




## Strategic Planning for Foreign Language Program Accreditation in Higher Education

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### Yükseköğretimde Yabancı Dil Programı Akreditasyonu için Stratejik Planlama

Donald STAUB , Asist. Prof., Izmir University of Economics, donald.staub@izmirekonomi.edu.tr

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**Öz.** Bu çalışmanın amacı, bir program düzeyinde akreditasyon sürecinin uygulanışını ve sonuçlarını analiz etmek ve ilgili bir vaka çalışması perspektifinden, akreditasyon hedefleyen programlara rehberlik edecek bir planlama çerçevesi önermektir. Bu çalışma, "bir süreç, etkinlik, olay gibi sınırlı bir sistemi" inceleyen (Creswell, 1998, s. 112) araçsal vaka çalışması olarak yürütülmüştür. Veriler, akreditasyon sürecinin uygulandığı yabancı diller okulundan 26 tam zamanlı öğretmen ve yönetici ile yapılan kapsamlı görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmıştır. Çalışmada belirtildiği gibi, üniversitelerin, paydaşlarına (hükümetler, finansörler veya bireyler) katma değer sağlama baskısı altında oldukları için daha fazla dışsal değerlendirmeye veya akreditasyona tabi tutulması gerekmektedir. Ancak, üniversitelerin birçoğu, bu zorlu süreçleri etkili ve verimli bir şekilde yönlendirmek için deneyim ve uzmanlığa sahip değildir. Bolman ve Deal'ın "Dört Çerçeve"si gibi çerçeveler ile Spillane, Halverson ve Diamond'ın "Dağıtılmış Liderlik" gibi çerçeveler, kalite güvence girişimlerini planlayan ve uygulayan kişilere, organizasyonlarının kalite güvence girişimine hazır bulunma durumunu etkili bir şekilde teşhis etmeleri için araçlar sunabilecektir. Çalışma bulgularına dayalı olarak, bu çerçeveler temelinde yürütülen tek bir vaka analizi aracılığıyla, liderlerin organizasyonlarının mevcut durumunu analiz etmelerine ve kalite güvence girişimine hazırlık derecesini değerlendirmelerine yardımcı olmak ve süreci kolaylaştırmak için ilk kez uygulayanlara yardımcı olacak bir rehberlik çerçevesi önermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Akreditasyon, dağıtılmış liderlik, kalite güvencesi, yükseköğretim.

**Abstract.** The purpose of this study is to analyze the implementation and outcomes of an accreditation process at the program level and, from the perspective of a relevant case study, propose a planning framework to guide programs seeking accreditation. This study was conducted as an instrumental case study, examining "a bounded system such as a process, activity, or event" (Creswell, 1998, p. 112). Data were collected through comprehensive interviews with 26 full-time teachers and administrators from a foreign language school where the accreditation process was applied. As stated in the study, universities are under pressure to provide value to their stakeholders (governments, funders, or individuals), which necessitates more external evaluation and accreditation. However, many universities lack the experience and expertise to effectively and efficiently manage these challenging processes. Frameworks such as Bolman and Deal's "Four Frames" and Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond's "Distributed Leadership" can provide tools for those planning and implementing quality assurance initiatives to effectively diagnose their organization's readiness for quality assurance initiatives. Based on the study's findings, through a single case analysis conducted within the context of these frameworks, this study proposes a guidance framework to assist novice practitioners in assessing their organization's current state and readiness for quality assurance initiatives and facilitating the process for first-time implementers.

**Keywords:** Accreditation, distributed leadership, higher education, quality assurance.



## Genişletilmiş Özet

**Giriş.** Son yirmi yılda Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde çevrimiçi öğrenme önemli derecede yaygınlaşmıştır. Bununla birlikte, Polonya ve Türkiye gibi gelişmekte olan ekonomilerde özel yükseköğretim kurumları büyümeye devam etmiştir. Özel yükseköğretim kurumlarının sayısındaki bu artış, öğrencilerin seçim ve kaliteyi öncelikli olarak değerlendirdiği tüketici odaklı bir pazarı beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu nedenle hükümetler ve eğitim alanında yatırımcılar, yükseköğretimde kalite güvencesine giderek daha fazla önem göstermeye başlamışlar ve kalite güvence çalışmaları giderek yaygınlaşmıştır.

Kalite güvencesi çabalarının sık sık akreditasyon aracılığıyla gerçekleştirildiği bir dönemde, birçok üniversite dışsal değerlendirme ve akreditasyon süreçlerini etkili bir şekilde geçirmeyi hedeflese de bu konuda yeterli deneyim ve çerçeveden yoksundurlar. Bu durum da, kalite güvencesinin faydalarını kurumlar açısından maksimize etmek için özel bir planlamanın gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır. Bu gereklilik doğrultusunda bu çalışmada, Bolman ve Deal'ın Dört Çerçevesi (yapısal, sembolik, siyasi ve insan kaynakları) ve Spillane, Halverson ve Diamond'ın Dağıtılmış Liderlik kavramı temelinden incelemeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu çerçeveler, bir organizasyonun mevcut durumunu değerlendirmeye ve kalite iyileştirme ve akreditasyon girişimleri için bir temel oluşturmaya yardımcı olmak amacıyla tasarlanmıştır. Yapısal çerçeve, bir organizasyon içindeki kuralları, rolleri, politikaları ve teknolojiyi inceleyerek destek sağlama, aktif katılımı sağlama ve kalite girişimlerini sürdürme konusunda öngörüler sunar. Sembolik çerçeve, organizasyon kültürünü, anlam ve ritüellerini ele alarak bu yönleri etkili bir şekilde motive etmek için anlamının önemini vurgular. Siyasi çerçeve, bir organizasyon içindeki güç dinamiklerine ve rekabete derinlemesine bakar ve başarılı bir katılım için etkili kişileri ve önemli kaynakları belirleme konusunda rehberlik sağlar. İnsan kaynakları çerçevesi, hem bireysel hem de organizasyonel ihtiyaçları, becerileri ve ilişkileri göz önünde bulundurur ve bunların birbirine bağımlılığını vurgular.

Spillane, Halverson ve Diamond tarafından tanımlanan Dağıtılmış Liderlik, bireysel liderlik özelliklerinden ziyade çeşitli liderler, takipçiler ve durumsal bağlam arasındaki liderlik faaliyetleri ve etkileşimlere vurgu yapar. Bu, liderlik sorumluluklarının kolektif ve iş birliğine dayalı bir şekilde dağıtılmasını vurgular, bu sorumluluklar farklı aktörler ve organizasyon yapıları arasında dağıtılabilir. Bolman ve Deal'ın Dört Çerçevesi (yapısal, sembolik, siyasi ve insan kaynakları) ve Spillane, Halverson ve Diamond'ın Dağıtılmış Liderlik kavramı temelinden hareket eden bu çalışmanın temel amacı, düzeyinde bir akreditasyon sürecinin uygulanışını ve sonuçlarını analiz etmek ve ilgili bir vaka çalışması perspektifinden, akreditasyonu hedefleyen programlara rehberlik etmek için bir planlama çerçevesi önermektir.

**Yöntem.** Bu çalışmanın amacı, program düzeyinde bir akreditasyon sürecinin akreditasyon sürecinin başarısını ve zorluklarını etkileyen faktörleri derinlemesine inceleyerek ilgili bir vaka çalışması perspektifinden akreditasyonu hedefleyen programlara rehberlik etmek için bir planlama çerçevesi önermektir. Bu çalışmanın yürütülmesi için "bir süreç, etkinlik, olay gibi sınırlı bir sistemi" inceleyen (Creswell, 1998, s. 112) araçsal vaka çalışması (Stake, 1995) yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Veriler, 2016 yılında çalışmada bahsedilen ve kapsamlı bir kuruluş aracılığıyla akreditasyon sürecinin uygulandığı yabancı dil okulundaki 26 öğretim elemanı ve yöneticiyle yapılan kapsamlı görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmıştır.



**Sonuçlar.** Akreditasyon süreci, çalışmadaki ilgili programda saha denetimi, öğrenciler, öğretmenler ve yöneticilerle odak grupları ve ders gözlemlerini içeren detaylı bir süreç olarak deneyimlenmiştir. Bu çalışmada, akreditasyon süreci için harcanan zaman ve çaba göz önüne alındığında Bolman ve Deal'ın Dört Çerçevesi ve Dağıtılmış Liderlik çerçevesinin akreditasyon sürecinin planlama ve uygulama sürecine ne değer katabileceği sorusuna cevap aranmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları akreditasyon sürecinde yürütülen denetimin olumlu sonuçlar verdiğine işaret etmekle birlikte akreditasyon sürecinde daha iyi iç analiz ve planlama ile önlenebilecek gerilimli anlar yaşanmıştır. Programın akreditasyon sürecinde deneyimlediği olumlu yanlar ve zorluklar, Dört Çerçeve ve Dağıtımçı Liderlik perspektifinden ele alınmıştır. Her çerçeve üzerine yapılan incelemeler, programın akreditasyon sürecine yaklaşımındaki güçlü ve zayıf yönleri ortaya koymuştur. Programın akreditasyon sürecindeki deneyimleri incelendiğinde kültür ve iş birliği gibi belirli yönlerinin güçlü olduğu, ancak iletişim ve şeffaflıkla ilgili sorunların daha iyi planlama ile ele alınabileceği anlaşılmıştır.

Özetle, bu çalışma akademik bir ortamda kalite güvencesi ve akreditasyon süreçlerini uygulamanın zorluklarına dair değerli öngörüler sunmaktadır. Başarı ve sürdürülebilirliği sağlamak için organizasyonel yapı, kültür, güç dinamikleri ve insan kaynaklarını göz önünde bulunduran bütüncül bir yaklaşımın gerekliliği de vurgulanmaktadır.

**Tartışma.** Üniversiteler, içerisinde buldukları ortamda paydaşlarına katma değerlerini gösterme baskısı altındadır. Gittikçe daha fazla kurumun, dışsal değerlendirmeler veya akreditasyon süreçlerine tabi tutulmaları zorunluluk olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Ancak bu kurumların birçoğu, bu süreçleri yönetebilmek için gerekli deneyim ve uzmanlığa sahip değildir. Bu makale, tek bir örnek analizi yoluyla, bu tür kurumlara süreci kolaylaştırmak için araçlar sunmak amacıyla bir rehber çerçeve önermektedir.

**Sonuç.** Bu metin, yükseköğretimde kalite güvencesi çabalarını planlamak ve değerlendirmek için Bolman ve Deal'ın Dört Çerçeve ve Dağıtılmış Liderlik çerçevesini kullanmayı önermektedir. Bu, süreci acele etme baskısına rağmen, bu girişimlerde potansiyel başarısızlıkları önlemek için detaylı analiz ve planlamanın önemini vurgulamaktadır.



## Introduction

Higher education, globally, once again finds itself in a unique transitional period. Multi-national campuses, MOOCs, micro-credentials, and massification characterize many of the conversations around where higher education is, and where it may be going. Despite conversations around the end of higher education as it is currently conceived, the overwhelming impression is one of expansion, whether domestically or internationally (Altbach, 2015). The last two decades have experienced substantial growth in the higher education sector via online learning - predominantly in the U.S. - as well as bricks and mortar just about everywhere else. Across developing economies and throughout Africa access to higher education has experienced a sharp upward trajectory as policy changes in many countries have created a warmer climate for private higher education. Poland is an oft-cited model (Kwiek, 2009), as is Turkey, where nearly half of 200 higher education institutions are private, and have opened their doors in only the last twenty years.

Prior to this growth period, higher education - primarily public higher education - was accessible to the relatively few that managed to successfully navigate rigorous admittance systems (i.e. high stakes exams). As higher education opportunities have opened up to greater percentages of populations, we are seeing a transition to a more consumer-driven market. In other words, while there still remains high demand for (low-cost/free) public higher education, for the vast numbers of consumers, "choice" and "quality" are driving higher education decisions. Furthermore, other major stakeholders, be it the government or investors, are also inquiring about quality (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2014). And this focus on quality, commonly referred to as the accountability movement, is not predicted to be going away anytime soon (Burke, 2005; Shah, Nair & Wilson, 2011). Indeed, while in this period of substantial growth in higher education, we are also experiencing increasing emphasis on quality assurance (Cao & Li, 2014).

Whether quality assurance efforts are driven internally, by a university administration, or externally by a governmental or certifying body, more and more institutions are turning to accreditation to verify quality; this may take place at the institutional level or the unit (i.e. program) level. This movement is considered to be well-justified, given the emergence of "dubious" and "bogus" institutions (e.g. Levy, 2008; UNESCO, 2005; Ozturgut, 2011) around the globe that are purportedly taking advantage of the widespread desire for a higher education diploma. Accreditation schemes range from "desk-top" exercises that essentially require few participants and much paperwork to comprehensive, rigorous, cyclical processes that require sustained input and engagement from all stakeholders in the enterprise. Accreditation schemes are generally characterized by: 1) a set of standards identified and articulated by an accrediting body; 2) the educational unit demonstrating achievement of those standards, through written descriptions and some form of evidence (this is often referred to as a self-study); 3) inspection of documents, evidence, and practices by qualified external reviewers, who make a recommendation for (non) approval of accreditation; 4) a final decision rendered by a board of officials from the accrediting agency. This has resulted in many established accrediting bodies, originally founded in the West and established for the purpose of accrediting schools in that particular region, are seeing demand grow for their services internationally (Eaton, 2015; Knight, 2015; Morse, 2015; Salmi, 2015).



While the process of demonstrating achievement of standards through written responses and the assembly of appropriate evidence is demanding and time-consuming, it is still the type of work that can be carried out by a team of knowledgeable, focused individuals. This is where criticisms of the external accreditation process emerge; issues are raised concerning where the actual impact of the accreditation process lies – on administration, processes, and policies, or does the impact reach the core mission (i.e. teaching and learning) (e.g. Kis, 2005; Stensaker, et al., 2011). While external review processes are generally believed to be of value, there is a strong belief that internal quality assurance processes may result in greater benefit to the organization, particularly the core processes (i.e. instruction and learning) as well as in increasing staff engagement (e.g. Carlsson, 2016; Gayef & Hurdag, 2014).

The challenge facing many universities today is that they, and their academic programs, are required to undergo external evaluation and/or accreditation but are not sufficiently prepared; they have neither the experience to tap into, nor an analytical framework to serve as a guide for effectively and efficiently implementing such a process. In order to reap the maximum benefits that quality assurance can offer to an organization, it is critical that a solid foundation exists, which may only result from a deliberate planning process (Albon, et al., 2016; Young, 2003).

The objective at this point is to analyze the implementation of a specific quality initiative, through the lens of Bolman and Deal's Four Frames along with Spillane, Halverson and Diamond's Distributive Leadership. For organizations that are planning to pursue quality initiatives, prior to conducting the self-study that is prescribed by an accrediting body, it may be instructive to examine the organizational unit through these two separate frameworks. Accreditation can be a time intensive and costly endeavor. The development and implementation process may encounter a smoother road if this analysis and planning exercise is carried out prior to embarking on an accreditation or quality assurance journey.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this paper, the argument is presented that in order for quality assurance and accreditation processes to engender a deeper, sustained effect across the given unit, there is an additional, critical self-study that units must undergo in order to assess preparedness for undergoing the accreditation application process. To succeed, there are certain factors that must be taken into consideration as planning for accreditation and quality improvement begins to take place. In order to make this case, two separate theoretical frameworks from organizational management and educational leadership are proposed. Bolman and Deal's (2003) four frames of structural, symbolic, political, and human resources provide planners with a useful tool to analyze the current state in the organizational unit, and build a roadmap that will help strengthen the foundation for any accreditation and quality assurance initiatives. Additionally, the work of Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2001; 2004) around Distributed Leadership will be drawn upon. For practitioners and students of quality assurance, these two frameworks provide a lens through which roadblocks and leverage points can be realized prior to embarking on QA efforts; likewise, they may serve as analytical tools when conducting a post-mortem on a QA initiative.



Bolman and Deal view the organization as comprised of four elemental frames: the structural frame, the human resource frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame. The structural frame includes such aspects of the organization as rules, roles, goals, policies, technology, and the environment. Bolman and Deal see that "structure is a blueprint for the pattern of expectations and exchanges among internal players," (2003, p.38). For the leader (see Distributed Leadership, below) of a quality initiative, analysis of the structure leads to a better understanding of where the leverage points are in terms of garnering support, recruiting active participants, and increasing sustainability of the effort. By understanding which administrators and faculty are in a position to support a quality initiative, and by understanding where the incentives and roadblocks lie, a careful analysis of the structure can reveal to the leader the means to broaden and sustain engagement in the quality initiative. In terms of planning, Bolman and Deal (2003) view the structural frame as the realm for creating strategies to set objectives and coordinate resources.

The symbolic frame consists of culture, meaning, ritual, ceremonies, and stories. The key to this frame, Bolman and Deal point out, is not necessarily what happens, but what it means. In this context, they suggest that "activity and meaning are loosely coupled." They further suggest that much of life is uncertain and ambiguous, and therefore people rely on symbols for making sense, and from those symbols arise myths, rituals, ceremonies and stories "that help people find meaning, purpose, and passion," (2003, p. 217). Therefore, when a leader goes looking for the ways to motivate teachers and staff to more thoroughly engage in the quality process, they would be well-served to pay close attention to this frame, as this is, as they say, "where the people live." If this frame is ignored, then the staff will see themselves as being ignored, which is not an effective way to inspire commitment.

The political frame, perceived as power, conflict, competition, and organizational politics, becomes a useful lens for analyzing the unit for barriers to engagement. Bolman and Deal view organizations as coalitions of individuals and interest groups with enduring differences vying for scarce resources, which results in competition, negotiation, and ultimately in policies and structures based on these dynamics. When planning to undertake a quality initiative, the leader of the effort must have a reasonable understanding of who has power and influence (again, see leaders and followers under Distributed Leadership) and how they are connected throughout the unit. Leaders also need a keen sense of "what makes people tick," and what resources they can bring to bear to increase engagement in the quality process. It is also perceived as the arena to air conflict and realign power (2003).

To determine needs, barriers, and leverage points, it behooves leaders to look through the lens of the human resource frame, with its consideration of needs, skills, and relationships. This frame highlights the symbiotic nature between the needs of individuals and organizations, and how a positive relationship can be struck between the two to foster a healthy, productive environment. In the planning phase, Bolman and Deal (2003) illustrate this frame through gatherings to promote participation.

Analysis through Bolman and Deals framework cannot take place, nor can action plans be implemented if there is an absence of effective leadership. For this reason, Distributed Leadership



(Spillane, et al., 2001; 2004) is a compelling framework to examine whether and to what degree successful planning and sustained implementation of a quality initiative can occur.

Distributed Leadership is an attractive framework because it views leadership from the perspective of leadership activity, or practice, as opposed to examining the traits and actions of a single individual. It is also an attractive framework because it offers a means for not only explaining leadership practice, but also informing practice, and providing international program leaders with tools for fostering these environments and administering successful initiatives.

The central notion of Distributed Leadership is that "the appropriate unit of analysis is not leaders or what they do, but leadership activity," (Spillane, et al., 2004, p. 13). In other words, leadership practice is not simply viewed as the abilities and characteristics of an individual leader, rather, it is the complex web of social interaction between the leader, followers, and the situation.

Instead, Distributed Leadership posits that a leader's cognition is stretched, or distributed, situationally, over aspects and actors (Spillane & Sherer, 2004), thereby rendering decisions meaningful only within a social context. Therefore, the focus of leadership shifts from a single individual to the "interplay between the actions of multiple people" (2004, p. 37) utilizing particular tools and artifacts (Spillane, et al., 2004). They explain that this "collective leading requires multiple leaders working together, each bringing somewhat different resources- skills, knowledge, perspectives - to bear," (2004, p.25). Spillane and Sherer (p. 14), building on Thompson's (1967) work propose three ways in which leadership may be stretched over two or more leaders:

**Collaborated Distribution:** one leader's practice becomes the basis for another leader's practice (i.e. Thompson's "reciprocal interdependency");

**Collective Distribution:** two or more leaders who work separately but interdependently in pursuit of a shared goal and their independent activities generate leadership practices (Thompson's "pooled interdependency");

**Coordinated Distribution:** leadership practice in which different leadership tasks must be performed in a particular sequence (Thompson's "sequential interdependencies").

Collective and collaborated distribution of leadership occurs when cognitive activity is stretched over actors, artifacts, and organizational structures. Cognitive activity is defined as existing in two ways: situationally and socially (Spillane, et al., 2004). Situational cognition refers to cognition that is distributed via material and cultural artifacts through the physical environment, such as policies, programs, and procedures. Social cognition is distributed when individuals collaborate in order to achieve a common goal.

Spillane, Halverson and Diamond suggest that leadership practice is "extended through organizational structures that enable the movement and generation of knowledge and incentives in the organization," (2004, p. 37), meaning that while leadership can be constrained by organizational structures, leadership can also shape structure, and create situations where practice can be extended





to a greater number of followers. The aim of this study, then, is to explore a framework that will serve as a purposeful tool for program leaders to utilize as they strive to establish a quality culture focused on accreditation.

## Methodology

This study analyzes the implementation and outcomes of a program-level accreditation process, and, through the lens of a relevant case study, propose a planning framework to guide programs pursuing accreditation. The methodology utilized to conduct this study was an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995), which explores a “bounded system, such as a process, activity, event” (Creswell, 1998, p. 112).

Data collection involved interviewing full-time teachers and administrators in the intensive English Program within the foreign languages school. Interviews were also carried out with instructors and coordinators from the Undergraduate English program, the Foreign Languages program, and the English for Turkish Departments program. In total, 26 out of the 60 full-time staff members from all foreign language programs participated in this research. These participants included seven individuals involved in program coordination, as well as five primarily engaged in administrative roles. Consequently, the majority of interviewees were from the intensive English program.

The semi-structured interviews were primarily one-on-one, with the exception of two coordinators from the remote campus who responded to interview questions via email. Staff were notified of the study's purpose through a general email that requested their participation in the interviews, assuring them of confidentiality. After obtaining consent from the informants, interviews took place that were recorded and transcribed. The responses were initially categorized based on the specific interview questions, and coding was subsequently carried out to identify recurring themes.

Questions in the semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit extended responses from the participants, and were somewhat general in nature. A sampling of questions included: What effect did you think that going through the accreditation process had on the foreign languages school; What are the short-term and long-term effects of the accreditation process on the foreign languages school; Do you think that undergoing the accreditation process is worthwhile, to the foreign languages school.

## The context

In 2014, an organizational unit (an academic program) in a private university in Istanbul, Turkey, undertook a project to gain its first accreditation from an internationally recognized, proprietary accrediting organization. A Quality Assurance Coordinator (QAC) was appointed to lead the project. There was a list of standards articulated by the accrediting organization and it was the QAC's responsibility to ensure that a written response and sufficient evidence was gathered for each standard. This process was what was referred to above as a “desk-top exercise.” A group of administrative staff wrote responses and gathered evidence for those standards that were relevant to their individual areas of responsibility. This was followed by a one-day onsite inspection visit that could be characterized as the inspector looking through paperwork and evidence, carrying out a few



interviews with administrators, and conducting a brief tour of the premises. There was no interaction with students or teachers – other than those who were administrators as well – nor were there any lesson observations (it was understood that this would not take place). Soon thereafter, accreditation was granted. This gave the unit something to brag about and a stamp for the website, but it left the unit wanting something more rigorous.

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In 2016, the unit director made the decision to pursue accreditation through a different organization. This latter process would be more comprehensive and rigorous. Whereas it was similar to the initial effort in that written responses and evidence were still required, the clearly stated aim of the onsite inspection by external reviewers was that little time would be devoted to looking over documents, with nearly all of three-day visit dedicated to focus groups with students, teachers, and administrators, as well as lesson observations of approximately 75% of the 80 teachers on staff. At the debriefing, the inspectors were rather positive concerning what they perceived as solid alignment between what had been articulated in the written responses to the standards, and what they had observed “on the ground.”

This is the good news. This was the result of some of the factors that will be discussed below through Four Frames and Distributed Leadership. The not- so-good news is that in the end – particularly in the final run-up to the onsite inspection – a number of tense moments arose that could have detrimentally impacted the outcome of the inspection. Upon reflection, the unit was most likely able to weather the last-minute storm because of the strong foundation on which the project had been built. At the same time, there were a few windows that should not have been blown out, if a proper internal analysis had been conducted prior to commencement of the process. It is with this line of rationale that the lessons shared below may become learnings for others who will be pursuing accreditation or quality assurance initiatives in the near future.

## Findings

### The structural frame

The structural frame (Bolman & Deal, 2003) includes such aspects of the organization as rules, roles, goals, policies, technology, and the environment. In terms of planning, Bolman and Deal view the structural frame as the realm for creating strategies to set objectives and coordinate resources.

The effective quality assurance program is not monolithic. It is one essential component among a central core of activities in the teaching and learning enterprise that comprise curriculum planning, instruction, testing, and professional development. Thus, to be effective, quality assurance must not be designed and implemented in isolation from these core activities; it should be viewed as one part in a greater whole. In other words, quality assurance, and, as a by-product, accreditation applications, require that they be integrated into the structure – the fabric – of the day to day operations of the unit. Policies should exist to support these activities (e.g. a quality assurance policy; a professional development policy). Roles must be clarified via job descriptions; e.g. who is responsible for gathering and analyzing data (whether from student performance or student



opinions), who is responsible for reporting the results of analyses. Moreover, what process is developed to identify goals and objectives, who is responsible for reviewing and revising action plans and progress reports. These should not be activities that are identified once it has been determined that the unit will pursue accreditation; they should be built into the permanent operations of the unit.

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Another illustration of structure hindering effectiveness and efficiency is workload. How many hours are instructors expected to teach in a normal semester? How many hours are allotted for office hours or planning? How much time is organized to provide common planning and discussion times for instructors? Another structural example might be the rewards offered to faculty and staff for their participation in the assessments process. Leaders should seek ways to maximize inclusion and engagement by examining possible structural supports and impediments. Then there is the issue of time as it relates to planning and implementing quality initiatives. In order to defend a policy or justify a change, data from and for stakeholders – quantitative and/or qualitative - must be gathered, analyzed, and logically presented to make a reasonable case. This requires time. As does the continuous process of ensuring that those in support remain so, and those who are not are provided with enough convincing information to consider a change.

This is in sharp contrast to what generally takes place – an edict comes down, a deadline is given, a small committee or task force is assigned responsibility. These tasks may indeed be effectively completed, however, such a short-term gain may have also leapfrogged the most critical, and potentially time-consuming aspect of planning: Securing consensus and engagement. Certainly, the obverse may be true as well. Over-thinking and over-planning can be risky too. Too much information, leading to too much noise, which dulls the signal, can repulse stakeholders, also leading to rejection. Those planning the planning must work a careful balance between ensuring achievement of goals and creating a deadly impression that the process has no end in sight.

### **Reflection on the structural frame**

Enhancing productivity and cost-effectiveness, while reducing the impact of individual preferences on the organization's well-being, is a paramount goal. In a real-world context, the structural framework has proven exceptionally valuable during the accreditation application procedure. In the case of the SFL, this framework prompted inquiries into aspects such as the organizational setup, necessitating examination of administrative departments, the allocation of duties, and reporting hierarchies. This aligns with Bolman and Deal's concept of "a structured guide for official expectations and interactions within the internal team."

Bolman and Deal also emphasize that the organizational structure is not a rigid, unchanging entity but can be examined and adjusted as the organization's requirements evolve. For example, the inspectors identified several "performance gaps" in services, which prompted the creation of specialized units focused on Quality Assurance, Continuing Professional Development, and Early Alert. These changes were well-received by the staff, who saw them as enhancements to the organization's structure and overall organization.



In the particular university program examined for this case, there was clear establishment of units – for curriculum and assessment, for quality assurance unit, for professional development – and roles and responsibilities were clearly defined through job descriptions. However, these three units often found themselves vying for the same valuable resource – staff time – which resulted in frequent conflict. An additional issue was that each unit established annual objectives, and they ostensibly fed into the organizational goals and objectives, yet in reality, there was infrequent follow-through in terms of formative and summative evaluations and reporting. On the surface, by each of the units carrying out responsibilities individually, things appeared to be working well. A lack of coordination was not debilitating for the unit, but it did hinder efficiency and concerted improvement efforts. By analyzing the unit through the structural lens, the lack of coordination and collaboration could have been brought to light and actions could have been taken to address the disconnect.

The following quotes from the participants prove their appreciation of the structural framework implemented, highlighting its role in instilling structure and organization. They aspire to see this sense of order seamlessly integrated into their everyday practices, rather than being a mere facade. While acknowledging that complete adherence to the framework may not be the norm, there is a growing consensus that adjusting policies to meet expected standards is essential. This evolution has translated into an enhanced focus on qualification and quality assurance, with documents meticulously reviewed and efforts directed toward meeting established standards. Importantly, these improvements are not limited to procedural aspects but also extend to teaching practices, exemplified by a newfound willingness to develop and utilize lesson plans.

The process brought us structure and organization. It would be nice to have that continue....to have it built into our normal way of life, as opposed to putting on a show. "this is what we can do" Is this the reality? No. Not completely...but who does lesson plans every day. But it's nice to have things in a kind of package deal for students from beginning to end.

-Participant 1

If it is changing the policy that affects us as well. If we are going to teach at the level that they are expecting us to, then we are going to have to operate at that level. So this whole idea of standards...if we are going to offer at this level of standard, then 'let's do that.

-Participant 2

We began to be more qualified. We now check our documents again and again. They send me [their documents] before printing and photocopying. Everyone has a [CEFR standard, and they try to fit that standard. Now, everybody is focused on quality. We see more quality.

- Participant 3

So, these improvements not only bring systematicity, but improvements to teaching as well. For example, the Lesson Plans. No one had their Lesson Plans, but when people were asked to produce them, they were willing to do so.

-Participant 4



## The symbolic frame

The symbolic frame consists of culture, meaning, ritual, ceremonies, and stories. The key to this frame, Bolman and Deal point out, is not necessarily what happens, but what it means.

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Implementation of an effective quality assurance program is in part technical, but in large part, it is cultural. In order for an organization to establish a sustained quality assurance effort, it is critical for those leading the effort to understand the internal culture of the organization. If requirements and requests are seen to be in conflict with the culture – or sub-cultures – within the organization, then any well-designed initiative is going to struggle to succeed. Therefore, in order to establish relevance, it is important that those associated with the quality assurance effort are viewed as part of the culture. And, to do so takes time. This is where external consultants can fail. They are not viewed as insiders because they have not participated in the rituals – the year-end celebrations, the weddings, the after-lunch coffee chats – that gains them entrance to the culture.

Completion of at least one quality cycle (i.e. closing the loop) - planning, implementing, assessing, analyzing, and acting upon the data – could be called a success, which is not uncommon. Most educational units generally have the motivation – whether it is internally or externally driven – to finish one cycle of the assessment process. Success, however, is not enough. What often occurs is a great flurry of activity for at least one year, or until the accreditation inspectors leave campus. This is usually followed by a rapid downward spiral in activity, until what remains is a minority of individuals who carry the torch because it is their stated responsibility, or because they inherently understand the value of assessment and evidence. This is why most accrediting bodies in the United States are not satisfied with data from a single cycle of assessment as evidence of an effective assessment program; units that apply for accreditation are required to present at least three cycles of assessment data.

The ultimate goal of an effective Standards Assessment Program is for regular completion of the assessment cycle for all Standards. This is not to say that all Standards should be assessed at the same time, only that over time, they must all be assessed in a regular schedule. In other words, the goal is sustainability of the assessment program. To do so takes a vision, and time. The message and the goal need to remain clear, consistent, and convincing. Discussions and information-sharing need to center on how we can learn from what we are doing (i.e. becoming a learning organization) and asking the right questions for improvement (i.e. a culture of inquiry).

This may take time and a good deal of patience, as well as perseverance. And, the further away from a culture of quality that exists in the beginning, the longer it will take to get there. If faculty and staff are accustomed to an environment of suspicion and lots of sticks with few carrots, then the turn-around will take time. Likewise, if an accreditation or external review is hanging overhead, then the process can be rushed through for short-term gain, but it may generate long-term negative impact. Thus, a sustained, effective quality assurance plan begins with a long-view, and the understanding that a methodical, deliberate approach is necessary for solidifying a culture of quality.

To this end, planning for sustained quality assurance requires inclusion. Just as good



assessment should be comprised of multiple perspectives, so should it be for planning. This is why seeking input from the diverse array of stakeholders is important, including those who are immediately impacted: Program administrators, the instructors who teach and assess, as well as the students who are there to learn. The next ring of stakeholders would be the schools that employ the program graduates, as well as the program graduates themselves. In addition to simply aggregating input via surveys, focus groups, and advisory boards, planning must strive for majority (unanimous is virtually impossible) agreement and support that the process has reasonable intentions and expectations. If the outcomes are vague or the increased workload too overwhelming, the initiative will fail.

### Reflection on the symbolic frame

This was perhaps the area of greatest strength as the unit moved forward with its quality assurance and accreditation planning. The teacher retention rate within the unit is strong, meaning that most staff have worked together for a number of years. The unit coordinators for Curriculum, Quality Assurance, and Professional Development had all been working in the unit for at least five years. Therefore, they were not viewed as outsiders trying to impose change without understanding, or having played a role in the internal culture. With that said, the accreditation implementation team still faced challenges as they tried to implement new practices that reflected the quality standards of the accrediting body. A pre-analysis of the culture in relation to the needs of the accreditation standards may have highlighted areas where difficulties would emerge. In turn, a plan of action for these critical points, implemented prior to embarking on the accreditation effort, may have reduced anxiety as the process moved toward a formal inspection.

The following comments by the participants involved in the accreditation process demonstrate their perspectives on the symbolic framework employed, emphasizing its significant value. They highlight how accreditation fostered a sense of unity by bringing people together for meetings and contributing to the creation of a distinct organizational culture. Furthermore, the experience had a profound impact on participants' perceptions, with the recognition of positive aspects often overshadowed by negativity. The accreditation process served as a powerful reminder of the importance of acknowledging and celebrating achievements and positive feedback. In addition, the symbolic framework was associated with tangible benefits, such as increased dynamism, enhanced prestige, and the attraction of high-quality students. These collective sentiments underscore the profound influence of accreditation on both internal and external perceptions of the organization.

Yes. Definitely. Accreditation has been worth it. Bringing people together for meetings. Creating this culture.

-Participant 6

Someone told me after the [accreditation inspection] debriefing that we always focus on the negative here, but after hearing all the positives from the inspectors, we realized that we had forgotten how to see the positive. It's a really nice thing to hear positive things.

-Participant 8



Yes. Accreditation has real advantages. One of them is that it brings a dynamism; it makes a difference. If you have A, it brings prestige. It will be a good reason for students to choose this school. Also, for outsiders, they will see that the people who work there have quality.

-Participant 10

### The political frame

The political frame, perceived as power, conflict, competition, and organizational politics, becomes a useful lens for analyzing the unit for barriers to engagement in quality processes. Implementation of an effective quality assurance program requires an understanding of the power structures within the unit. There is a formal power structure, illustrated through the unit's published organization chart. There is most likely a secondary, underlying power structure that may be equally revealing concerning who does what. This can have both negative and positive implications. Certainly, cliques and influence that comes from seniority or close relations with those who have positional power are a few ways that this sub-layer of politics may operate.

This may be a harmful context if the players see themselves as power brokers, protecting their space, with the ability to block individuals, who may be competent but lacking political clout, from gaining recognition and perhaps advancement opportunities, which may benefit the organization in the long run. In this event, those who are leading a quality assurance initiative must gain an understanding of these relationships, motives, and leverage points in order to effectively engage – not aggravate – this structure. Realizing these relationships and how they function is something that takes time; this is another reason why external consultants are not advisable as they are often not psychic to these critical mechanisms.

Conversely, this underlying structure may also prove quite beneficial to quality assurance efforts. This is where Distributed Leadership plays a role. Distributed Leadership is generally viewed as a complex web of social interaction between the leader, followers, and the situation. It is what Spillane, Halverson and Diamond characterize as the "interplay between the actions of multiple people" (2004, p. 37) utilizing particular tools and artifacts (2004, p.21) within a particular situation. That is, leadership is not seen as actions of a single individual, rather it is the interactions of many individuals who are working to achieve a commonly shared ideal (i.e. the stretched cognition). Individuals may have formal, positional power or they may be informal leaders that have a degree of influence over "followers". Therefore, individuals who may not have positional power may still hold influence by virtue of their abilities and actions - that move operations in a positive direction.

Such an underlying power structure opens the door to effective and efficient practices and engagement throughout a unit, without the traditional top-down approach of request and approval in order to take actions. Individuals at all levels are expected to take actions that lead to achievement of the unit's goals and objectives (e.g. an accreditation process). In order for Distributed Leadership to take hold, there is a degree of psychological safety that is required. Psychological safety implies that individuals feel that ideas and actions taken in order to achieve unit goals and objectives will not be met with derision or retribution; that ideas and actions by all actors have value. Increased



collaboration as well as a focus on improvement emerge when conversations center on how to improve or experiment with new ideas rather than on how to stifle such tendencies.

### Reflection on the political frame

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The unit establishing quality assurance practices – including an accreditation initiative – benefits from a relatively flat structure. There is a wide layer of individuals who hold some degree of administrative responsibility, yet all administrators are instructors as well; the unit director teaches a set number of hours per semester, and substitutes when necessary. To illustrate, of the 80 individuals in the program, 28 have some degree of administrative responsibility. Therefore, there is not a traditional us vs. them attitude in the corridors. This structure has also facilitated an environment that resembles distributed leadership. This takes us back to Spillane, Halverson and Diamond's Collaborated Distribution - one leader's practice becomes the basis for another leader's practice - and Collective Distribution - two or more leaders who work separately but interdependently in pursuit of a shared goal and their independent activities generate leadership practices.

Within the unit described in this case study, there are numerous examples of Collaborated and Collective distribution. The unit benefits from many individuals who have worked together for a number of years, which has created an environment where collaboration is widespread, both vertically and horizontally. A specific activity to illustrate this phenomenon occurred in the preparation stage for the unit's accreditation application. A team of 12 "influencers", the majority of whom were teachers (as opposed to a traditional "leadership team" often comprised of positional leaders) was tasked with drafting responses to accreditation standards. These individuals were selected not only because of their ability to effectively respond to the standards, but even more so because of their networks throughout the unit and their abilities to engage a broad base of "followers" throughout the accreditation process. In terms of planning for quality assurance processes, including an accreditation application process, it behooves the unit leaders to consider the networks of informal leaders and followers, and assess the degree to which psychological safety and distributed leadership are present. Certainly, this may lead to some of the "difficult conversations" that positional leaders must have. If a foundation of trust and collaboration is not in place, then successful attempts at quality improvement are in jeopardy.

Participants engaged in the accreditation process have shared the following views on the political framework applied, emphasizing the unequivocal value of accreditation. They assert that accreditation serves as a clear indicator of an organization's adherence to standards, instilling trust in the accrediting body. Furthermore, it plays a vital role in self-assessment, providing a benchmark for performance and indicating areas for improvement. Participants acknowledge the competitive nature of the educational landscape and recognize the necessity of obtaining accreditation as a means of staying afloat and thriving in this environment. The demand for certificates and the imperative to enhance quality drive the consensus that accreditation is essential in the contemporary era. Additionally, the political framework is seen as a means of enhancing an institution's public image and appealing to those who prioritize accredited institutions, further underlining its worth.





Totally. Accreditation is absolutely worth it. Because it shows you have standards and you can trust the organization that accredits you. it kind of shows you where you are; how you're doing. Some people say standards are not good, but when new people come, they know what to aim for, and we know what to aim for.

-Participant 12

Ultimately, we have to get on this [accreditation] boat. It's going to be sink or swim in this competitive environment.

-Participant 20

I would say Yes, accreditation is worth it because we are in that age. Students need certificates. Schools do too. Very competitive, and we have to become better. Whatever we need to do, we need to do it.

-Participant 18

If we get approved by this company, it's going to be better in the public eye. It's going to be better for the ones who value these things.

-Participant 22

### **The human resources frame**

The human resource frame views the organization from the perspective of needs, skills, and relationships. Bolman and Deal underline the point that when analyzing an organization through this frame, inquiries center on alignment between organizational needs and individual needs; that employees are viewed as assets that contribute to the success and well-being of the organization. If individuals feel that there is an inadequate fit between themselves – no matter their talents and capacities – they will underperform, and eventually depart. Conversely, if individuals feel a meaningful fit between their needs and their contribution to the organization, then satisfaction and productivity are more likely to rise. The human resource frame therefore becomes the centerpiece of employee retention programs.

Quality assurance efforts, particularly as they are gaining a foothold, are generally viewed as, at best, extra work added to an already busy schedule. At worst – and quite commonly – they are seen as a needless burden and a nuisance, with little relevance to their perceptions of what constitutes the core mission of the unit (i.e. “I’m a teacher and should only be required to teach”). Therefore, communication and transparency are central to the analysis of the human resource frame. Leadership must be willing to listen and respond to the needs of individuals; if a quality assurance initiative requires additional time and effort from staff, then a time-effort analysis should be conducted to see if staff can be offered something in exchange (e.g. release time, or rotation of responsibilities).

Likewise, leadership must implement an effective communications plan for clearly articulating expectations and outcomes. If staff feel left in the dark about projects and practices, then they may not react as desired when their support is truly needed (e.g. during accreditation inspections or at end-of-semester data collection periods). Thus, for planning purposes, it is advised that a detailed



communications plan be designed prior to implementation of the quality assurance effort. This would include frequency of communications, form (short notes, open forum, etc.), and audience (all staff, administrators, etc). The plan should also include a feedback loop, where staff are made aware that their voices are heard. This is most effective if responses come from unit leadership; i.e. staff feel that their contributions are recognized. A final important note is that staff are people too – they seek appreciation for effort. An organization that effectively operates because of distributed leadership, still needs top positional leaders to publicly recognize effort and success of individuals, teams, or the whole staff.

### Reflection on the human resources frame

Did the unit succeed in effectively carrying out an accreditation effort? Yes. Could they have done better? Yes. How? As mentioned previously, an analysis of time and effort was conducted of the teaching staff. A 12-person team was identified from those who felt they had the energy to commit one summer (a slow teaching time when teachers have more time to dedicate to projects) to working on responses to standards. While the work was intensive – meeting three times per week for three hours to review drafts – a significant effort was made to establish a low-stress working environment with coffee and food provided at each meeting, and an end-of-summer celebration dinner. This proved an effective approach as it created a team of dedicated, collaborative individuals.

Were there challenges? Certainly. Following the summer success, when the unit swung back into an academic working mode, the process slowed. Which was expected, but so did communication. This led to gaps in information transfer, and concerns that the process had ground to a halt. As the accreditation inspection approached toward the end of the academic year, some staff felt out of the loop, which resulted in unnecessary levels of stress. Again, a tighter communications plan and greater transparency would have minimized tension when it was needed least.

Participants, in the comments shared below, have expressed their views on the human resources framework employed, underscoring the substantial advantages it brings. They recognize that both teachers and students reap the benefits of a highly organized curriculum, and they find it challenging to see any reason not to pursue accreditation. However, the consensus on whether accreditation is worth it hinges on the type of institution, its goals, and the collaborative spirit of the team. Participants stress the importance of teamwork and a supportive management team in the accreditation journey. This sense of community and positive change in practice underlines the overall value of accreditation and the tangible improvements it ushers in, ultimately making the process a rewarding endeavor.

The benefits are here. We as teachers are benefiting from it, as are the students who are benefitting from our highly organized curriculum. I don't see why you wouldn't do it.

-Participant 1

Is accreditation worth it? It depends on the kind of institution they have...and what they want. And what the co-workers want...as a team. If you can't work as a team, it's really hard.



If they are not all supportive, it is difficult. We are lucky to have the management team. If they trust their team, if the management can be trusted, I would say, Go for it.

-Participant 5

Yes. Accreditation has positive effects. Being a member of a community is always a good thing.

-Participant 13

I would say Yes, accreditation is worth it. At the beginning it will be difficult. People may suffer. But in practice, it changes things. It really changes things in practice. So, I'm happy.

-Participant 19

### Practical Implications

As indicated throughout this study, universities are under pressure to demonstrate value-added to their stakeholders – be they governments or funders or individuals. As a result, more and more institutions are required to undergo external evaluation or accreditation. However, many of these organizations lack the experience and expertise to effectively and efficiently navigate these rigorous processes. This paper, through a single-case analysis, proposes a guiding framework to assist first-time implementers with the tools to facilitate the process.

### Limitations

This study has a few limitations worth noting. Firstly, only 43% of foreign languages staff agreed to participate in the interviews. Certainly, a higher participation rate would have been preferred. Some staff members had left for summer holidays at the end of the academic year, which affected participation. This also led to shorter interview durations, typically around 20-30 minutes, due to end-of-semester time constraints. To encourage participation, we assured instructors that interviews would not exceed 30 minutes. Another limitation is the absence of student perspectives, a deliberate choice because the study focused on faculty and staff perceptions. Moreover, students might not have been able to recognize any effects that occurred between the completion of the accreditation process and the data collection phase.

### Conclusion

Effectively planning a quality assurance effort in a higher education institution is not a simple task. There are numerous competing factors that require attention in order to ensure successful implementation - whether it is establishment of a quality assurance entity or a start-to-finish product such as an accreditation application. In order to minimize complications, a case has been made for utilizing Bolman and Deal's Four Frames as a set of lens through which leaders may analyze and understand the current situation in their organization, and assess its degree of readiness to embark upon a quality assurance initiative. By viewing the organization through the lens of Structure, Symbols, Politics, and Human Resources, leaders can better understand those areas of leverage as well as those points at which challenges may emerge in the implementation process. Furthermore, conducting an

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analysis utilizing the Distributed Leadership framework has been advocated, which provides a sense of how much or little the staff is working in collaboration to achieve a common vision and goal. In the end, planning is certainly an arduous, time-consuming effort. And, it may result in a delay to the start of an effort so that a stronger foundation may be put in place. Despite exigencies that often come from higher up in the organization to "get it done yesterday," time and effort devoted to careful analysis and planning may prevent an effort from not getting done at all.



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