Featured School:

Copenhagen Business School
Frederiksberg, Denmark

www.cbs.dk

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AACSB International
Copenhagen Business School

The Copenhagen Business School (CBS) is the first business school in the nation of Denmark to achieve AACSB accreditation. It is also one of the largest business schools to hold membership in AACSB International, both in terms of faculty strength and student enrollment. Ole Stenvinkel Nilsson, CBS' Director of Accreditation and Quality Assurance, oversees the efforts required for assessing the quality of the business education received by over 18,000 CBS students at all levels (undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral).

AACSB Senior Research Associate Colin Nelson recently discussed with Director Nilsson the means by which his school is able to ensure the quality of the education it provides to so many students. One of the more intriguing and unique aspects of assurance of learning at CBS is the significant level of ownership that all its stakeholders have in the process, including administrators, faculty, students, and even alumni.

R. Colin Nelson (RCN): I understand that Danish law requires universities to have an assurance of learning process similar to that required by AACSB of our accredited schools. Do you find that process to be synergistic with the assessment efforts you undertake for AACSB?

Ole Stenvinkel Nilsson (OSN): There is obvious synergy between the statutory systems and AACSB. The problem is, however, that assurance of learning systems tend to require quite specific data and process definitions, and it is difficult to establish internal procedures and systems that meet the requirements of both.

According to the “Order on the Accreditation Institution,” all Danish University Programs must pass a national accreditation once every five years. The Danish Accreditation Institution, ACE Denmark, established 2007, is an independent governmental institution overseeing that all programs are meeting the Danish Accreditation Criteria, which are the following:

- Criterion 1: Societal need for the program
- Criterion 2: Labor market for the graduates
- Criterion 3: Research basis of the program
- Criterion 4: Program is based on an active research environment
- Criterion 5: Quality and strength of the research environment of the program
- Criterion 6: Educational structure of the program
- Criterion 7: Organization of the learning process and the qualifications of the teachers
- Criterion 8: Quality assurance process of the program
- Criterion 9: The scholarly competence profile of the program
Criterion 10: Learning goals and assessment of learning outcomes

As you can see, there is synergy between AACSB’s standards and ACE Denmark Criteria. The fact that CBS has been involved in evaluations and accreditations since the 1990s has helped in creating awareness and acceptance among faculty for this kind of quality assurance.

RCN: Perhaps you could give us some background information on the Danish system to help clarify how that is so?

OSN: Certainly. Degree programs offered by Danish universities are regulated by a comprehensive set of national regulations. Complying with these regulations is a necessary condition for being licensed to offer the program. All degree programs must have a legal document, entitled “Program Regulations;” comply with the Danish Qualification Framework; comply with the Danish Exam Regulations; be graded according to the Danish Grading Regulations; comply with the Danish Government Examiner (“Censor”) Regulations; and meet the standards of the ACE Denmark.

In addition to the program-specific requirements, Danish universities must have a Board-approved strategy for the overall institution, deliver an Annual Report, and have a “Development Contract” (with the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation) identifying key performance indicators and overall goals to be attained during the contract period.

Finally, the Danish University Act of 2003 specifies in detail how management of programs must be organized, including processes for continuous improvement and engagement with external stakeholders. In particular the University Act specifies the extent of student and faculty influence on program development.

RCN: It’s interesting that you mention student influence on program development. One of the practices that CBS has shared in AACSB’s Effective Practices Survey is the use of “Study Boards,” which include an even number of faculty and students, to help in the continuous improvement process of each course. Can you elaborate on how these Study Boards function in practice?

OSN: Study Boards are statutory by Danish law. Each program must have one (although it is possible to share it with other programs). They typically have 6-10 elected members, and there must be a parity of students and instructors. Each program must have a set of regulations, covering the subjects taught in the program, their sequence and length, examinations required, flexibility allowed, etc. The Study Board suggests a set of regulations to be approved by the Dean, and then decides on all academic matters related to those regulations. CBS has chosen that each [degree] program has its own individual Study
Board, and that each course [i.e., class within a program] has a course coordinator appointed from faculty.

The Study Boards meet 4-5 times a year, and meetings must adhere to the “Standard Rules of Procedure of the Study Boards at Copenhagen Business School,” including guidelines for notice of meetings, rules of procedure, presentation of matters for discussion and decision, voting, committees, and minutes of the meetings. In an annual report to the Dean of Education, each Program Director must report on major challenges, and explain how the Study Board has chosen to react to such challenges in order to improve the situation. In addition, Program Directors are expected to report on any new information that may lead to program improvement opportunities in the future.

**RCN:** How did CBS come to develop this assurance of learning system?

**OSN:** The Danish national system for defining learning outcomes and controlling the exam standards is the basis for CBS’ assurance of learning system. The historical basis for the current system is a long-lasting focus (since the mid-nineties) on quality and assessment, starting with an international audit in 1996, a follow-up audit in 1998, and EQUIS accreditation in 2000. In addition, CBS has participated in regular benchmarks since 2001, as well as international research evaluations for the last 15 years. All these activities have developed a quality and assessment culture at CBS that makes it natural for faculty to participate in assessments as part of continuous program development.

**RCN:** Can you give us a brief overview of the process?

**OSN:** Each year, several sources of information on performance and goal attainment are collected from various sources—students, recruiters, teachers, censors, program managers and administrators, and CBS Business Intelligence—continuously throughout the year. This information is then processed at regular meetings in the Study Boards, and decisions and new initiatives to improve program quality are made accordingly. A summary of program assessments and planned development initiatives is presented in the Annual Program Report (written by the Program Director) to the Dean of Education. After the Dean’s approval, decisions are implemented in the Program Regulations for the following year. This annual cycle constitutes the continuous improvement process of all degree programs at CBS. Everything is regulated by general institutional strategies and policies.

**RCN:** Are there any significant variations in your assurance of learning practices, depending on program or degree level?
**OSN:** Very limited variations, as the whole process is standard. Since CBS has a large number of programs, we have chosen the same assurance of learning model for all programs. In addition to the national Danish framework for assurance of learning, CBS has institutionalized a number of internal policies and standards to be applied to all its degree programs. The CBS Program Quality Policy includes four strategies:

1. The Quality Assurance Strategy describes policies and procedures for quality assurance, approval and regular assessment of programs and degrees, assessment of students, and sets standards for teaching resources and student support.
2. The Knowledge Sharing Strategy describes how program information is shared and used as basis for program adjustment and stakeholder feedback.
3. The Evaluation Strategy sets institutional guidelines for collecting, disseminating, and follow-up on student survey data.
4. The Learning Strategy makes it clear to the students (and teachers!) what expectations CBS has with regard to the students' active cooperation in the learning process, and specifies the educational ideal that all CBS graduates must adhere to. In addition, the Learning Strategy contains regulations to ensure that teachers all have documented skills in university level teaching and that proper support is given if needed. In order to get a tenured position at CBS, the applicant must document that he/she has successfully completed a comprehensive CBS course in university pedagogy, or has pedagogical qualifications at similar level.

Together, these strategies define the general framework for quality assurance and program management of all CBS programs.

**RCN:** How has the use of the Study Boards impacted the learning goals of programs at CBS?

**OSN:** Course learning objectives are suggested by professors, and then approved by the Study Boards. The Study Board then defines the program learning goals and writes them into the Program Regulations. The Dean, in overseeing the process, is responsible for aligning program learning goals with institutional learning goals.

**RCN:** How much relative weight do you give to feedback from current students, faculty, and graduates when “closing the loop?”

**OSN:** All evaluations and feedback are discussed by the Study Board, where faculty and students in this way close the loop when the Board annually adjusts the program regulations. Graduates/alumni have a
less direct role. They are invited into advisory boards that receive summary reports on feedback and program adjustments.

Our dialogue with graduates and employers is a difficult balance between specifics – the choice of learning methods and subject elements, the distribution between different subjects, etc. – and general issues like the choice of programs to offer, size of programs, etc. Advisory Boards provide useful feedback on the general issues, but the transformation of that into course plans and instruction technology is a complicated process, to which there seems to be no one good solution.

Exams are another source of feedback: grading in exams must follow learning objectives, and if grades are weak, learning objectives may not be fulfilled. Study Boards receive grade statistics for all courses. Those courses that have external examiners receive reports from the examiners that reflect on problems encountered during exams.

**RCN:** Can you give us an example of an instance in which student feedback is vital to “closing the loop?”

**OSN:** Student feedback and reaction to it happens virtually every day, or at least every week. CBS has about 30 Study Boards that receive student survey feedback twice a year. Two processes are typical: instances where students express dissatisfaction with a certain instructor, who is then approached by the course coordinator, Head of Department, or Program Director to discuss possible improvements. Or the criticism is of a certain course or course element, where the same procedure takes place. Results from those discussions are reported to the Study Board, where decisions are then made, if appropriate.

As far as specific examples, in 2003, the Full-time MBA introduced a formal rubric to assess the strategy project, which is the capstone project of the MBA. The assessment demonstrated that students did not sufficiently meet the learning goal to develop realistic implementation plans to meet practical obstacles. As a result of this finding, a new mentoring scheme was introduced where students are teamed up with a “grey wolf” and a “young lion,” two experienced leaders at different stages in their career, to coach the students on leadership, including overcoming organizational resistance.

**RCN:** I see on the CBS website that students give survey feedback both on individual courses and on their entire academic year. Does every student give feedback on each, or is there a sampling procedure you follow?

**OSN:** Our surveys go out to all students in both cases, and the response rate on student surveys is between 20 and 60 percent. One of the most important sources of information is course feedback from students. In order to maintain a close follow-up on program delivery, CBS has implemented a standard
evaluation policy: “CBS Evaluation Strategy.” The strategy consists of several elements: On-line surveys of students' perceived quality of each course on a number of dimensions are mandatory. The standardized questionnaires ask essentially the same general questions, regardless of the specific degree program or course in question. The aim of this type of evaluation is to get comparable feedback on a range of variables. Students are asked for their assessment of:

- the course as a whole
- the student workload
- the extent to which students engage in course-related activities
- the course content, curriculum, pedagogy, and teaching material
- the students' own contribution to the learning environment
- the rating of teachers

This type of feedback is very useful to teaching staff as well as course coordinators, who report to the Study Board on the results of the evaluations and make adjustments to content and pedagogy accordingly. Based on the results of the student evaluations, the teachers at the particular program engage in discussions as a natural follow-up to the students' evaluation. However, the discussion among the teachers is not restricted to the results of the students' evaluation, but also includes more fundamental discussions concerning the overall goals of the degree program. Thus, the student survey report is an opportunity to make an annual overview of the program. This discussion process is believed to be a very crucial element in the ongoing development of both the content and structure of the degree programs.

Based on the student surveys, the Study Boards give feedback to the course coordinators, individual teachers, and Heads of Department, and also initiate measures in response to survey results. In cases of repeated poor performance, the Study Board may demand that the teacher in question be replaced. More positive reactions include formal letters of recognition and prizes of teaching excellence.

RCN: That sounds like a lot of data to collect and process. Do you have anyone (i.e., staff, graduate assistants, etc.) that aids you in collecting and analyzing the data?

OSN: In fact, the overall responsibility for the program quality lies with the Dean of Education, next with the Program Director, and then the Study Board. My role is mainly to observe and respond if I observe results or processes that are not in accordance with the general standards, but I don't have the operational responsibility. Data on program performance is collected by CBS Business Intelligence, a unit at our school dedicated to collecting and presenting data on all [Key Performance Indicators] KPIs, including program performance.

RCN: Is there a budget allocation process for all the assessment processes at CBS?
OSN: Each program receives a budget that must cover all instruction and assessment, including external examiners. The budget is allocated on a set of parameters including level, size and discipline. The Program Director allocates funds (including monetarized drawing rights on professors' time) among courses. The survey system has its own budget allocated from the central CBS administration. It is highly automated, and therefore relatively cost efficient.

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End Notes