

# THE ACCREDITATION GAME<sup>1</sup>

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0, Accreditation can be difficult to understand, even for those who only have to grapple with one version of it. For those who have to work in multinational circumstances, it is even more confusing. That is because the true nature of accreditation in any particular instance can be obscured by a number of factors. As is often the case, however, opaque phenomena can be illuminated with the light of metaphor. My goal here is to view the accreditation process as a game, not as a diversion or lack of seriousness, but as a structured activity comprised of players, goals, objectives, rules, strategies, and equipment among other components. I propose that viewing accreditation through the prism of a game will allow participants to see elements and their relationships/activities more clearly, both for those who think they have mastered one version, but are puzzled by some or all of another.

0.1 Let us begin with a quick review of the elements we customarily associate with games. Obviously, there are rules, goals, objectives, strategies, materials/equipment, players, and variants, and, in many cases, an audience. This inventory will serve to get us started. What we'll see quickly is that the accreditation game is quite complex, and therefore our presentation will necessarily be somewhat circular.

1. **The players.** A good place to begin is with the players, who cannot be completely distinguished from the goal. As in most games, the goal is to win. Win what? That depends on the player, considered here in the most general sense possible. For a university, the first thing to win is "accreditation," which can be variously defined. For other players, the thing to win may be something else entirely. So who are the principal players? They may include the institution, its administration, its faculty, its students, its graduates, its governing board, its state governing agency, the accrediting agency, other universities, and the public at large. These can be divided into internal and external players. Each has differing roles to play, and each has differing interests in the process and results.

The institution is not, as may be initially thought, a single player. In many countries today accreditation is a requirement; thus, everyone must play, but they are not all necessarily playing the same version of the game, or even always by the same rules. The administration knows that it must "win." Failure to win puts the future of the institution at risk and the jobs of the administrators at even greater risk. The role of the

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Sally Andrade for helpful comments. Any errors are entirely my own. This is a pre-presentation draft, not for citation. © Sept. 2008, Jon Amastae

administration in the game is to marshal and organize all the other institutional players so that they comply with the standards for accreditation, i.e., winning. The administration is in some ways like the coach of an athletic team, but as a player-coach. The administration must be a bit careful, however, because unlike an athletic team, the administration is playing multiple games simultaneously. Playing the accreditation game requires resources, the most important of which is energy. Playing too hard can become a distraction or diversion from other activities the administration values. Therefore, the administration must act as if accreditation is the most important of all the games, but not actually invest too much in it. It must play hard enough to win, but not necessarily expend 100% of its energy.

Another important internal player is the faculty. The faculty also knows that accreditation is essential, but...Many faculty regard the entire exercise as a nuisance, and many play grudgingly or cynically. A few will attempt to use the process to achieve their personal objectives, whether redressing perceived inequities or implementing a cherished programmatic change. But, of course, a few of the faculty are true gamers. They love it. It provides a chance to act on a larger scale, to be key players in assessing their own and other programs, and to have a voice in the future. Thus, the administration must manage these occasionally conflicting internal players adroitly while at the same time dealing with external players.

The principal external players are the accrediting agency, at least two levels of government (federal, state, and the institution's system, if applicable), and the public. The accrediting agency sets the rules for accreditation, including both criteria and the process. This is more complicated than it might seem, because of overlaps in roles. First, the agency is at once a player in the game as well as the referee, to return to the idea of the athletic contest. As a referee, the agency may mediate conflicts among other players about the criteria and processes of accreditation. But the agency also is a player in a larger sense in that its ultimate goal is not, as it might seem, the accreditation of any particular institution, but the justification and continuation of its own existence. Thus the game is played on multiple levels by the different players.

Second, there is potential overlap between the various external players, or between an external player and an internal player. . In terms of external players alone, in some contexts, the agency and the government are separate. In others, the agency may in fact be a governmental unit. Or, while the agency appears to be an independent organization, it functions as an agent of a consortium of universities, who ultimately determine the criteria and processes of accreditation. In that respect, any power it has ultimately derives from those it accredits. Those who make the ultimate judgments are in fact also internal players

Finally, the public is a player. "The public" includes employers, the media, parents, even students--anyone not directly involved in managing the process of accreditation. Accreditation exists to provide credibility, faith (going back to the Latin root) in the quality of the institution and the education it provides. Not all countries have systems of accreditation, but their institutions of higher education may have credibility

nonetheless. In countries that have or desire to have systems of accreditation the public tends to be an important player that can influence the game in several ways. First, the public wants some assurance of quality, but that word may mean different things in different contexts. Second, sectors of the public may have vested interests in attaching the label of “quality” to a particular institution, for example, a new private institution seeking validation or affirmation, while another sector may have exactly the opposite interest (for example, the case of an institution attempting to limit the number of competitors). In any case, my point here is that a vaguely defined “public” that is not a direct player in the game may nevertheless be an important player.

A post-script to the list of players might include those who are often unaware of their role in the game. They are, of course, the students. Accreditation is often said to be necessary for their protection and benefit. Yet they, paradoxically, often have little awareness of or interest in the actual process.

**2. The purpose of the game.** It may seem strange to have discussed the players in the accreditation game before the purpose, but there is a reason for having done so. Simply put, there are many possible goals, and different players put different values on each one. The purpose most frequently assumed is that accreditation provides assurance of institutional quality. While almost all the players would agree with this objective, different players interpret it in different ways. For one example, the word “quality” may have various, subtly different interpretations, from the minimal threshold separating unacceptable from acceptable to something approaching excellence. Many players willingly accept the public’s tendency to equate “accredited” with “excellent.” It isn’t that they don’t think they are excellent, only that they often suspect that the accreditation process is a distraction from their own efforts to achieve excellence. Administrations and faculty typically want to get through the accreditation process with a minimum of disruption and move on, although administrations can’t afford to admit this desire. At the same time, administrations may also use accreditation to motivate recalcitrant faculty to long-needed changes. That is particularly true of a new administration that wants a tangible symbol of its own effectiveness.

Faculty and staff acknowledge the necessity of accreditation, but often regard the process with disdain, for many reasons. Or they may want to use the process for their own ends. Many governments that have not historically exercised great control over their institutions of higher education have come to rely on an independent accreditation to work for them—except when an accreditor denies approval to a politically important institution. Accrediting agencies, whether independent or governmental, emphasize the role of accreditation in creating a system of quality higher education. It can be true. But as with all organizations, accrediting organizations are ultimately at least as concerned with their own place in the system as with the quality of institutions. One way to do that is to become powerful, which in turn means large, which means to accredit many institutions many institutions, especially including ones that are regarded as of high quality, for reasons entirely apart from their accreditation.

Goals may be only implicit, yet very real. Higher education does not exist in an ideal world of learning. It exists in the concrete world of economics and politics and social striving of many sorts. One of the actual results, and goals, of accreditation is to constrain the entry of new institutions. That, of course, can be a double-edged sword, depending on one's position. For established institutions, limiting, or even eliminating competition may seem good. For potential new entrants, or regions which have limited access to higher education, not so good. The difficulties of this goal/effect of accreditation are now more evident than ever, in a world defined by global competition and on-line programs that recognize no national boundaries.

In addition, the desirable outcomes of purpose of the game may change. The concept of "quality" once referred primarily to material and quasi-material conditions and resources: buildings, laboratories, libraries, faculty and their credentials (that word again!), curricula, and the like. Today an essential element of quality in many accreditation schemes concerns the processes of the educational enterprise, particularly the institution's processes of continuous improvement. Thus "improvement" is now a primary objective of the accreditation system, for almost all players. Of course, "improvement" must be defined, and that is part of the game. Presumably, improvement should touch first the most basic institutional purpose, which is student learning. In playing the game, however, processes for demonstrating improvement may crush any real attempt to improve. That of course is to say that playing the game may become the fundamental purpose of the game.

It may seem strange to talk about the goals and objectives and the like of the game without having mentioned what most consider the primary point of any game: winning (or losing). The quick reaction to those words is that for every winner there must be at least one loser (in an athletic contest). There may be a larger ratio of losers to winners (a poker game). Is this true in the Accreditation Game? Certainly not in the US, where the number of losers is miniscule. Nearly everyone wins. Most applicant universities are accredited. Being accredited is so important that agencies can use the threat of withdrawing it, or of sanctioning universities through a label of "Probation" in most cases to compel compliance with the association's standards. Most players are satisfied, most of the time. We must ask, what kind of game is it that has more winners than losers? Rather than indicating the irrelevance of the metaphor, this fact illustrates a fundamental truth: to play is to win.

At the same time, there are a few losers, and even for them, we find aspects of the game. In general, what is the tactic when those who control a game won't let you play? You look for another instance of the same game (i.e., a different accrediting association), or, of course, you go off and start your own game, which is to say, another accrediting association/agency of similar institutions. This may be another instance of the "everyone wins" syndrome, as the number of accreditors increases.

**3. Rules of the Game.** So, for this welter of players and objectives, what are the rules? As in all games, there are formal, explicit rules and informal, implicit rules. And, as always, the formal rules are easier to deal with. They typically define the objective

(narrowly: obtain accreditation), the players (narrowly: the agency, the institution—including its governing body), and the process. They are published, often in considerable detail with respect to the criteria, the scope, and the process. The formal rules are easy to compare from one accreditation scheme to another. For example, one scheme may require accreditation of entire institutions, while another may require accreditation of individual programs. One may use a 10-year cycle, while others may use a 5-year cycle. Most accreditation systems require a self-study, and all of them have rules, some of which are moderately flexible, for its conduct and format.

It is the implicit rules, however, and their interaction with the explicit rules, that are more complex, and more interesting to analyze. In the interests of time, I will mention only a couple here. These rules very much depend on the perspective of the player involved, and they are often a “game within the game.”

The first implicit rule is, Take it seriously, but not too seriously. Accreditation is often essential, but it is also not the only institutional priority. That is to say, in many contexts it is necessary in order to operate the institution, the ticket to the larger game of running an educational institution, if you will, but it is not sufficient. Rule two is, Don't let the second part of Rule One be apparent. Of course, even this simple rule is made to be broken, or modified. If you are a cynic, don't take it seriously at all. If you are a gamer, or if you work for an accrediting agency, you must take every aspect of it literally and absolutely seriously. If you are a manipulator, your rule is to use what you can to achieve other, more limited personal or departmental objectives (new facilities, new administrative procedures) that are your primary interest.

4. **Strategies.** As much as some people would like the accreditation game to provide a cookbook with precise procedures for achieving a well-defined goal, it is much more fluid. The interaction of purposes, players, explicit rules, and implicit rules will lead to strategies. For the player ultimately responsible (President/Rector, Dean, Program Director, etc), the outcome is realized through an initial strategy of choosing an appropriate director of the accreditation process, then working through that person to define the working commissions and their personnel (players), and their responsibilities. Many accreditation efforts are less effective than they would otherwise be because of poor strategic choices of mid-level leaders and poor definition of working groups.

5. **Equipment.** It might seem that the accreditation game is played without materials or equipment. That is not the case. Accreditation is a very material process. At the most superficial level, playing the game requires financial resources to support everything from membership fees to accrediting organizations, the time the staff dedicates to the process, computer resources, production and dissemination of extensive documents, support for visiting teams of evaluators, membership fees to accrediting organizations, and on and on. He/she who controls those resources becomes a very important player indeed, and can exercise a very strategic role in the process.

But there is an even more important category under this rubric, which is information. The currency with which the game is played (you might think of Monopoly

here) is information. Accreditation is essentially about collecting information concerning the institution, presenting it in ways that demonstrate the institution's fundamental quality, but not appearing to be a shallow whitewash. If you make the institution look too good, the presentation is suspect. (How on earth do the Harvards of the world do this?) Moreover, finding some deficiencies to improve creates the basis for the next round of accreditation in five or ten years. Those who control this most basic material of the game are obviously important players, and they may have their personal or departmental strategies for interacting with other players. Players who such individual desires will almost inevitably attempt to use accreditation to gain access to information they might not normally have.

**6. Variations of the Game.** We've made occasional reference to different accreditation schemes, or to this context or that. Thus, there are variant forms of the game, just like American basketball vs. international basketball. The game lens can be a useful way to understand differences among the various accreditation systems by providing a framework for comparing and contrasting their different aspects. For example, within the category of the players, different national variants may organize different players. In the U.S., government is not a direct player. In some countries, a government unit is responsible for organizing the process. In the U.S., the primary focus of accreditation is the institution. In other countries it is the individual program. Occasionally variations can be difficult to detect simply because almost all higher education players tend to use a similar vocabulary. The same words, however, can be used with different meanings in different countries (see the next section). This leads to the impression of a single well-defined game, when actually the illusion of a common vocabulary obscures the fact of differences.

**7. The Audience.** It is occasionally difficult to distinguish players from the audience. The logical assumption is that the public is the audience, and indeed it is, when that public is not exercising some sort of influence. Audiences do influence outcomes, but generally in a less direct manner. Among other things, students, parents, and legislators can vote with their feet, so to speak. Their continued support (demonstrated through enrollment, donations, or appropriations) may indicate approval. If they ignore accreditation entirely, it loses its effect. If they determine that accreditation does not achieve its main aim in providing them with assurances of quality, the other players, agencies and accredited institutions, may be forced to raise standards. The same can be said of government, in some cases, at least, historically in the United States, where governments observed accreditation systems and disputes for years, but did not play directly. In contrast, many developing countries that seek affirmation or improvement of their institutions of higher education, therefore, want to implement accreditation systems that supposedly provide assurance of high standards and quality.

Thus, one of the conditions in which an observing audience may become a player is when the game is perceived to be dysfunctional. In many countries governments are trying to become players, either by creating accreditors directly, or by influencing the

structure and operation of independent accreditors, because these political bodies perceive that a change in their role is necessary.

Universities themselves are also an audience, even as they are players. It is a complex, multilevel game, and universities watch the game played at their comparison institutions, both those accredited by the same accreditor and those under other accreditors, even in other countries.

Some would be tempted to combine both players and audiences into a “stakeholder” category. One of the functions of accreditation is to facilitate mobility, both of students and faculty. It is thus important for University X to know that University Y is accredited in order to determine whether to admit a transfer student from Y, or to hire a doctoral graduate of Y. Both X and Y are thus stakeholders, as well as players and the audience. The audience consists, therefore, of a wide variety of players, several of which carry more than one label. (I am tempted to speak of uniforms displaying the badges of different teams. And then cheerleaders, and who knows where it will stop?)

**8. The Vocabulary.** Of course, every game has its language, with its vocabulary and definitions. Accreditation has its own vocabulary and communicative style. Part of learning to play the game involves learning to use the language. In a sense, as the philosopher Wittgenstein pointed out, using the language **is** playing the game. In this context, the language game begins with the very name of the game, “accreditation” (sounds like Carly Simon’s song “Anticipation”—great opportunity for a send-up!). To play a game the player needs to use the language appropriately with all the nuances of meaning depending on the context (audience, purpose, discourse, etc). If you don’t use it appropriately, you’ll be found out as a fraud, and marginalized or even excluded from the game, as too inexperienced or naïve to play.

An important part of the language game within the Accreditation Game revolves around the word “accredited.” Many associations manage this word very skillfully. They insist in their own publications that it must be used only as cited and defined by them. In the U.S., at least, this often is defined circularly in some way as meeting the criteria and standards of the association. But many players have additional interests, and engage in their own skillful use of this and other terms to create other impressions. For example, at least one association in the U.S. has adroitly combined satisfaction of minimal standards of quality with an emphasis on the quest for excellence. Institutions in that association will naturally emphasize the latter and not the former in the way they speak publicly about their achievement or renewal of accredited status.

In the context of our trilingual/trilingual organization, the matter of language becomes even more important. The three languages share a large cognate vocabulary, French and Spanish because they belong to the Romance subgroup of Indo-European, and English because it underwent massive borrowing from French, Italian, and Latin first in the period of the Norman conquest and second during the Renaissance. But cognate words do not always have exactly the same meaning from one linguo-cultural context to

the next. One of the problems of playing the accreditation game in a trilateral context is that of communication. We use the same words, so we think we are playing exactly the same variant of the game, but we may well be deceived, sometimes without even being aware.

The prime example of the language game is the use of words I've thrown about very loosely here (intentionally, so I could make this very point). The Accreditation Game insists on a strict semantic distinction between 'goal' and 'objective.' Goals are broader than objectives, less amenable to concrete definition. Objectives make up goals, and can be measured. What's interesting about this is that neither Mr. Webster nor Mr. Oxford seems to be aware of this distinction.<sup>2</sup> They are not players of The Accreditation Game. But we who are players must learn how to use these terms appropriately, or we will not be taken seriously as players.

And it isn't just in English. Recently I was consulting in a Hispanophone country on a project that required an evaluation of results. The working group included three or four native Spanish speakers of that country, two Spaniards, and me. Before long an animated discussion broke out concerning the semantic difference between *meta* and *objetivo*: which was broader/narrower, which more philosophical/more measurable, etc. This is clearly a country that needs more of The Accreditation Game.

**9. Conclusion/Summary.** There is a well-developed academic discipline called game theory. It spans mathematics, computer science, economics, political science, philosophy, and more. I've avoided it in my discussion because I wanted to make some points in a less formal and forbidding way. But accreditation can be analyzed in both macro- and micro- aspects as a game, with all of the elements I have mentioned. Obviously, I've only begun to scratch the surface of this game metaphorically, but you get the picture. I'll leave filling out or magnification of the details to your imaginations. I don't know if viewing accreditation as a game will actually help anyone design or complete this challenging experience, but it has proved useful to me in understanding how pieces of it fit together.

Now I'll be the first to admit that other metaphors may be as good or better. The next one that comes to my mind is theater. You can even look at the language similarities. It's a play, there are players, an audience, rules (the script), and no one loses. Well, almost no one. There was that unlucky Hamlet guy...and MacBeth, too, and... But never mind. To quote the fellow that made the rules for those two, the play's the thing.

## References

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2001 (1937) *Philosophical Investigations*. Malden: Blackwell.

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, those who take the time to consult Mr. Oxford on the etymology of "goal" might be quite, quite surprised.

