

AACSB, between dreams and reality,
how to get your accreditation



Introduction

Whether you're a professor, dean or student, you know that this five letters label is the Holy Grail for business schools. The AACSB is an institution that lived through the ages and is now a pillar of worldwide education. It is **the epitome of a quality accreditation** for business schools and **positively influences their engagement toward research and pedagogy**.

By asking some accredited schools, you will come to the realization that the AACSB experience is a long-term engagement. Like a marriage, schools marry with continuous improvement. Getting accredited implies enormous efforts in terms of internal organization... And it's expensive! Thus it is not a good idea to divorce with this particular label.

1916

Creation of the AACSB through an association of prestigious American universities (Harvard, Columbia, University of Nebraska, Yale, University of Wisconsin and others*).

1968

The University of Alberta is the first non-US accredited university.

The AACSB is not just an accreditation. It is also a think-tank-like association and regularly produces numerous reports on worldwide education management, innovations in management, observations, statistics and trends to follow.

* <http://www.aacsb.edu/about/history/timeline>

Understanding how the AACSB works, its vocabulary, its schedules and its benefits for a business school are still difficult to figure out with clarity. We're talking about a sector of education that is highly administrative and where it's not much fun to read dozens and dozens of documents to understand on which adventure a school is about to embark.

1997

L'Ecole Supérieure des Sciences Economiques et Commerciales (ESSEC) is the first non-North American business school to be accredited, AACSB intensifies its internationalization.

780+

Number of AACSB accredited business schools worldwide which represent less than 7% of the total number of business schools.

Yet we still find articles and blog posts attempting to clarify what the AACSB is. But it is often oversimplified and we still don't understand the core of the organization... which gives birth to **urban legends** about the label that are either not really true or completely wrong.

Number of schools following the accreditation process in 2016-2017.

258



The AACSB is an English-only organization, thus it is important to fully understand its vocabulary because it won't be translated!

You got it right, the goal of this white paper here is to demystify and clarify what the AACSB is and how it works, what's at the core, how to obtain it and what are the advantages?

Urban legend #1

FALSE

The AACSB's criteria are based solely on the quality of faculty and its engagement in research

Let's start our investigation by trying to understand the **AACSB's values**. A lot of international accreditations base their criteria on Quality Assurance Mechanisms. This makes us think about professors' ability to teach well and teach the right skills to their students.

The thing is that the AACSB goes way further.

As explained by **Albrecht Sonntag**, Associate Dean for accreditation at ESSCA school of management, since 2003 the AACSB have reformed these **standards** and consider not the **Assurance of Teaching** but quality and **Assurance of Learning (AoL)**. This shifts the emphasis from being on faculty to student success.

"There's an expression that puts into words the AACSB changes in 2003", says M. Sonntag:

"You teach, but do they learn?"



Obviously, this makes sense. The organization's initiative goes as follows:

We study student success and learning because we can base ourselves on their results and their progression, which can **be measured in an objective way** and determine if faculty **taught well the skills needed** to integrate or better perform in the professional world. Obviously, the goal of a school is to train the best students and innovators of tomorrow, not the best professors to train students. And this difference is crucial.

Because **the prism is reversed**, the AACSB doesn't want faculty to subjectively decide what to teach. The goal is to analyze the market and its needs in order to adapt skills and **educational content to teach students**.

The results?

A school acting in this manner insures a higher percentage of employment for students just after graduating as well as **skilled professional** training and **future innovators**.

So yes, the AACSB also considers a **research-focused faculty** important. For the same reason that it can be measured quantitatively and objectively to define a school's engagement to **improvement** and **innovation**. But no, the AACSB is not basing its accreditation criteria solely on the quality of a school's faculty.

Urban legend #2

FALSE

The AACSB is based solely on quantitative criteria

All you have to hear are keywords like “**Assurance of Learning**” or “**Global Standard**” or even “**Student Success Measurement Methods**” to think that this certification is based only on **quantitative** data. In fact, it’s not so true. At least for the past couple of years.

The AACSB method of «from market needs to students skills» inspired many schools: *“so much that overtime, many were obsessed with collecting quantitative data. This is regrettable because not everything is quantifiable in the human relationship of the learning process”*, affirms Mr. Sonntag.



The Associate Dean for accreditations at ESSCA school of management has underlined himself these “threats” to AACSB audit groups when his school went through the accreditation process (2010-2014) and proposed taking into account both quantitative and qualitative data for AoL.

1

Conserving academic data and performance indicators in order to measure the **evolution of skill integration** by students per course, program and across all years.

Adding **qualitative diagnosis** from faculty on the overall quality of their work and on more detailed subjects like the progression of their students. This diagnosis is much more effective than using solely the rankings *“Exceeds Expectations, Meets Expectations and Fails to Meet Expectations”*.

2

3

Also adding **feedback from students**: their review of the courses they followed, their professors and their ideas for improvement. These are highly valued feedback because what’s more indicative to judge the quality of a school than the opinion of its students?

This method proposed by **Albrecht Sonntag** for ESSCA is also found in the AACSB 2013’s reform of the standards. The AACSB applies an important reform of its dogmas every ten years more or less. Now, qualitative content is just as important as numbers and quantitative data.

“There are also many other qualitative resources that can’t be measured but they still are very important for an in-accreditation or post accredited school”, says **Patrice Houdayer**, International Director of Programs and Student Life at SKEMA business school (France).

For example, Peer-Review-Teams (composed of 3 Deans) who come to assess the candidate school can meet anybody to discuss their experience at school or to answer their questions. Candidates’ answers are crucial to their overall assessment.

Another example, says **Patrice Houdayer** :

“ SKEMA has a campus in Brazil and it had a project. Students gave themselves an objective: ensuring that a maximum number of children from the neighboring favela go to school and learn. It’s a huge project that has an impact on the society and the environment, which is also something that the AACSB values. Nevertheless it is a qualitative fact that can’t be measured but still indicates the quality of the school.”



Urban legend #3

FALSE

The AACSB is a label reserved only for the top business schools

Possibly the most widespread belief about the AACSB. Yes, less than 7% of business schools are AACSB accredited. Yes, it is a niche community that merits the effort. Yes we find numerous prestigious universities that are labelled, but no. The AACSB is not exclusively reserved to «elite schools».

A school joins the “elite” **once accredited**. According to AACSB, accredited schools prove their quality and their expertise once they have adopted a number of processes of continuous improvement that are verified by the organization, never before.

Anyway, an accredited school in a closed community who shares research and expertise naturally puts off a kind of elite attitude. But not being accredited doesn't mean your school is bad.



For **Richard Soparnot**, Director of Academic Affairs at ESC Clermont, this is his point. *“Many other very innovative schools are the best in their field but aren’t AACSB accredited because they do not match the standards or just don’t need it”*.

By the way, innovation in learning, in pedagogy and the school’s environment are pretty much new values for the AACSB, notably through the 2016 **Innovations That Inspire** initiative which celebrates and advertises the nominees for their “good moves in terms of innovation”.

Finally, it is important to note that every business school can succeed at getting accredited, especially for the **Assurance of Learning** because it is a matter of process and **organization around learning**, not only about reputation of the faculty and their researches.



Urban legend #4

FALSE

The AACSB has stiff standards

If you think that the AACSB accepts only elites or if you focus on the fact that less than 7% of schools are accredited, you naturally will think that the process of accreditation is stiff. If you do something wrong, then “bye bye”.

This really isn't the case.

It is crucial to understand that the AACSB was first created on an **anglo-saxon model**. And despite its globalization “*we still find that approach*”, underlines Richard Soparnot, “*particularly when we address data collection and reporting of learning goals and learning objectives*”, terms we find in Standard 8 of the AACSB’s document’s criteria.

This standard requires a very well-organized document that will allow a school to implement a constant follow-up with its learning objectives and learning goals.



To complete the implementation of this standard, the candidate school must show that learning objectives are included in every syllabus, course and exam*.

This might be something difficult to do for some schools since they must report in their Self Assessment Reports, the evolution of learning objectives and academic results through the years, pre and post-accreditation.

Standard 8 is one of the most complicated standards for schools to implement but it is crucial in order to improve continuously.

And when one says “standards to apply”, it is normal to think of stiffness.

Yet, it doesn't mean the whole process of accreditation is incredibly difficult. Although it reflects a strict anglo-american mindset since its globalization, the AACSB adapts its criteria to countries, cultures of education and school values.

* <http://www.aacsb.edu/-/media/aacsb/docs/accreditation/standards/business-accreditation-2017-update.ashx?la=en>



Then, seeing how much the AACSB helps a candidate by modifying their requirements makes you realize that getting the certification isn't like a scary and intimidating proctor that says «no» at the first mistake observed. On the contrary, there is a mentor assigned to a school, audit groups, the entire guide on the AACSB website and its glossary. Finally, timelines are customized to schools' needs. It is then more a question of guiding schools on a path that seems efficient and offers **continuous improvement to provide the best management education to students.**

Did you
know?

Learning *WHAT* ?

Learning goals and learning objectives are benchmarks that facilitate the organization of educational objectives for every student in each course, program and degree.

Simply put, these are simple sentences describing a skill to integrate all knowledge, educational content and course articulation. In other words, they are tools that ease the application of a method of skills and organizational knowledge.

Learning goals

These are objectives of skill integration at the scale of a program. They are macro objectives and, compared to values, they are followed but aren't measured nor used as objective benchmarks.

Learning objectives

More detailed objectives, these are measurable and are at the core of syllabi and course direction. Thanks to them it is easy to get clear feedback on the AoL for a specific course.

Urban legend #5

FALSE

The accreditation process is really difficult, from the beginning until the end

You probably noticed that the accreditation process was kind of... eventful. Well, we saw that the 8th standard was pretty arduous to implement but it's not the only one. Other standards come back regularly like the 5th, 15th, 10th and 12th standards and are often problematic for the same reason: data collection.

If you have read the articles, you might have seen that it is expensive, it requires a superhuman effort that even Superman wouldn't dare starting on, but despite these two downsides, **it's worth it**. No doubt about it!

But is it really that difficult from beginning to end?

We asked several schools and were answered literally the same thing. The most difficult step in the accreditation is the very beginning, after that, the renewal isn't too bad.

As **Richard Soparnot**, Director of Academic Affairs at ESC Clermont, explained to us *"it is very difficult for one to become familiar with AACSB's approach and methods but it is the most important thing to do even before attempting the application. Otherwise, you'll get yourself into a mess and won't see an AACSB stamp coming anytime soon"*.

According to Mr. Soparnot, it isn't unusual to see candidates fail at getting accredited because they dove straight into the application without really understanding what was needed to specify and accomplish learning objectives. So they end up with late submissions, fail and have to apply again another year. The beginning of this adventure is crucial because it is at this moment a school can collectively organize the numerous alterations that may happen during the process. Having everyone updated is of great importance and cannot be underestimated...

You should know

The accreditation process lasts on average between 5 to 7 years. But it can take as little as 3 or 4 years. On the flipside, there are situations where we find schools getting accredited after 10 years, because according to mentors and audit groups, the school needed time to implement the processes needed.

It seems to be long... very long, but in the academic world it's not. The key to success is to avoid wasting time and being ready before starting the application.

A piece of advice

Listen to AACSB's advice: read all there is to read and everything you need to understand, even if it takes you a year to master the process perfectly.

According to **Richard Soparnot** *"entering the AACSB adventure is a huge time and financial investment, so be sure to know everything and to have a dream team by your side. The accreditation won't be a question of difficulty, but simply a discipline to master"*.

Patrice Houdayer, International Director of Programs and Student Life at SKEMA adds: *"It is highly advantageous for a candidate school to communicate with accredited ones to better understand their experiences and their knowledge. Knowing this makes it easier to save precious time and increase your chances of success"*.

Finally, all of our correspondents agreed that adding data collection tools and digital tools (especially the right ones) were also crucial in facilitating the process of implementation and organization of a school.

Christophe Rouillon, Director at ESSCA Shanghai, who uses TestWe confirmed, *"This software is a great accelerator in terms of academic data collection, organization and communication"*.

Urban legend #6

FALSE

The decision to apply to the AACSB is made only by Deans

Once again, another false concept. We might think that the AACSB is a certification pursued only by Deans for their schools or maybe, at most, the school administration. Is that what you think?

Who are “Accreditation Managers”?

Accreditation Manager is a role often seen in universities and european schools. The AM acts as the guarantor and manager of the implementation of AoL and continuous improvement of the candidate school. They are the person that organizes the internal structure and data to report to audit groups, mentors and accreditation organizations.

No, no, no, no, no, stop thinking!

The candidacy is a matter that includes the whole school in a **constant and collective effort**. We're not saying students are the main actors in the accreditation process although it is useful to let them know what is going on. But everyone else has a real role to play in it including: professors, accreditation managers, Deans and the whole administration.

Why a team effort?

First, self evaluation reports are required to demonstrate a valid guideline for the AACSB. They represent a huge amount of data extended over several years. From the composition of faculty, their activity and status (visitor, assistant, full time, part time...) to academic data and results from students on each course and program, course syllabi and learning goals...

Self Evaluation Reports?

Self Evaluation Reports are required in the accreditation process. Simply put, they are all about giving feedback and metrics of the school, quantitative and qualitative results, in order to prove that the school effectively implements all the criterias of the accreditation organization.

Everything, absolutely everything must be given to mentors and audit groups. So you can imagine how important team organization is here ensure everything is reported and organized correctly.

Showing that everyone is on the same page is a key element of the accreditation. It shows the AACSB that the school has the structure to meet the Assurance of Learning (AoL), and facilitates the implementation of continuous improvement. In turn, this eases and shortens the duration of the accreditation process.

Quantitatives

All the quantitative data form what is called a «Rubric». This is where we find learning objectives, assessment and exam results and overall student performance. These are classified into three divisions: Exceeds Expectations, Meets Expectations and Fails to Meet Expectations.

Qualitatives

As you saw earlier (page 4, 5, Legend #2), qualitatives are diagnosis, feedback produced by professors and students on the quality of courses, programs and their efficiency to help integrate learning objectives. *“The feedback help us determine if we should create new courses, reorganize others, get rid of courses, modify their organization”* explains Mr. Sonntag, *“adding these qualitative insights is most precious”*.

Finally, Self Evaluation Reports are “feedback loops”. As we already mentioned, they testify of the school’s positive evolution toward AoL and clearly announce what the school will test next to improve its structure and AoL as well as the results of these tests. The objectives? *“Closing the gap with the accordance of audit groups, mentors and the AACSB means the AoL is completed and you then enter the phase of constantly modifying things for continuous improvement. It also means you will definitely be ready to be accredited”*, told Albrecht Sonntag.

Who are “Mentors”?

Mentors are Deans of already accredited business schools. They can be voluntary or assigned by AACSB. Normally there is no connection between the school and the “mentor”. Their mission? To guide a school along the path of accreditation and continuous improvement. More precisely, they help a school to understand the approaches, terms and methods of the AACSB. They advise them on how to organize its faculty and administration, its courses and programs, which professors stay... They can meet at school several times a year, only once, or even through Skype sessions. Their support depends on the school’s needs and on the geographical distance between the two.

A mentor is like a candidate school’s best friend during its accreditation process and can really be a game changer. Understand one thing here: listen very well to what your mentor has to say!

Urban legend #7

TRUE

Being accredited to the AACSB tremendously improves international reputation and performance for a school

“An accredited school is part of a club and like in every club, there are advantages... lots of them”, says Mr. Houdayer.

Direct advantages

- Positive influence on faculty composition and hiring (professors, Deans, researchers etc.)
- Factor of attraction in terms of student applications thanks to the “quality label”*
- Numerous partnership propositions from other schools
- Access to a community, events, information reunions and networking
- Access to reports from the AACSB on research and innovation (pedagogy and technology in education)
- Launchpad for the highest ranks in international business school rankings

* **The Globe And Mail** <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/business-education/b-schools-work-hard>

Indirect benefits

- Discipline and constant improvement in school management
 - Enhanced course quality and increased skill integration for students
 - The community gives the school access to experiences from others. *“Accredited schools obviously have a very intense competition between them. But strangely, the sharing of knowledge sharing and cooperation between them is surprisingly just as intense!”* told Patrice Houdayer, International Director of Programs and Student Life at SKEMA
 - Boost for marketing
-



Conclusion

After taking a look at all of these points and urban legends, having an idea of how the AACSB works and what its values and approaches are become much more clear.

The certification is kind of hard to get, its process is relatively long, it is fairly expensive and somewhat elitist.

But the secret for obtaining it easily is in understanding its mindset, its approach.

One must understand that the AACSB is a guide for establishing positive processes to enhance learning rather than a plain and simple title. An experience more than a test.

- Its goal is to build a virtuous circle of innovation and learning. This is done to ensure that students learn well and are being trained as future influencers for their environment and market.
- All candidate schools for the AACSB are considered as equal in their ability to succeed.
- The AACSB is a matter of collective efforts and needs everyone to be solidary.

Finally, the AACSB creates an environment of support and guidance rather than proctoring and sanctions.

Understanding it helps an accredited or non-accredited school determine which actions to take, which initiative to implement and which tool is best to use. In other words, one must be familiar with the AACSB mindset to ensure the acquisition of the certification.

Special thanks

This investigation was made by the TestWe team in order to make issues, terms, functionalities and benefits of the AACSB clear and easily understandable.

We wanted to thank in particular:

Albrecht Sonntag, Associate Dean for accreditation at ESSCA school of management

Christophe Rouillon, Director at ESSCA Shanghai

Patrice Houdayer, International Director of Programs and Student Life at SKEMA

Richard Soparnot, Director of Academic Affairs at ESC Clermont School of Management

TestWe, expert of e-Exams

TestWe is a French startup that was launched in 2014. It proposes a new way to create, grade, manage and take exams by digitizing the whole process. Basically no more pencils, papers or cheating. TestWe is about saving time, money and being good for the environment!

TestWe is a startup deeply committed to innovation in Education and is always listening to bright ideas coming from its users as well as their problems.

Also, it works intensely with its users and the AACSB in order to optimize its solution and build a tool that will make the accreditation and renewal processes easier. TestWe works to better establish continuous improvement and AoL for any educational institution, especially business schools.

Are you interested in continuous improvement?

In e-Exams and innovation in Education?

Contact us to know more!

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