

NWCCU's Paradigm Shift

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As we come closer to the change and launch date of the newly adopted Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation, we anchor to the NWCCU mission like an immutable piece of identity for accreditation – quality assurance and continuous improvement to promote student success.

For those who have found meaning in higher education, why do we now find ourselves in this tortuous moment of cognitive dissonance? Concepts like equity, not equality, and accountability, have infused our discussions leaving behind doubt, confusion, and even remorse. Are accreditors partly to blame by furthering the *status quo* beyond its effectiveness in today's society? How can accreditors address this state of affairs in a substantial way? The challenge is rightly aimed at those requiring quality assurance and continuous improvement in higher education institutions: NWCCU and other regional accreditors. Ultimately, NWCCU must change its paradigm. Change is no longer only a concept, it's the deciding factor for promoting success, as well as being a moral imperative.

Where has quality assurance gone awry? Quality assurance may be defined as mechanisms, procedures, and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality is delivered (Kim, 2018). Are those mechanisms, procedures, and processes derived from the Standards of Accreditation truly delivering quality education to all students? Are the requirements of NWCCU reinforcing an authentic assessment of effectiveness? To unravel this dilemma, we are attempting to understand how one makes a paradigm shift, in the words of Thomas Kuhn. Not a paradigm created from existing rules, but a paradigm that creates the rules that subsequently follow. A visual depiction of our current paradigm in education may be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U>. We propose a NWCCU paradigm shift to inspire a transformational change in beliefs about accreditation.

Initially, we will thoughtfully explore why accreditation is usually communicated as a compliance-oriented activity for the sole purpose of accountability in higher education institutions. Many have shared that faculty are not motivated by compliance. They are, after all, purveyors of knowledge for knowledge's sake, and most will say they are not in the business of creating widgets. The tension between accreditation requirements and faculty reception to these requirements can be palpable depending on how the collected data are described and utilized and, thereafter, associated with NWCCU. Furthermore, how do external factors conflict with or complement the intentions of assuring quality? What truths about the value of higher education are reflected in the dominant discourse (political, economic, social)?

Even though internal and external quality assurance are widely accepted norms in higher education today, there still remains the perception of quality assurance as both a bureaucratic

burden and infringement of scholarly autonomy. This can lead to an organizational cultural incongruence where differing perspectives and competing priorities inhibit coordinated efforts. Who defines 'quality' and who controls the messaging? Unpacking the subjectivities of a plurality of perspectives is foundational to understanding the accountability versus improvement tension that acts as a barrier to a culture of quality.

Moreover, the new paradigm must shift to continuous improvement of *outcomes* for student learning. Only then will the political, public, and academic cultures convert negative connotations of accreditors to positive and facilitative connotations as collaborators. There must be a symbolic conversion of accreditation in thought. Some might say a change to a growth mindset.

We also passionately believe accreditors must widen acceptable measures of institutional effectiveness to look beyond quantitative benchmarking as the primary indicator of an institution's mission fulfillment. During the recent Year Seven evaluation visit to Thompson Rivers University, one faculty member proffered that for a student to complete any number of classes successfully, even only a few, could be a contribution to that student's life in ways that may not be measured in statistical categories of completion. At some point, all faculty have marveled at students' expressions of insight, so why not? One may hear an individual state that education saved her life. What is the truthful interpretation of this statement? While quantitative metrics about student performance are easily obtained, we intend to provide NWCCU institutions a framework to develop qualitative indicators for a student's educational experiences; reliable measures that recognize formative lifelong learning. One can imagine the rich and deeply profound information to be discovered and coupled with communities, shared meanings, and cultural diversity.

Further, a qualitative approach acknowledges the unique social, historical, and contextual dimensions of each institution, therefore providing relevant measures that are context-specific. Faculty often discount data, particularly if it is not collected within their own classroom (Weiman, 2017). Often, a local example is far more convincing, insightful, and impactful, than published research. Action research can be used to bridge and build upon concepts generated by quantitative data to investigate findings in greater depth and to potentially identify the transformative factors in a student's learning experiences. Engaging educators and students as the primary researchers in these endeavours fosters a learning culture where all stakeholders participate in planning for mission fulfillment. Eventually, reliably assessed qualitative indicators can serve as a powerful complement to quantitative benchmarking, leading to a balanced approach to institutional outcomes through quantitative AND qualitative measures.

Finally, we will examine the effects of leadership in building consensus in a regenerative quality community. Accreditation Liaison Officers (ALOs) are leaders, and, depending on the institutional context, they must be responsive and responsible leaders. Coordinated efforts and an outcomes oriented focus in accreditation efforts are more likely to occur by shifting the paradigm from leadership through a top-down, administrative directive for compliance to leadership as responsive, yet responsible, consensus building, and creating a learning ethos. What leadership

strategies might address conflicting priorities in order to advance a culture of quality? A people-oriented approach to leadership promotes a culture of quality by supporting empowerment, team-building, open and candid communication, and by relying on knowledge and skills that are widely distributed across the institution.

To base our theories and applications in reality, we will be surveying NWCCU member institutions around the third week in January 2020 through mid-February 2020. Preliminary results of the survey responses will be presented during NWCCU's March 2020 workshop for ALOs. To complement the survey results, we will meet with focus groups on certain areas of inquiry during the month of May 2020 to further search for meaning through narratives. At the end of the 2020 academic calendar year, we will share our conclusions and suggest how we believe a transformative paradigm shift in accreditation based on both qualitative and quantitative parameters may promote a greater step toward quality assurance and continuous improvement for all member institutions.

In the interim, please "follow" us in the next three issues of The Beacon where we will discuss the theories and applications pertaining to the areas described earlier in this article. We will provide you with a small biography to read ahead of time and we hope that you engage with us in commenting about the content. Please email us at pgoad@nwccu.org or ahoare@tru.ca. We are also exploring the creation in the near future of a forum for discussion by all interested persons. Details are forthcoming. The first readings for the February issue of The Beacon are:

Ewell, P.T. (2009). Assessment, accountability, and improvement: Revisiting the tension. *National Institute for Learning Outcomes and Assessment*, Occasional Paper #1. Retrieved from http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/PeterEwell_005.pdf

Harvey, L. & Stensaker, B. (2008). Quality culture: understandings, boundaries and linkages. *European Journal of Education*, 43(4), 427-441.

Studley, J.S. (2018). Accreditors as policy leaders: Promoting transparency, judgement, and culture change. In S.D. Phillips and Kinser, K. (Eds.), *Accreditation on the edge: Challenging quality assurance in higher education* (pp.157-171). Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Vettori, O. (2012). Examining quality culture part III: From self-reflection to enhancement. *EUA Publications*, 2012.

References

Kim, G. (2018). An exploratory case study of a quality assurance process at an Ontario university. *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*. 5857. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/5857>.

Wieman, C. (2017). *Improving how universities teach science: Lessons from the science education initiative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.