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Assurance of Learning (AoL) and AACSB's 2020 Business Accreditation Standards: a conversation with Marine Condette

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to discuss Assurance of Learning (AoL) and 2020 Standards from Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International with Marine Condette from AACSB.

Design/methodology/approach – Structured interview.

Findings – Changes following the 2020 Standards.

Originality/value – This paper is an interview with Marine Condette from the AACSB Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) office on AoL discussing as well the changes with the 2020 AACSB Standards.

Keywords AACSB, Higher education, Continuous improvement, Assurance of Learning, International accreditation

Paper type Technical paper

Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International) is a global nonprofit association that connects educators, students and business to achieve a common goal: to create the next generation of great leaders. Synonymous with the highest standards of excellence since 1916, AACSB provides quality assurance, business education intelligence and learning and development services to over 1,850 member organizations and 950

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Marine Condette is Senior Accreditation and Member Services Manager, Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) for AACSB International – the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. Condette started working with AACSB as an Accreditation Manager when AACSB opened the Amsterdam office in 2015. In this role, she has been supporting business schools in the EMEA region that are either pursuing initial accreditation or completing the continuous improvement review cycle if already accredited. Prior to AACSB, Condette was involved in higher education working for Educational Testing Service and for the French embassy in the Netherlands. She is also a member of the Professional Development Committee of the European Association for International Education and is currently a DBA student at the University of Bath.



accredited business schools worldwide [1]. In July 2020, the AACSB Accreditation Council adopted the new 2020 Guiding Principles and Standards for Business Accreditation. There are now 9 standards (versus previous 15 standards) organized in three categories: Strategic Management and Innovation; Learner Success; and Thought Leadership, Engagement and Societal Impact. The complete guiding principles and standards can be found at the AACSB web site at www.aacsb.edu. This interview with Marine Condetta starts with a discussion on the impact of the pandemic on business accreditation and then focuses on Standard 5: Assurance of Learning (AoL).

Marine, the COVID-19 pandemic has left its mark on business accreditation. Can you describe the changes AACSB is seeing in business accreditation?

Isabelle, beyond the impact of the lockdowns on student enrollment and course delivery, we have certainly observed an increasing rate of technology disruption and a rise of new educational models, including micro credentials and alternatives to more traditional degree programs.

During the onset of COVID-19, schools had to quickly pivot to virtual instruction. This included schools that had not historically done this in the past. As we moved through the stages of the pandemic and most schools resumed in-person instruction, many are rethinking their strategy for virtual delivery. Schools are expanding their digital footprint and the programs or courses they offer online, based on successes achieved during COVID-19. Schools and faculty in particular are leveraging different types of technology to produce a more interactive and engaging experience in online courses. Additionally, schools are able to engage with a broader range of individuals than they could previously, absent technology. For example, many schools are inviting guest speakers from abroad that they otherwise could not involve in the past. We have also seen innovations in terms of experiential learning in a virtual context.

We have also seen a growing pressure from business practitioners, learners, governments and societal stakeholders in general for business schools to make a positive impact on society. Many were already doing good work in that space, but now schools are increasingly required to develop and track their initiatives with societal impact at all levels, and to publicly showcase that impact.

These areas were key drivers when developing the 2020 standards, and their impact can be seen in the nine standards. One interesting element – included in the 2020 standards but thought of *before* the pandemic – was the expectation that schools have a risk analysis and contingency plan in place. It was innovative at the time, but now we know it is extremely relevant as we come out of a worldwide disruptor in higher education.

The pandemic has also impacted the way AACSB operates. Can you describe how the pandemic has affected accreditation visits?

At the onset of the pandemic we had to rapidly develop processes and protocols to organize virtual and/or hybrid visits, to make sure schools are not penalized in their accreditation cycle. In 2020-2021, all 273 visits were virtual, except for one face-to-face and six hybrid visits. We retained established peer review teams, thus providing the least disruptive path forward. Volunteers and schools provided positive feedback about these new visit formats, but there is certainly a desire to get back to in-person visits.

How has the pandemic affected learning and development and assessment?

During the initial onset of the pandemic, many schools had to hit the pause button on their AoL efforts. Schools were focused on shifting their curricula online and did not have the

capacity to continue AoL efforts. Therefore, many schools' AoL schedules were interrupted during this time. Schools have now resumed these efforts, and in some cases had to adjust their AoL programs where they had made substantive changes to curriculum or instructional delivery modes.

How has the pandemic impacted AACSB staff?

Obviously, we were asked to work from home, following advice and regulations. We also delivered all our events (conferences and seminars) online.

Can you discuss the major AoL changes in the AACSB Standards adopted in 2020?

The standards were approved in July 2020. We like to say it is an evolution, not a revolution *vis-à-vis* the previous set of standards. When it comes to AoL, the main philosophy and features of the 2013 standards remain, but there were some notable changes:

- There is a philosophical switch from learning goals to competencies to keep up with current international trends in business education.
- Language was added that specified new and emerging low enrollment programs may have modified AoL processes.
- Expectations related to micro credentials, such as certificates and badges that stacked into a degree program, should have appropriate quality assurance processes in place – recognizing the diverse types of business offerings and the need to assure quality for non-degrees.
- The 2020 standards mandate indirect assessments, which were previously optional. Many schools shared that their curriculum changes were largely driven by indirect measures, and we now ask to see a mix of direct and indirect measures in their AoL system. Some programs may be assessed solely by indirect measures, while other programs still should have a direct assessment component.
- Schools are expected to provide evidence that faculty are sufficiently and meaningfully engaged in AoL. The 2013 standards implied faculty involvement in AoL but it was not explicitly stated. It has therefore been more specifically identified in the 2020 standards.
- A new table named Table 5-1 [2] reporting on the assessment plan and results for the past five years is provided for schools to complete regarding AoL activities for each program. Table 5-1 is a mandatory table for schools in the initial accreditation process and optional for accredited schools. The goal here is not only to help schools report assessment results and improvements made but also to ensure consistency across schools.

How do you see the focus change to principles based, outcomes focused affecting AoL?

In the past, there has been an emphasis on strict adherence to the standards and deviations were considered bad. The 2020 standards take a different approach: a principles based approach. The key question, then, is: Is the school sufficiently aligned with the spirit and intent of the standard? This requires a shift in the volunteers' mindset and AACSB International trains them (mentors, peer review team members, accreditation committee members) via a mandatory training. As mentioned above, when it comes to AoL direct and

indirect measures are now expected; however, the school chooses the mix and degree programs where different measures will be used. Schools could have programs with only indirect measures (such as student/employers surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, reflective essays), which is fine as long as the rationale is evident and solid.

There is now less of a focus and emphasis on the AoL process. The emphasis shifts more heavily toward the outcomes and continuous improvements that result from the AoL process. Additionally, schools may use AoL outcomes as evidence of high-quality respect to faculty qualifications. For example, a school may be slightly below the recommended AACSB ratios in a particular discipline, but they may have strong outcomes in programs related to this discipline. This can be part of the school's portfolio of evidence provided to AACSB.

Learner success

In the 2020 AACSB Standards, AoL is addressed in Standards 4–7 under Learner Success which covers curriculum, AoL, learner progression and teaching effectiveness and impact.

Standard 4 addresses curriculum. Were there changes to this standard?

There is a new expectation for schools to describe how degree programs include learning experiences that develop competencies related to the integration of information technology. This reinforces the need for learners to be technologically agile upon graduation and also to be more closely aligned with the 2018 accounting standards (Table A6 [3]). It is envisioned that this reporting will in the future provide a searchable resource for schools to determine trends in the use of technology.

The expectation is that any contents of degree programs (including stackable microlearning certifications and executive education programs leading to a degree) include relevant competencies to prepare graduates for business and management careers and lifelong learning. This standard addresses the changing landscape of degree programs and how degrees can be earned.

Standard 6 – learner progression is new. What changes are included in this standard?

This is actually not a new standard. Rather, it revamps the previous standard 4 on Student Admissions, Progression, and Career Development. Changes here are minimal since standard 4 was still very relevant – but the expectation that job placement results indicate a high degree of learner success within a reasonable period beyond graduation was added. Note that the 2020 standards refer to “learners” rather than “students,” to better reflect the reality of higher education and the current lifelong learning mindset.

What changes were made to teaching effectiveness and impact – Standard 7?

An emphasis on teaching impact and outcomes – rather than focusing solely on policies and processes for enhancing teaching effectiveness – was added. This aligns with the outcomes focused nature of the 2020 standards by looking beyond just processes related to teaching effectiveness.

Schools are also expected to have a multi-measure assessment of teaching effectiveness and must support faculty to prepare them to teach across different modalities, to teach in an inclusive environment and to encourage lifelong learning among faculty.

Assurance of learning is often a challenge for business schools seeking initial AACSB accreditation. In your time in working with schools seeking initial accreditation, what are AoL issues that you see that arise?

It is true that some schools struggle at the beginning of the process, although interestingly most of the schools in the Europe, Middle East and Africa and Asia-Pacific regions already have an AoL type of system in place because of national regulations. However, there may be significant differences in content and form, and that is where many schools find it difficult: How to translate and adapt what they must do to ensure alignment with AACSB AoL expectations. For instance, in the UK, schools must report on learning outcomes at the course level, while AACSB expects data and improvements at the program level. In the Netherlands, the national accreditor requires an external review of a sample of student work (theses) to ensure intended learning outcomes are achieved. AACSB, however, does not ask schools to “reinvent the wheel” and enables them to repurpose the data if it satisfies the purpose of AACSB AoL. For instance, there is now a move in France to a competency-based approach to frame academic programs, and this seems to be very much in line with the AoL framework.

Another difficulty I see is related to faculty engagement, especially at the early stages of the process. This is a key element to a successful AoL system and it can take time to get faculty “onboard.” Having one or two people owning the process is usually not synonymous of a sustainable, mature AoL system.

The actual reporting of AoL data and results can also be challenging, since many schools do not always know how to do that in a concise and clear manner. That is why we now provide Table 5-1. The terminology itself can also be difficult to grasp for schools in the initial process (e.g. closing the loop, indirect measures), especially for non-native speakers. The definitions are included in the standards and there is an AoL white paper and there are AoL seminars to clarify the different elements of the process. AACSB International aims to provide as much support to schools as possible.

In your experience, do you find that assurance of learning is often a challenge for business schools seeking AACSB reaccreditation. In working with schools seeking reaccreditation, what AoL issues or traps do you see?

One of the most important factors in achieving business accreditation is having evidence of a robust AoL system in place. Once schools are accredited, there is always room for improvement. What we sometimes observe is that schools may have overly complex AoL systems, with too many competency goals per program or too many steps in the assessment of AoL data that will delay the implementation of necessary curricular or process changes. Sometimes schools collect data but do not actually use it to improve the curriculum. AACSB encourages schools to continuously review their current AoL system and see how it can be simplified – while making sure the assessment process is being carried out in a systematic, ongoing basis.

Schools should also ensure that they develop an AoL system for each new program they launched during the five-year cycle. This will be checked by the reviewers in their next visit. Although they may not be able to provide evidence of “closing the loop” at the time of the visit, it is essential that schools are able to explain the AoL process they have in place for these new programs (e.g. measure types, timeframe).

Have there been AoL reporting changes under the new standards?

Yes, and Table 5-1 provides a new way to report on AoL results and improvements made on the basis of these results.

What advice would you give to business schools on how to successfully report AoL?

I recommend schools report on their AoL system in a concise but clear manner. Sometimes AoL responses can be long and complex to read. Evidence such as curriculum mapping and rubrics can be provided in the addendum or in the base room and do not need to be in the core of the report. I do advise schools to provide two to three concrete examples of changes made based on AoL results, like with an undergraduate and a graduate program. It is important to show the outcomes of your school's AoL system and not just the features of that system. Additionally, although not required, schools are strongly encouraged to use Table 5-1 as it provides a good snapshot of the AoL process and outcomes by program, which is easier for a team to consume than reading lengthy AoL reports.

I have also seen some schools struggling with the introduction of indirect measures. After speaking with them, many realized they already had indirect measures, but did not previously report on them. Also, indirect measures are not needed for all programs, so schools should make sure to reflect on where it makes most sense to use indirect measures (e.g. newly launched programs, practice-oriented degrees).

Last but not least, talk with peer schools, and attend AACSB events and seminars to learn new ways to approach AoL.

What advice would you give to business schools on how to successfully navigate AoL process improvements?

Keep it simple. Schools can make AoL much more complicated than it needs to be. Make sure you are using the data to inform curricula improvements – this is what AoL is about.

Lastly, how does a business school really know that it is doing an effective job with AoL?

AoL is effective when schools have an AoL process that is systematic and regular, when a culture of assessment is in place, where curricular changes can be reported and are effective for all programs, as well as when feedback on graduates is positive by employers, and the achievement of learning outcomes improves or is evident.

In a spirit of continuous improvement, which is key to AACSB accreditation, we would also expect schools to regularly “rethink” their AoL processes to make sure it is the most efficient possible in terms of resources, reporting and time.

Notes

1. www.aacsb.edu/about-us
2. AACSB 2020 Business Standards Table 5-1 entitled “Assessment Plan and Results for Most Recently Completed Accreditation Cycle by Degree Program” is provided in Standard 5 p. 49. Table 5-1 is for schools to complete regarding Assurance of Learning (AoL) activities for each program. Table 5-1 is a mandatory table for schools in the initial accreditation process, and optional for accredited schools.
3. AACSB 2018 Accounting Standards Table A6 entitled “Technology Agility and Faculty Minimum Qualifications For the Most Recently Completed Academic Year” is provided in Accounting Standard A6 p. 28.

About the author

Isabelle J. Fagnot is Associate Dean quality and accreditation and Professor of management of information systems at KEDGE Business School. Fagnot received her PhD (2011) from the School of Information Studies of Syracuse University. Her research focuses on behavioral issues of managing information systems related to organizational security, quality assurance and the culture of the information profession. Fagnot's research is regularly disseminated in journal publications, conference presentations and invited lectures. Fagnot has extensive experience in quality assurance having led initial and maintenance accreditation processes in Triple Crown schools. Isabelle J. Fagnot can be contacted at: isabelle.fagnot@kedgebs.com

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