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The AACSB Assurance of Learning process: An assessment of current practices within the perspective of the unified view of validity

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to propose a framework for quality assurance of assessment practices in business schools within the Assurance of Learning (AoL) process. This framework is based on the unified view of validity (Messick, 1989), which encompasses six aspects: content, substantive, structural, generalizability, external and consequential. Parallels are made between these aspects and each of the AoL steps, while inventorying previous studies conducted in the field of business education on this matter. Moreover, this paper sheds some light on the main points to consider and the pitfalls to avoid when implementing the AoL process. The discussion related to each aspect raises the necessity to perform particular studies in order to ensure the quality of assessment practices within the AoL process.

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1. Introduction[2]

The quality assurance movement is not new in higher education; some authors have dealt with this topic since the seventies (Barak, 1977; Folger, 1977). Over the past two decades, quality assurance processes have been more extensively put in place in higher education in Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States. Changes in the structures of economies including open borders, free trade, globalization, development and dissemination of knowledge, all accelerated by the use of information and communication technologies, required businesses and other social institutions to be more competitive through a highly skilled and innovative workforce (Nicholson, 2011). However, the instruction received in universities was judged inadequate with respect to employers' demands (Azevedo, Apfelthaler, & Hurst, 2012; Downey, 2000; Nicholson, 2011). In fact, employers were expecting graduates to be operational in their work, to respond to real world needs, to be highly skilled and innovative, to integrate best practices, and to immediately adapt to their new environment. Moreover, during this same period of time, many students were adult returning students with high expectations regarding the quality of education received in higher education institutions, and the return for their investment in terms of time and money (Downey, 2000). Their aim was to improve their working conditions within a very short period of time and to access better-paid jobs.

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[2] Abbreviation used in the article: AoL: Assurance of Learning.

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Business schools, like other faculties, have had to deal with these demands as the stakeholders have been pressuring them to provide some assurance that their graduates possess the requisite skills (Azevedo et al., 2012). Thereby, business school accreditation bodies such as *The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business* (AACSB) *International* and *The European Foundation for Management Development* (EFMD) have put in place quality assurance standards to deal with these issues. For AACSB, these standards are named *Assurance of Learning* (AoL) standards and their focus is placed on outcome assessment, i.e. assessment of what students have learned in degree programs (Miles, Hazeldine, & Munilla, 2004). These standards are met by following five interrelated and iterative steps, which are often referred to as AoL process (AACSB, 2007).

Based on direct[3] assessments of student learning, business schools possess a lot of freedom and latitude to define and implement their assessment strategies within the AoL process. A recent literature review reveals the inexistence of studies on this matter (Gardiner, Corbitt, & Adams, 2010). The AACSB did not state any rules to follow in order to ensure the quality of assessment practices in business schools, despite the existence of strong theoretical frameworks derived from other fields of study, such as management (Dumond & Johnson, 2013; Gardiner et al., 2010), and measurement and evaluation in education. In this latter field of study, reliability and validity are qualities to be verified in assessment results. However, faculty and administration at many business schools are often not well acquainted with the issues of reliability and validity involved in developing and implementing the AoL process. Moreover, reliability and validity have been partially documented by a few authors such as Callahan, Strandholm, and Dziekan (2010) and Hadjicharalambous (2014) when designing and implementing an objective test in their business school, and by Allen and Bycio (1997), Black and Duhon (2003), Bycio and Allen (2007), Mason, Coleman, Steagall, Gallo, and Fabritius (2011) when using tests designed by external testing bodies. Thus, the objective of this paper is to document validity and reliability requirements for effective assessment as well as current business school practices within the context of the AoL process.[4] One of the current developments in the field of measurement and evaluation in education, driven by Messick (1989) from the Education Testing Service (ETS) three decades ago, concerns the unified view of validity. This view includes reliability and proposes a framework which encompasses six aspects of validity that have to be addressed for assessment results within the AoL process: content, substantive, structural, generalizability, external and consequential. To our knowledge, no previous authors have used this framework in the field of business education, nor to ensure of the quality of the AoL process, despite the systematic verification of the reliability and validity it offers. Writing this paper is thus motivated by a desire to further document the use of the unified view of validity (Messick, 1989) within the context of the AoL process conducted in business schools, and this, in order to ensure the quality of their assessment practices. Success in identifying some important points to consider systematically, and some pitfalls to avoid, in applying the unified view of validity (Messick, 1989), will allow business schools to have more confidence in their assessment results and thus, in their AoL process.

In this paper, the AACSB AoL process is first presented. Then, the validity and reliability requirements for effective assessment are laid out. In this section, the unified view of validity is defined (including reliability, validity and the six aspects of validity to address for assessment results) and validity issues of assessment practices adopted by business schools within the AoL process are addressed. In parallel, the current business school practices are described. In this way, we shed light on the main points to consider and the pitfalls to avoid when implementing the AoL process and discuss the necessity that particular studies be performed in order to ensure the quality of assessment practices within the AoL process.

2. The AACSB AoL process

The AoL process encompasses five interrelated and iterative steps (AACSB, 2007). These steps are: (1) definition of student learning goals and objectives, (2) alignment of curricula with the adopted goals, (3) identification of instruments and measures to assess learning, (4) collecting, analyzing, and dissemination of information and finally, (5) using information for continuous improvement.

2.1. Definition of student learning goals and objectives

The first step is to establish a set of learning goals for each degree program (4–10 learning goals). These goals must be consistent with the business school's mission, and reflect the degree of achievement of knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired in the program, and expected by the business community, regardless of the business major (AACSB, 2007). More specifically, these goals should focus on general skills, such as communication, problem solving, ethical reasoning (AACSB, 2004; Eder, 2004; Nicholson & DeMoss, 2009), as well as on specific skills in business administration AACSB, 2007). Note that in this step, the AACSB recognizes that each business school possesses a distinct mission, different stakeholders and resources, and thus, different outcomes expectations, formulated in terms of learning goals (Miles et al., 2004). A recent study by Azevedo et al. (2012) treated this aspect with the aim of measuring graduate employability. These authors proposed a

[3] According to Eder (2004), "Direct assessments acquire evidence about student learning and the learning environment. Examples are exams, projects, logs, portfolios, and direct observations. Indirect assessments acquire evidence about how students feel about learning and their learning environment. Examples include surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and reflective essays" (p.137).

[4] As there are 711 member institutions that hold AACSB Accreditation distributed in 47 countries and territories, this paper is directed to a general international audience.

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