic staff. The research paper, through a Qualimetrics Intervention Research at a private University in the Gulf region seeking international and national accreditation to stimulate its competitive role, will portray the link between HEIs actors’ engagement and the integration of accreditation standards.

Literature Review

In an increasingly changing world, one of the main challenges of organizations is how to adequately deal with “the social loafing” paradox. Mulvey, Veiga, and Elsass (1996) pointed out the crucial reason behind social loafing and why managers “raise the white flag;” it is that some team members lack the confidence to contribute, and they feel insignificant regarding some organization issues. From this perspective, connecting employees’ talents with the objectives of HEI will drive change and address the global challenges through innovation (Cruz, 2009). Buller (1988) underlined that the primary roles of the human resources professional would be to draw the attention to “the strategic importance of the organization's people and culture,” (p. 46) and to convey plans to staff at all levels. Hence, through cultivating “the whole person” (Chisholm, 1989), organizations can align their overall vision with their employee’s needs. Savall affirms that only through the creativity of the actors’ companies can wipe out dysfunctions (Worley et al., 2015). From this context, to survive the complexity of change, the people within the organization are the primary motivators for organization’s survival (Benjamin & Mabey, 1993; Oakland & Tanner, 2007; Savall, 2010). Wellins, Bernthal, & Phelps (2005) demonstrated that

intangible assets consisted of around 80 percent of the market value and that employees' engagement is "the fuel that drives the value of intangible assets." (p.3) In a nutshell, during change the HEI managers' agenda might involve whether to decentralize activities and disseminate them down to all levels, or to centralize the activities and decisions. With the emergence of change at HEI, one of the main challenges is to engage their employees (Saxena & Srivastava, 2015) and to maximize their human potential (Hommel & Thomas, 2014) in order to meet their objectives.

Boosting Employee Engagement

A study, conducted by Harter et al. (2002) on 36 organizations from different sectors, revealed that employee engagement had a meaningful positive effect on increasing the productivity of the organization. Scholars disclosed that engaged staff impacted positively upon the organization performance and sustainability (Christian et al., 2011; Harter et al., 2002; Macey & Schneider, 2008). Savall (2010) in his book *Work and People* used the word "inert" to describe tools such as technology, financial capital, because they cannot induce performance without the contribution of people in an organization. Thus, people are the "actors" who add value. Odiome (1987) revealed that the key to success is to involve "other people on whom you are dependent, this dependence works best if all hands are similarly committed to a better future as defined by job objectives" (p.102). Bakker & Demerouti (2008) demonstrated that employees' engagement yields higher performance. In this context, Collins (2001) has drawn a three-circle framework, "passion of actors, the best competency of actors, and the drives of their economic engine" (p. 203) that instills core values into an organization while stimulating change. Accordingly, to boost engagement among the organization's actors, managers should be aware of their employee's skills and knowledge (Echols, 2005). Pfeffer et al. (2005) described managing people at an organization as the "soft" aspect of a business. Hence, managers should be concerned about improving employees' engagement. Tiong (2005) revealed that enhancing employees' engagement could be developed through four different channels "communication, supportive environment from supervisor colleagues, employee empowerment, training and educating employees to cope with stress" (p.34).

Hypothesis

Employee engagement is defined as "the sum total of the work place behavior demonstrated by the people" through believing in the organization values, understanding the framework of the business, respecting and assisting the other actors, and learning new skills Punam & Jitendra, 2015). The Socio-Economic Approach to Management (SEAM) theory believes that each employee in the organization is potentially creative and can be obedient or disobedient based on his relationship with the organization strategy (Savall, Zardet, & Bonnet, 2008).

To underpin the relationship between organizational performance and employees' engagement during innovative change, the research will highlight the following core hypothesis: The engagement of administrative staff and faculty members' engagement at HEIs enhances the accreditation process, and creates a participatory environment that will generally lessen resistance to change.

Methodology

The aspects discussed in the relevant literature about the positive impact of employees' engagement on organizational performance during organizational change led the researchers to conduct a further study that involves as many as possible of the actors at the University. Kinkily (2014) stressed that to survive the journey of change working with people and through them is more important than the setting. The researchers' aim was to highlight the stories and narratives of the University actors (Silverman, 2013; Boje, 2003) through conducting research 'with' people, rather than 'on' them (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Narrating the actors' stories creates an emotional bond with them and shapes an impressive story that can aid in articulating the mission, communicating the vision and connecting with the market (Hayman & Giles, 2015). From this perspective, the researchers followed the Organizational Development theory that is rich in diverse doctrines: action learning, action science, clinical action, Qualimetrics intervention research (Coghlan, 2012). The researchers implemented the Qualimetrics intervention methodology which is based on observations and interviews that were carried out in a private University in the Gulf Region that the researchers referred to as University B.

Qualimetrics Intervention Research emerged in France from the classical Organization development methods such as case study (Yin, 2003) and Action Science (Argyris et al., 1985; Argyris, 1995). Savall & Zardet (2011) define Intervention Research as an "interactive" theory with a 'transformative' objective, which has a goal of generating "moments of creativity" (p.31) through a "co-produced knowledge." In 1970, Henri Savall and ISEOR research team developed the Qualimetrics Intervention-Research (QIR). QIR covers organizational, human and economic matters to release untapped potentials, identify the hidden cost of dysfunctions, and energize the transformation phase (Savall & Zardet, 2014). QIR is a "top-down" process in which top manager supports the process of change and "bottom-up" "process in which all actors get engaged in the transformation process (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011).

From one angle, the Qualitmetrics Intervention approach is in line with Research Case studies and Action Science. It is cyclical and combines action and reflection to change knowledge and generates a scientific knowledge that can assist actions (Lallé, 2003).

From another angle, Lallé (2003) elucidated the unique perspective of Qualimetrics Intervention Research, viewing it as a "transformative"; whereas Action Science is viewed as "interactive." Moreover, QIR focuses on two goals. First, "the empowerment of the actors", and

second, the creation of knowledge and action that is relevant to the participants (p.1101). Consequently, a Qualimetrics Intervention not only stresses the participatory aspects of Action Research but also addresses the financial and the strategic aspects within the organization. It focuses on “the description of the transformation phenomena” (Savall et al., 2012, p.108) which will aid in creating solid findings.

Boje’s preface (2011) of the “Qualimetrics Approach” book describes Qualimetrics as a practice that measures, produces, analyzes and interprets.

Qualimetrics traces the ways in which numbers torture, fragment, abbreviate, and invent stories. Qualimetrics sets many alternative stories against the dominant story of the firm, and in this way intervention researchers and participants coproduce a new story, one bridging qualitative and quantitative practices. (p. xvii)

The Qualimetrics Intervention Research conducted in this paper analyzed University B at three levels: financial, qualitative and quantitative, that the researchers will discuss in their findings.

In this frame-work the Qualimetrics Intervention Research generated significance to “both words and numbers,” and the researchers played a dual role as “partners as regards companies' observation and co-producers of knowledge with company actors” (Bonnet & Peron, 2014. p.663 & p. 699).

Field Presentation

To examine the staff engagement at HEI during the integration of accreditation, the researchers intervened at University B (a private University in the Kingdom of Bahrain). At the time of the intervention, the number of University administrative and faculty members was close to 45 and the number of students around 400, distributed into various undergraduates and graduate programs. The top managers at University B described its overall cultural profile as a constructive one in which employees are encouraged to interact with others and achieve tasks in ways that increase sustainability and performance levels.

At the time of the intervention research, the University - in order to respond to the Higher Education Council (HEC) requirements and to maintain its position in the market - was seeking national accreditation from HEC and was submitting the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) application to be listed by the National Authority for Qualifications & Quality Assurance of Education & Training. Also, it recently developed a new strategic plan for the coming five years that has focused on quality of education, accreditation, and innovation.

Data Collection

The researchers carried out in-depth qualitative interviews with the top managers, junior administrative staff and faculty members and quantitative interviews with the junior

administrative staff. The analysis of the interviews allowed the researchers to extract a group of relatively explicative factors of occurrences at the University with an approach to tackle “thick description” of the social facts observed (Savall & Zardet, 2011; Yin, 2003).

At the top managers' level, the researchers have conducted seven interviews with all the members of the University College Council which are the main contributors at the strategic level of the University and coordinate the various administrative and academic departments. At the bottom level, the researchers conducted interviews with the junior administrative staff which included the Marketing and Public Relation, Admission, Registration, and Student Affairs departments. Table 1 presents a summary of the carried out qualitative interviews at the top and bottom levels indicating the category of the population, the type of interviews, the number of interviews and the number of the interviewees.

Table 1
Summary of Qualitative Interviews at the Top and Bottom Level

Top Level: Managers & Executives			
Category	Number of Interviews	Number of Interviewees	Type of Interviews
Executives	3	3	Individual
Top Managers	4	4	Individual
Bottom Level: Administrative staff			
Category	Number of Interviews	Number of Interviewees	Type of Interviews
Executives	4	4	Individual
Top Managers	1	1	Individual

Data Treatment

The diversity of the interviewees described in table 1 shed light on the root causes of the dysfunctions both at the “micro” and “macro” space of the University. During the interviews a high degree of confidence occurred among the majority of the actors interviewed and the researchers. However, the researchers faced some challenges in interpreting and reflecting the insights of the interviews. First, while carrying the interviews the researchers had to build a genuine trust among the interviewees. To highlight on this aspect, the researchers had to exclude one of the interviews from the data interpretation because the interviewee due to lack of trust didn't convey liberally her thoughts. A second challenge was the confidentiality of some the financial figures which limited the overall hidden cost evaluation.

Figure 1 illustrates the classification of the four stages of the data treatment (Savall & Zardet, 2011, p.288). First, the selection of the field notes quotes, second the classification of the field notes quotes by subthemes grouped by themes (the six main dysfunctions), third the generation of key ideas and fourth the calculation of the frequencies.

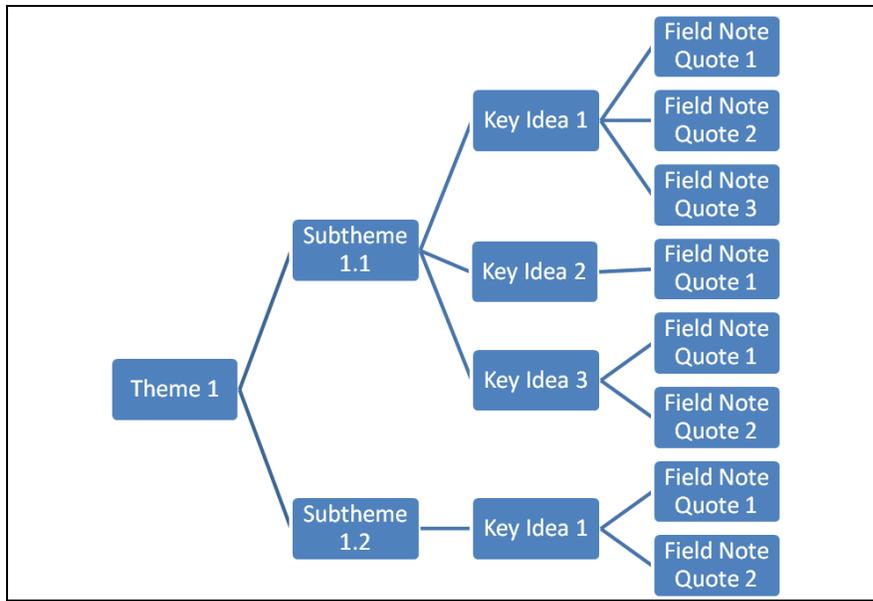


Figure 1. *Classification of the Data Treatment. Retrieved from Savall, H., & Zardet, V., (2011)*

While decoding the witness statements, the researchers weighted the key ideas by assigning frequencies relative to the number of responses which would help at a later stage in the utilization of tools.

Figure 2 highlights the descriptive statistics (number of interviews, time spent on interviews, field note quotes, themes, subthemes and key ideas) of the data treatment classification at University B. The interviews generated: 5 interviews at the bottom level and 7 interviews at the top level, a total of 18 hours of interviews, narrative of 157 witness statements at the top level, 101 at the bottom level; 85 key ideas at the top level, 19 at the bottom level, an average of 36 sub-themes, and 6 themes (the working conditions, work organization, communication coordination cooperation, time management, integrated training, and strategic implementation).

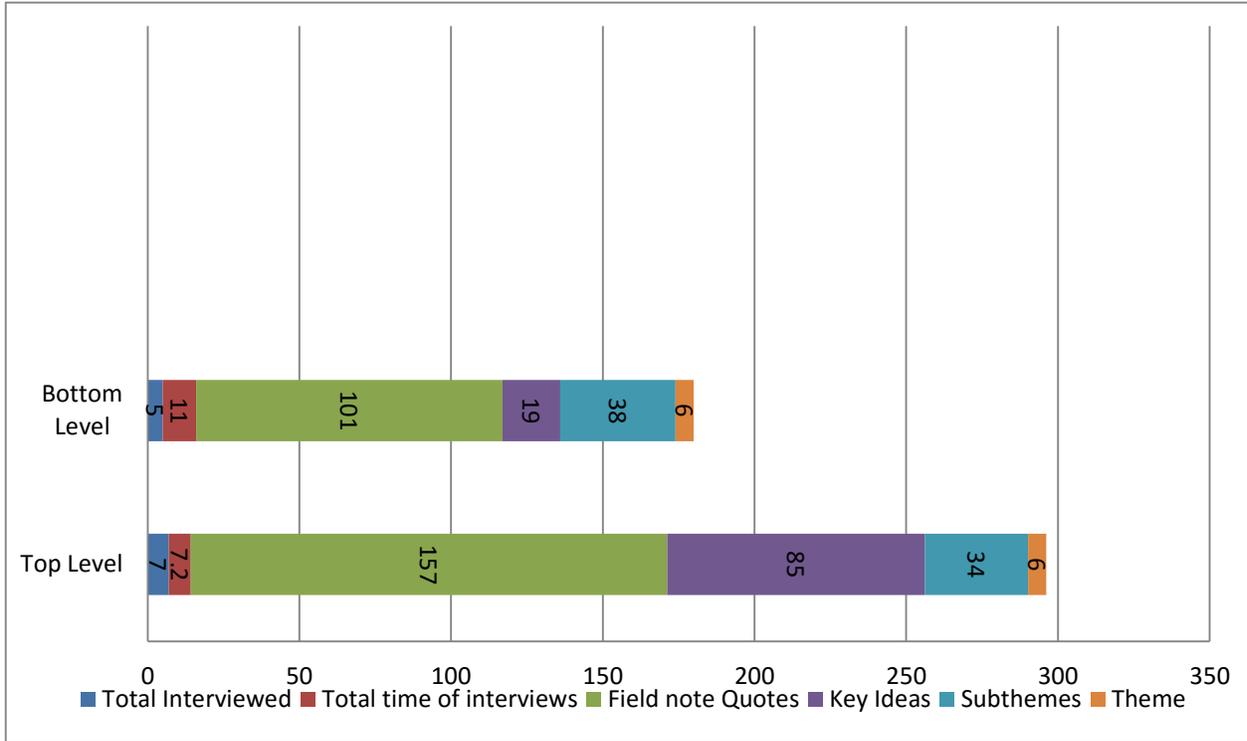


Figure 2. *Descriptive Statistics of the Data Treatment*

Figures 3 and 4 indicate the frequencies of the field notes quoted relative to the main six themes of dysfunctions. Hence, the frequencies reflect at both levels that the main themes that University B should look after are the strategic implementation and the work organization. At the bottom level, the work organization and strategic implementation included the highest percentage of witness statement 31 % each. Similarly, at the top level, the strategic implementation incorporates 20 % of the witness statements whereas the working organization 26 % of the total statements.

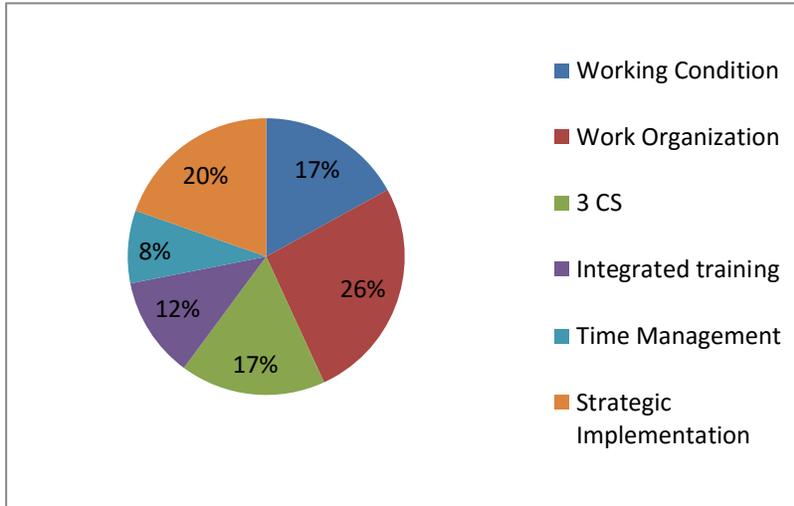


Figure 3. Frequencies of 157 Field Notes Quotes at the Top Level as per the Six Themes of Dysfunctions

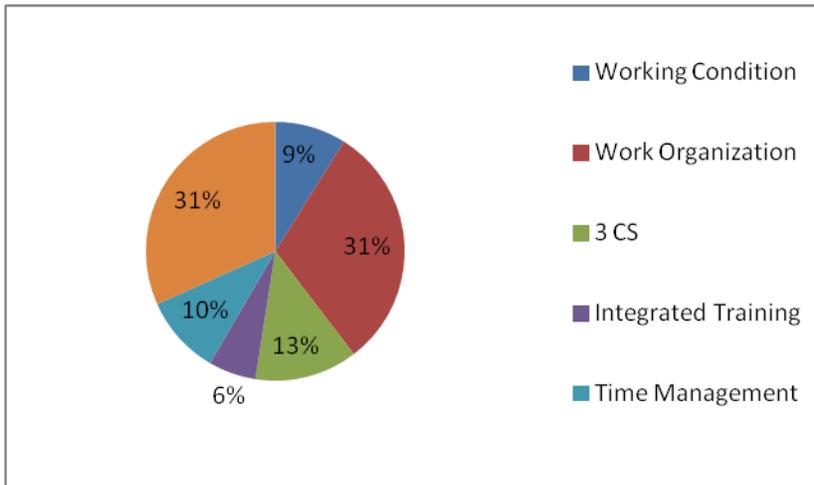


Figure 4. Frequencies of 101 Field Notes Quotes at the Bottom Level as per the Six Themes of Dysfunctions

The Data Script

The SEAM's script is composed to help people to communicate in a mutual language (Savall, et al. 2014). Boje (2003) highlighted the importance of narration to stimulate change, managers need to build "a more coauthored and inter-textual construction of narrative" to trace the difficulties of "storytelling processes" and to create "a more hybrid form of storytelling process" (p. 49). The interviews generated various dysfunctions that the researchers narrated and classified in six themes. Table 2 shows a few aspects of the subthemes and key ideas that will trace the data script.

Table 2
Example of Data Treatment Classification

Theme	Subtheme	Key Ideas
Working Condition	*Work Atmosphere	*Stimulate the Administrative and faculty members' attitude
Work Organization	*Autonomy in the Work	*Validate a flexible delegation mechanism
	*Distribution of Tasks, Mission and Function	*Initiate Induction and capacity building in the accreditation process
Communication-Coordination-Cooperation	*3C Internal to the Service	*Boost the Interaction and Communication Among Departments
Integrated Training	*Training Frameworks	*Coordinate Awareness Workshops
Time Management	*Respect for Delivery Time	*Develop Time Management Culture
Strategic Implementation	*Authors of the Strategy	*Empower the authors of the strategy

From the data treatment of the interviews that consists of themes, sub-themes, key ideas, field note quotes, origin of fieldnote quotes and frequencies of key ideas (Savall & Zardet, 2008) the intervener prepared and presented a data script, a mirror effect as per SEAM language to the whole University to reflect on the corrective actions. What is a mirror effect? A mirror effect is a “shocking action” that will push the senior management team to allocate their time and effort into change (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2011). Savall and Zardet (2011) define it as “a transactional image of the research object obtained through contradictory evaluation internal to the research object” (p. 286).

Implementation Process

The mirror effect at University B shed the light on the importance of having an accreditation action plan to track the activities depending on their value-added level, and to improve the teamwork spirit within the departments of the University. Through the shocking

action, the researchers helped the top managers to understand the areas that will steer the engagement of the University. The accreditation action plan purpose was to trigger the level of “autonomy” which is classified by Hackman & Oldham (1980) among the five characteristics of a job that will stimulate the motivation and engagement of employees.

The synchronization of activities and the involvement of the various actors in the plan led to a higher degree of communication parallel to Cappelletti’s (2009) model of internal management control that “coordinates organizational strategy with internal control objectives with the full support of a company’s board of directors, synchronization by a steering committee and direct involvement of all managers” (p. 26). Ultimately, the accreditation action plan traced the main pillars that the University should align with their built structure to incorporate accreditation:

- Assigning four accreditation committees, each committee being responsible for preparing two areas out of the eight areas required by the National Institutional Accreditation (HEC Accreditation Handbook, 2016).
- Allocating financial resources for the accreditation mechanism.
- Training subordinates on the new standards to be imposed through conducting workshops.
- Weekly meetings for each committee to update accreditation progress.
- Preparing the Self Evaluation Report through recording the various activities of faculty and administrative staff.

Findings and Discussions

The rational coordination and synchronization of human tasks have always posed a significant challenge to organizations (Clegg & Baiely, 2007). Buono & Savall (2007) highlighted that through a high level of communication, the actors would be empowered to overcome constraints while integrating changes. The Qualimetrics Intervention at University B enabled the researchers to obtain “1-knowledge specific to the organization; and generic knowledge that contributes to the increase of knowledge in the field of management” (Cappelletti & Baker, 2010, p. 219)

Specific Findings to University B

At a micro level, the stories of the actors echoed the importance of synchronization to enhance the integration of the accreditation standards which reflect the core hypothesis. The accreditation plan described the need to improve the communication among the various departments of the University. University B through the redesigning of its committees obtained a new synchronized platform and reinforced solidarity. Also, redesigning the distribution of tasks led to enhanced engagement; accordingly, the actors more successfully accomplished any task from recruiting new students, and assessing programs and services to establishing academic and administrative policies. The monthly meeting of the committees improved the “inter-personal

relationships,” and eased the flow and quality of communication, leading to a higher level of personalization. Also, the synergy among the actors facilitated a more seamless planning for aligning the accreditation standards. The accreditation plan guided the actors to achieve “Standard 1: Mission, Impact, Innovation” (AACSB, 2013) by their achieving the expected outcomes and their financing of activities related to the overall University mission. Such a planning approach will aid people to be active in accepting the integration of the accreditation standards, will drive them to move forward, and will lead to clarity in the performance of tasks. To wrap up, the researchers classified the main improvement actions due to the synergy of tasks into four categories working conditions, work organization, strategic implementation and integrated training as shown in table 3.

Table 3
Improvement Action Plans

Category	Improved Actions	Examples
Working Organization	Creating Committees that involve all the departments aligns the various activities of the University and synchronizes the tasks.	The committees were responsible for completing 8 areas of the institutional accreditation that included 32 standards.
Work Organization	Tasks are delegated between faculty and administrative staff members during the accreditation process.	Four administrative staff (3 top managers and 2 junior staff) and three faculty members handled the integration of Area 6 Student Recruitment, Support, Guidance and Progression (8 Standards)
Strategic Implementation	Quality and accreditation director was appointed to integrate the accreditation standards within the University identity.	The newly appointed director handled successfully the preparation plan for the National Qualification framework and the institutional accreditation as well redesigned the existing policies. Oriented the various teams on the accreditation process and scheduled weekly meetings.
Integrated Training	The University staff gained knowledge in the accreditation process.	Four workshops were held during the year by the director to all the faculty members and administrative staff to help them in completing the self-evaluation report and assist them in understanding the various KPIs

The improvement actions discussed in Table 3 led to qualitative, quantitative and financial gain as shown in table 4.

Table 4
Qualitative, Quantitative, and Financial Gain

Concrete Action	Elementary Dysfunction	Qualitative Gain	Quantitative Gain	Financial Gain
1-Assigning a Quality and Accreditation Director to follow up the accreditation plan	1.1The reports needed for integrating accreditation are not centralized and are handled by various departments	1.1Better Coordination among departments to prepare the documentation required for the accreditation	1.1Time spent to coordinate the actions needed for the accreditation plan will be reduced to half an hour per day instead of two hours per day.	11,000 \$
	1.2 Inflow comes from top managers for tasks to be done and the communication for action plan takes 3 hours per week	1.2Reporting the required data related to accreditation is more organized.	1.2 The time spent to communicate and give guidelines for action plans will be reduced to one hour per week.	4000 \$
2-Four workshops were held during the year by the director to all the faculty members and administrative staff to help them in completing the self-evaluation report and assist them in understanding the various KPIs	2.1Integrating the accreditation standards was held by one staff member	2.1The University staff gained knowledge in the accreditation process, which led to a delegation of tasks	2.1Staff who used to handle the accreditation process will allocate the 2.5 hours that he spent daily on the accreditation process to other productive activities	5000 \$

Ultimately, through nurturing the actors with accreditation skills, designing committees that involve at least one representative from each department and appointing a new coordinator that will mobilize and empower all the actors, University B will experience a smooth integration of the accreditation standards. For instance, while retuning the existing policies or developing new policies, the gaps were easily and comprehensibly filled due to the clear communication among the actors.

Generic Knowledge

At a macro level, while ridding the rollercoaster of accreditation, Universities are facing a silent factor that threatens the engagement of the human factor. Johnson (2014) mentioned that “the ability to engage employees, to make them work with our business, is going to be one of the greatest organizational battles of the coming 10 years” (p. 1). The Qualimetrics intervention at University B, through the mirror effect and the accreditation plan addressed the drivers that help Universities to win the battle of engagement.

Limitations and Future Studies

Even though the research is limited to one University and one country; it has the potential to open the door to further scientific studies at other HEI in the region that face similar challenges. Moreover, there are various aspects that the researchers did not cover example -job enrichment and motivation- that they can tackle through future research. In addition, the researchers unlocked the mystery of the minimal core hypothesis of identifying a strategic priority plan to engage all the University administrative and faculty actors in the accreditation process to yield positive outcomes. However, a maximum hypothesis of ensuring that the aspirations and behaviors of the staff are maintained in the leadership style while integrating the accreditation will lead to further discussions and debates.

Conclusion

The research paper at University B has detected “the formation, deformation, and transformation of the game rules” (Savall & Zardet, 2013, p. xxxv) to adapt to the different poles of accreditation. In this context, the Qualimetrics Intervention Research at University B has shed light upon how through nurturing the actors with accreditation skills, designing committees that involve at least one representative from each department and appointing a new coordinator that will mobilize, empower and engage all the actors, University B enjoyed the journey of accreditation since each actor played the role of a quality manager. In conclusion, during the intervention the researchers experienced that through boosting human engagement at all the University levels, change could be smoothly expedited.

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