

**How does accreditation influence the dynamics of organizational identity for business schools?**  
**Comment l'accréditation influence-t-elle la dynamique identitaire des écoles de gestion ?**  
**¿Cómo influye la acreditación en la dinámica identitaria de las Escuelas de Gestión?**

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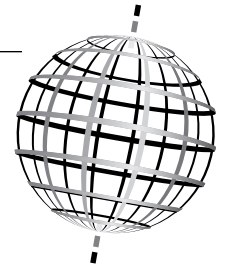
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Résumé de l'article

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# How does accreditation influence the dynamics of organizational identity for business schools?



## Comment l'accréditation influence-t-elle la dynamique identitaire des écoles de gestion ?

## ¿Cómo influye la acreditación en la dinámica identitaria de las Escuelas de Gestión?

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### RÉSUMÉ

L'accréditation est devenue importante pour les écoles de gestion depuis deux décennies. Dans cet article, nous explorons la manière dont l'accréditation influence les processus internes et externes de la dynamique identitaire. Premièrement, nous soutenons que le modèle de Hatch & Schultz (2002), la théorie de l'identité sociale et l'approche des routines habituelles offrent un cadre théorique global. Deuxièmement, nous illustrons celui-ci à travers un échec lors de l'accréditation d'une école de gestion européenne, et sa gestion du changement liée à l'objectif d'accréditation. Ensuite, nous élaborons et discutons un modèle intitulé « Identité en Changement via l'Accréditation » (ICA). Finalement, nous suggérons quelques implications pour gérer le changement pendant un processus d'accréditation ainsi que des pistes de recherche future.

Mots clés : identité, changement, accréditation, étude de cas, école de gestion

### ABSTRACT

Accreditation has become more prominent for business schools since two decades. In this paper, we explore how accreditation influences the internal and external processes of identity dynamics. First, we argue that Hatch & Schultz (2002) framework, social identity theory and the habitual routines approach offer a comprehensive theoretical framework. Second, we illustrate it with a European Management School's accreditation failure and its management of change related to the accreditation goal. We elaborate and discuss a model titled "Identity Change through Accreditation" (ICA). Finally, we suggest some implications for managing change during accreditation as well as avenues for research.

Keywords: identity, change, accreditation, case study, business school

### RESUMEN

En las últimas dos décadas la acreditación ha cobrado importancia en las Escuelas de Gestión. En este artículo exploramos cómo la acreditación influye en los procesos internos y externos de la dinámica identitaria. En primer lugar, sostenemos que el modelo de Hatch & Schultz (2002), la teoría de la identidad social y el enfoque de las rutinas habituales ofrecen un marco teórico global. En segundo lugar ilustramos este marco teórico con el fracaso del proceso de acreditación de una escuela de gestión europea y con su posterior gestión para conseguir la acreditación. Después, desarrollamos y discutimos un modelo titulado « Identidad en Cambio vía la Acreditación » (ICA). Por último, sugerimos algunas acciones para gestionar el cambio durante un proceso de acreditación, así como algunas futuras líneas de investigación.

Palabras clave : identidad, cambio, acreditación, estudio de caso, escuela de gestión

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The growing importance of accreditations since the late 1990s (Zammuto, 2008) make them a stimulating field of study. For international business schools, the most famous institutional accreditations are now AACSB – Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business – and EQUIS – EFMD Quality Improvement System. As of April 2012, there were some 649 AACSB accredited schools in 43 countries and some 139 EQUIS accredited schools in 38 countries. Although previous literature dealing with identity for business schools has mainly focused on rankings (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia & Corley, 2002; Wedlin, 2007), business schools' accreditation has surprisingly received much less attention regarding in particular its identity stakes (Julian &

Ofori-Dankwa, 2006). Following Elsbach & Kramer (1996) who show that being badly positioned in rankings triggers schools' members to feel a threat for their school's identity, we suggest that accreditation – and in particular, any failure to get accredited or any loss of accreditation – possibly represents an identity threat for business schools. The notion of "threat" has often been highlighted to start organizational adaptations in reaction to external changes (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Threat has been defined as "an environmental event that has impending negative or harmful consequences for the entity" (Staw, Sandelands and Dutton, 1981:502). In that regard, the non-accreditation – resulting from a failure or a loss of accreditation – seems to have become a possible major

identity threat for many business schools nowadays. Indeed, accreditation appears more and more as an entry ticket for business schools to allow these to play in a certain competitive international arena. However, not all schools necessarily take accreditation as a threat, as much depends on a school's historical identity, competitive context, governance mode and change management processes, for instance. Our interest here is thus to study the impact of accreditation on the internal and external processes of identity dynamics in business schools. More specifically, we study the processes of identity dynamics and explain how accreditation influences these. We build upon Hatch & Schultz (2002) framework and enrich it with two complementary theoretical lenses. So as to illustrate our theoretical framework, we describe the case of a European Management School (EMS) that first failed to get accredited and that went through several changes to reach its accreditation goal. Although past literature on identity dynamics has had a very strong internal focus, our aim here is to have a deeper understanding of the processes connecting internal and external constituencies. Based on the case study, we elaborate a model of "Identity Change through Accreditation" (ICA) that shows more concretely how the processes of identity dynamics occur during accreditation. In our discussion of the ICA model, we identify four potential identity-related situations where accreditation has a specific impact on identity dynamics. Our study suggests that an identity lens can assist understanding the effectiveness of managing change relating to a business school accreditation goal. Finally, we suggest some managerial implications for managing accreditation change processes as well as a few research avenues.

### Accreditation And Identity Dynamics

In their essay, Julian and Ofori-Dankwa (2006) argue that accreditation needs more theoretical and empirical research to better understand its impact on business schools. Hedmo (2002: 259) defines accreditation as "*the process whereby an organisation or agency recognises an education institution or programme as having met certain predetermined qualifications or standards, outlined by the accrediting organisation*". Since accreditation involves the membership of a school into an exclusive group of accredited organizations, accreditation touches an organization's identity and may involve strategic changes (Gioia et al. 1994; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Although accreditation is argued to have both internal and external consequences (Hedmo, 2002), past literature has somehow neglected identity as an important accreditation stake. More precisely, previous studies on accreditation have mainly focused on some either internal or external aspects. From an outer perspective, accreditation as a quality label is claimed to increase market transparency (Stensaker, 2003). Indeed, quality labels function like signals on a growing market, and are expected to better inform stakeholders about organizations (Zammuto, 2008). They are also a source of institutional

legitimacy (Durand & McGuire, 2005; Glynn, 2000; Stensaker & Harvey, 2006; Westphal, Gulati & Shortell, 1997) for an organization. Finally, quality labels can also enhance the reputation (Hedmo, 2004) of an organization. This will be especially the case when previously accredited organizations have a high status (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997). In these three cases, quality labels can be interpreted as making a difference between reliable and other organizations (Roller, Andrews and Bovee, 2003). From an inner perspective, accreditation as a process is presented as a tool of continuous improvement and quality culture (Harvey, 2004). Indeed, some authors (Proitz et al., 2004; Stensaker & Harvey, 2006) argue that accreditation as a process not only checks minimum standards, but also pays attention to improvement issues. Besides, accreditation is also a mean to formalize processes, leading possibly to a kind of "accreditocracy" (Julian & Ofori-Dankwa, 2006; Romero, 2008) that could make organizations less flexible and less innovative in their decisions. In this sense, accreditation has a cultural impact as it may influence bureaucratic values (Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Lejeune & Vas, 2009) and lead potentially to some convergence between schools (Thomas et al., 2013). At the crossroad of these two perspectives, accreditation for business schools also involves identity issues that may have been underestimated (Adam et al., 2002; Antunes & Thomas, 2007; Julian & Ofori-Dankwa, 2006). Indeed, accreditation influences business schools from both the cultural side as well as their image directed at outsiders, which leads us to consider organizational identity.

The concept of organizational identity has been first defined as the set of central and enduring attributes of an organization that differentiate it from other organizations (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Many scholars have built on this definition of organizational identity (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia et al. 1994; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). However, a dynamic view of identity has progressively emerged in the literature. For instance, Dutton & Dukerich (1991) have showed how image can have an impact on organizational identity. Hatch & Schultz (2002) have developed a theoretical framework that suggests how organizational identity is the center of a continuous interactive process between organizational culture and image. In line with these authors, we consider image as the perceptions of an external audience about an organization. More precisely, we view image as the level of externally perceived quality, which may be signalled through a quality label – corresponding to the criteria of a quality template – that is desired from an applying organization, and is granted or refused from an external accrediting organization. Thus, we differentiate image from perceived external prestige, which is defined as the "degree to which the institution is well regarded, both in absolute and comparative terms" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992:111). In line with previous research (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Schein, 1985), we define organizational culture as a tacit and emergent organizational context

characterized by specific values or principles. Finally, we define organizational identity as a set of identity claims and understandings answering to the question of “who we are as an organization” (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Identity claims have been defined as affirmations by leaders about who members are as an organization, while identity understandings are defined as beliefs shared by members about who they are as an organization. Examples of identity claims include logo, name and identity statements. Hatch and Schultz argue that culture and image “*are inextricably interrelated by the fact that they are so often used to define one another*” (2002:997). The authors also explain the processes between identity and image, and develop the relations between identity and culture. In this paper, we select Hatch & Schultz (2002) framework to study how accreditation influences the internal and external processes of identity dynamics. There are at least two reasons supporting this choice. On the one hand, accreditation has been argued to influence both culture and image. On the other hand, Hatch & Schultz (2002) provide the only existing framework— to the best of our knowledge – that articulates culture, identity and image. In particular, this framework includes four continuous consecutive processes that explain the links between identity, culture, and image:

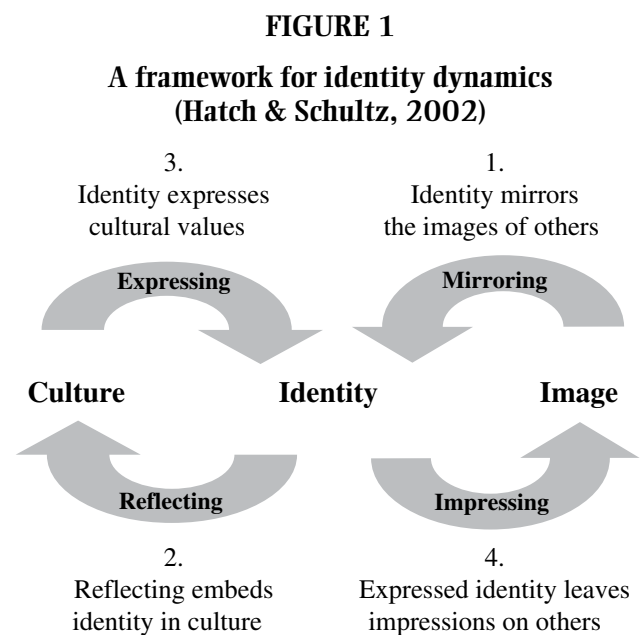
1. Mirroring: the process where identity is mirrored in the images of others;
2. Reflecting: the process where identity is embedded in cultural values;
3. Expressing: the process where culture makes itself known through manifestations;
4. Impressing: the process where expressions of identity leave impressions on others.

Although this framework (see Figure 1) appears as the first one to integrate internal (culture) and external (image) aspects of identity, or in other terms “*to account for the effects of both organizational culture as the context of internal definitions of organizational identity, and organizational images as the site of external definitions of organizational identity*” (Hatch & Schultz, 2002:991), we have few details about the way the four processes actually occur within organizations. In particular, the relationships between image and identity, or culture and identity seem not to have been analysed in details, and in particular for business schools. In this paper, we aim to fill this gap and explore in details how these internal and external processes of identity dynamics are influenced by an accreditation process. To the best of our knowledge, this framework has not been used to study business schools facing potential identity threats. Previous studies on identity change for higher education institutions seem to have focused mainly on the effects of business school rankings (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Martins, 2005) or university strategic change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 1994; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Therefore, the framework of identity dynamics

developed by Hatch & Schultz (2002) is an adequate and yet unexplored foundation to support a better understanding of the processes of identity dynamics involved during accreditation. We suggest enriching this framework with two complementary theoretical lenses, so as to better apprehend its internal loop (culture-identity relation) and its external loop (identity-image relation). More specifically, we suggest introducing social identity theory for the external loop, and the habitual routines approach for the internal loop. Indeed, we advance that social identity theory is useful to better understand the impressing and mirroring processes during an accreditation, while the habitual routines approach helps better apprehend the reflecting and expressing processes. We present these two theoretical lenses here below.

#### EXTERNAL LOOP BETWEEN IDENTITY AND IMAGE

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is of particular interest for approaching accreditation from an external perspective, and for better understanding the impressing and mirroring processes. According to this theory, people tend to classify themselves and others in different categories, such as gender, age, organizational membership. Indeed, this theory is based upon cognitive self-categorization (Asfhorth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Although the theory first concerns individuals defining themselves, we argue it can be broadened to organizational leaders defining their organization (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Labianca, Fairbank, Thomas, Gioia & Umphress, 2001). This theory is thus useful for understanding how a leader compares to and categorizes his/her organization into a strategic group of accredited organizations (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997). According to Whetten (2006:222), “*organizations acquire*



*a social identity from the industry to which they belong, the organizational form they use, and through membership in accrediting bodies.*" In other terms, entering into a group – hence subscribing to the perceptions of identities held by a dominant coalition (Sillince & Jarzabkowski, 2004) – also contributes to building an identity. In this line, Labianca et al. (2001:312) argue that *"the choice of emulation target within one's industry is not simply a matter of choosing the most structurally similar organization, but rather that identity-related attributes, such as reputation, organizational image, and organizational identity."* For these authors, top managers in universities categorize their organization according to valued characteristics of an aspired identity. The process of self-categorization seems thus central for the accreditation process as it offers insights on how leaders segment other organizations, and define their own organization among those categorizations. In their mind, this implies the recognition and acceptance of accreditation criteria that reflect a desired identity. Therefore, the theory is useful to understand the impressing process with self-categorization to start accreditation. Self-categorization also explains the importance of belonging to a group of accredited schools, for both image and legitimacy reasons. Several authors (Deephouse, 2000; Gioia & Corley, 2002; Rindova, Williamson, Petkova & Sever, 2005) recognize *"the rise to prominence of image in the current era"* (Gioia et al., 2000:79). In this regard, accreditation as a strategic change implies a choice: joining a group of organizations that look desirable because of their quality image. In this context, social identity theory is particularly salient as it suggests that leaders categorize their organization based upon the ownership of a quality label. Furthermore, the theory also highlights the legitimacy stakes of accreditation that involves being included or not in a somehow exclusive and legitimate community. Other things equal, the desire to be recognized as a member of a community will be stronger if the current members of that community have a higher status (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997). Therefore, the theory is useful to understand the mirroring process through the quality image and legitimacy stakes related to accreditation. In conclusion, the external loop of Hatch & Schultz (2002) framework can thus be usefully enriched by social identity theory to better understand the impressing and mirroring processes that reflect the first steps of an accreditation process.

#### INTERNAL LOOP BETWEEN IDENTITY AND CULTURE

The habitual routines approach (HRA) helps understanding how accreditation can change organizational identity from an internal perspective through the reflecting and expressing processes. The HRA (Brocklehurst, 2001; Burke, 1991) stipulates that identity is built on a continual process of habitual activities that confer a sense of structure and coherence on one's daily life. In this view, experimentation and exploration of routines may help redefine an identity

(Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). Indeed, a recurrent characteristic of identity seems to be its relationships with what individuals or subunit parts of an organization do (Fiol, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 1997), their habitual routines (Tatcher & Zhu, 2006), their behaviours (Fiol, 2001), their actions (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) and their practices (Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007). In this regard, the accreditation process may involve the implementation of new quality processes, new recruitment policies, new programmes or research activities, and/or new students' selection mechanisms. These changes in activities may imply further modifications in cultural values and assumptions. Indeed, if cultural assumptions and beliefs are expressed in *"a web of formal and informal practices and of visual, verbal and material artefacts, which represent the most visible, tangible, and audible elements of the culture of an organization"* (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006: 437), new routines are also likely to create new shared assumptions and values, hence change organizational culture (Hatch, 1993). Finally, new routines support the emergence of new identity claims (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002). Therefore, the HRA is useful to better understand the expressing process with habitual activities anchored in organizational culture. Moreover, routines are usually supported by a set of resources (Grant, 1991), hence creating a new routine may require the acquisition or development of new resources (D'Aveni, 1996). The habitual activities thus involve specific resources' allocations that build shared understandings among members about who they are as an organization. Resources play an important role (Glynn, 2000; Sillince, 2006) in building an identity, as the allocation of resources reflects priorities and aspirations. Further, resources are important to identity because they are both required by new routines, and support the existing routines that structure organizational life and influence organizational culture. In conclusion, the internal loop of Hatch & Schultz (2002) framework can be enriched by the habitual routines approach to better understand the reflecting and expressing processes of identity dynamics that characterize organizational adaptation to accreditation.

Therefore, Hatch & Schultz (2002) framework enriched with social identity theory and the habitual routines approach offers a more comprehensive view of identity stakes taking place during accreditation. As such, these complementary theoretical lenses provide a useful basis to better understand accreditation's influence on internal and external processes of identity dynamics. So as to illustrate our theoretical framework, we describe the case of an accreditation failure to emphasize how those processes can actually take place in a business school.

#### Methodology

We describe the case of a European Management School (EMS) that failed to get accredited by EQUIS in 2003, and succeeded in 2006. During this period, EMS identity has rapidly evolved to become eventually a much more

international, corporate oriented and formal organization. A unique case study especially fits for understanding a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, and is especially useful when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2003). Further, illustrative cases are widely used in management literature to help readers understand “*how the conceptual argument might actually be applied to one or more empirical settings*” (Siggelkow, 2007:22). An illustrative case study does not aim to test the validity of conceptual argument but rather to provide an embodiment of the conceptual argument (Yin, 2003) by building a contextualized story from an understood conceptual framework and enrich its theoretical development. Data for this study were collected through interviews, archival sources and direct field observation. In-depth, open-ended interviews (average duration of one hour and a half) with 10 key individuals, having academic or administrative responsibilities, were conducted retrospectively in 2008. Table 1 describes the profiles of interviewed individuals.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Extracts were coded in different categories: (1) the reasons to apply to the EQUIS accreditation, (2) the accreditation process, (3) the organizational change that it involved and its impact on the future of the school. Archival data included confidential EQUIS reports from EMS and from external auditors

(2003 data sheet, 2003 self-assessment report, 2003 peer review report, 2005 progress report, 2006 data sheet, 2006 self-assessment report, 2006 peer review report, 2007 and 2008 progress reports), internal documents (minutes from EMS councils, from 1999 till 2008). Another feature of this study is field observation. During the period from 2003 until the first accreditation in 2006, intensive observations on site were conducted by a member of our research team, who took written notes in a research book and participated in most EMS councils, attended numerous academic meetings, during which faculties discussed the EQUIS stakes. These different sources of data were intensively used and compared to ensure consistency and cross-check information through triangulation. As this study focuses on processes of identity dynamics through time, writing the case study and creating a validated timeline for EMS was especially important.

### Illustrative Case Study

EMS was created in 1972 as the management department from the Faculty of Social Sciences in a European university. In 2003, EMS had 35 faculty and approximately 1200 students in its two major master degrees. As to executive education, EMS proposed 5 different specialized programs to executives, leading eventually to certificates. In 2003, the school failed to get accredited, but succeeded in being accredited later in 2006 by EQUIS (EFMD Quality Improvement System). EQUIS has been launched in April 1997 by the EFMD (European Foundation for Management Development). It is a quality label for international business schools. Applying schools have to go through five steps – enquiry, application, visit, eligibility, self-assessment, peer review – before being accredited for 3 years, 5 years or being refused for accreditation. Depending on the situation, the process can last from one to five years. The main fields of assessment for EQUIS are summarized in 10 chapters that are: (1) context, governance and strategy, (2) programmes, (3) students, (4) faculty, (5) research and development, (6) executive education, (7) contribution to the community, (8) resources and administration, (9) internationalisation, (10) corporate connections. In 1998, 16 European business schools were accredited and this number then increased rapidly during the following years. In October 2008, there were up to 113 institutions from 33 countries that had been EQUIS accredited.

As any department of the University, EMS has a council composed of all professors and some representatives of scientific and administrative staff. The council votes major decisions and budgets, and makes elections for a President. In 1998, an audit had been started by a national Council of Rectors (CR) to assess the quality of teaching and programs at EMS. This CR procedure included a self-assessment report for EMS and an experts’ visit, where a leading representative of EFMD was already taking part. In their April 2000 report, the auditors made several recommendations

**TABLE 1**

#### Profile of interviewed persons at EMS

- 1) Professor at EMS (since 1994), Dean of EMS (1999-2005)
- 2) Professor at EMS (since 2001), EQUIS coordinator (2003, 2006, 2009)
- 3) Professor at EMS (1990-2005), Dean of Faculty of social sciences (2001-2005), Vice-Rector of the University (since 2005)
- 4) Professor at EMS (since 2001), Academic research director (since 2007)
- 5) Professor at EMS (since 1994), Academic research director (2003-2007)
- 6) Professor at EMS (since 2001), Academic programs director (since 2007)
- 7) Professor at EMS (since 2001), Academic programs director (2004-2007)
- 8) Professor at EMS (since 1996), Academic programs director (1999-2003)
- 9) Head of Administration (1990-2006)
- 10) Head of International relations (since 1999)

like the need to use less magisterial old-fashioned pedagogy. Since that time, EMS started to be interested in getting the EQUIS accreditation. The whole process is described in the next lines and illustrated in Figure 2.

#### FIRST APPLICATION AT EQUIS: 2001-2003

in June 2001, the President of EMS insisted that EQUIS be added in the strategic plan, and reminded the previous pressure from the Rector to get the accreditation label. For EMS, the reasons to get the EQUIS accreditation were twofold. On the one hand, it was a recognition and legitimacy issue. Being part of the accredited members was considered as a way to be recognized in a specific community and maintain its position as a core member of international business schools networks. On the other hand, the accreditation was targeted to differentiate from, or at least to equal, competitors. Indeed, two other national schools – among which EMS traditional challenger – were close to get EQUIS accredited in 2001. Further, EMS was core member of a prestigious European network, where more and more members started to get EQUIS accredited. The President of EMS thus decided to get the accreditation among others to keep EMS core position in this network. The EQUIS process was launched with a first contact in January 2002, and the auditors' visit was planned in July 2003. Concretely, a team of faculty was organized from December 2002 around a professor known as the EQUIS coordinator, talented at applying project management methods from his previous experience at a consulting company. Each member of the team had a responsibility

to write a chapter out of the 11 ones expected at the time by EQUIS for a self-assessment report (SAR). For some chapters, parts of previous work were updated, like the CR self-assessment report.

#### BUILDING A NEW VISION: 2003-2004

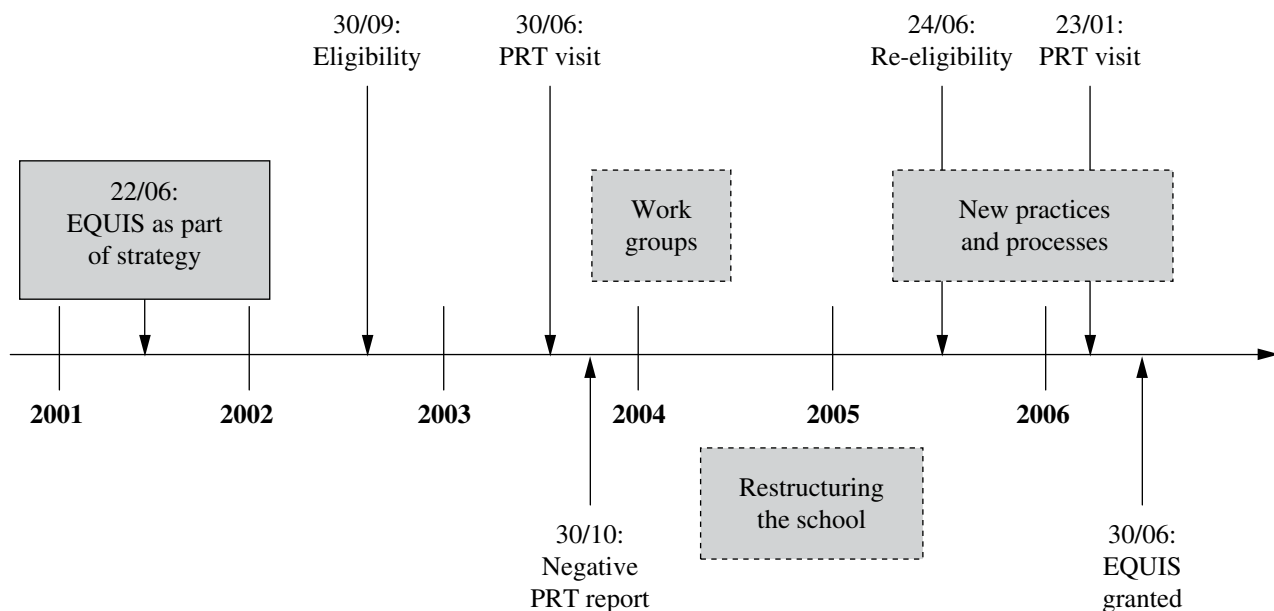
After the auditors' visit, EMS received a feedback in October 2003 that expressed a recommendation not to apply to EQUIS at that time. The report stipulated some weaknesses that can be summarized as follows: no clear strategy, no coherent governance (corporate and international partners not involved enough), lack of internationalization (for faculty and English courses), poor faculty management, poor marketing and communication. After this feedback from EFMD, the EMS President announced a "green day" with all academics in December 2003 for a collective thinking about EMS strategy. In November 2003, the Rector of the University came to EMS to announce that a plan had to be established to get the accreditation within 2 years. At this occasion, the President announced the creation of two work groups with different tasks on a period of 6 months: a "reaction" group to prepare actions to address the weaknesses pointed by EQUIS, and a "strategic" group to think about the future positioning of EMS and organise "green days" for a common vision to emerge.

#### RESTRUCTURING THE ORGANIZATION: 2004-2005

At the end of 2003, EMS built an advisory board, with representatives from the corporate world. A first autonomy

FIGURE 2

#### Timeline of key events during EQUIS process at EMS (2001-2006)



agreement, making the EMS department tend toward a faculty, was also drafted. In June 2004, the autonomy convention was approved, and the “strategic” group presented the results of its work. Among others, EMS had the will to differentiate itself through centres of excellences (CE), combining research and teaching activities. Therefore, centres of excellence are more than just centres of research. They were to be seen as the differentiating force of EMS on the European scene. The EMS council approved these ideas, and progressively three CE were organised and emerged in 2004, as well as the first incentives appeared for research papers being presented in international conferences or published in academic journals. Before, research was left to individual initiatives without any convergence in chosen topics. At the administrative level, there was a relatively huge reorganisation of tasks and persons, with a new communication team and a new position for corporate relations. In terms of funding, an international foundation was created in 2004 with the objective of supporting fees to invite international faculty at EMS. Another important change in the governance of the school was approved in May 2004: the proposition and implementation of mandates for different responsibilities. This change allowed to introduce a description of different responsibilities and to create a management team composed of the President, the Academic research Director, the Academic programs Director, the Head of Administration and Programs Coordinators.

#### **NEW MANAGERIAL PRACTICES AND PROCESSES: 2005-2006**

As a result of the restructuring of the organisation, several practices and processes were changed at EMS. First, the management team began to take more and more operational decisions, although being still accountable to the Council. For instance, the management team launched a first ranking of academic journals that was proposed to the EMS council to assess the quality of its research, as well as a teambuilding activity between professors. Other practices linked to the school’s governance include more systematic discussions with the Advisory Board – composed by a set of representatives from corporations – for any strategic decisions. Second, the administrative team started to implement new functions related to the internationalisation of EMS, one for the implementation of the Bologna reform and the other to develop external communication. Third, a first Executive MBA program was launched in 2005 in collaboration with some academic partners. Some professors at EMS were involved in this new programme that allowed a tighter link to the corporate world. Fourth, research activities were developed on a more frequent schedule through several seminars and meetings in each centre of excellence. Along with these changes, the EQUIS process went on with an updated version of the previous self-assessment report approved in December 2005.

#### **GETTING ACCREDITED AND CHANGES IN HUMAN RESOURCES SINCE 2006**

In its second self-assessment report, EMS introduced itself under a new English name rather than using its historic name “EMS” that was nationally well-known. The second preparation was globally perceived by professors as more focused on image and based upon results more than intents. Finally, EMS got the accreditation for 3 years in May 2006, for the greatest relief of its members. After this collective effort and all changes to get the accreditation in 2006, EMS knew then a kind of post-birth depression. Next to have got the accreditation label, it appears from interviews that the EQUIS success had not been celebrated within the school at a level corresponding to invested efforts. A few months later, the Head of Administration and two professors left their jobs for different reasons, either for a lack of recognition or an opposition to the evolution of EMS towards a corporate model, instead of an academic model. These successive leaves were quite unusual in a university context, and led to other recruitments. In September 2006, EMS master programs were included in the FT European ranking among the first 20 positions. Between 2007 and 2008, several Deans were elected to be in charge of leading the school, but with a constant mission to keep – and not to lose – the EQUIS accreditation on a long term perspective.

#### **A Model Of Identity Change Through Accreditation (ICA)**

The case study of EQUIS accreditation at EMS offers an illustration and several insights on how the four processes of impressing, mirroring, reflecting and expressing (Hatch & Schultz, 2002) actually occurred within EMS and reached organizational identity. Further, the case shows how the complementary theoretical lenses of social identity theory (SIT) and habitual routines approach (HRA) shed light on the accreditation process. It shows concretely how the external and internal processes of identity dynamics are embodied in the relationships with the accrediting agency and the internal stakeholders at EMS. Based on this illustrative case study, we propose to “elaborate existing theory” (Pratt, 2009) by introducing an extended framework of identity change adapted to an accreditation process. We provide this new model with the title “Identity Change through Accreditation (ICA)”, as illustrated in Figure 3. The ICA model is a flow model that suggests how accreditation actually involves both external and internal aspects for business schools. Here below, we describe each of the four processes of the ICA model, illustrating these with the case of EMS and its evolution from an academic towards a more corporate orientation.

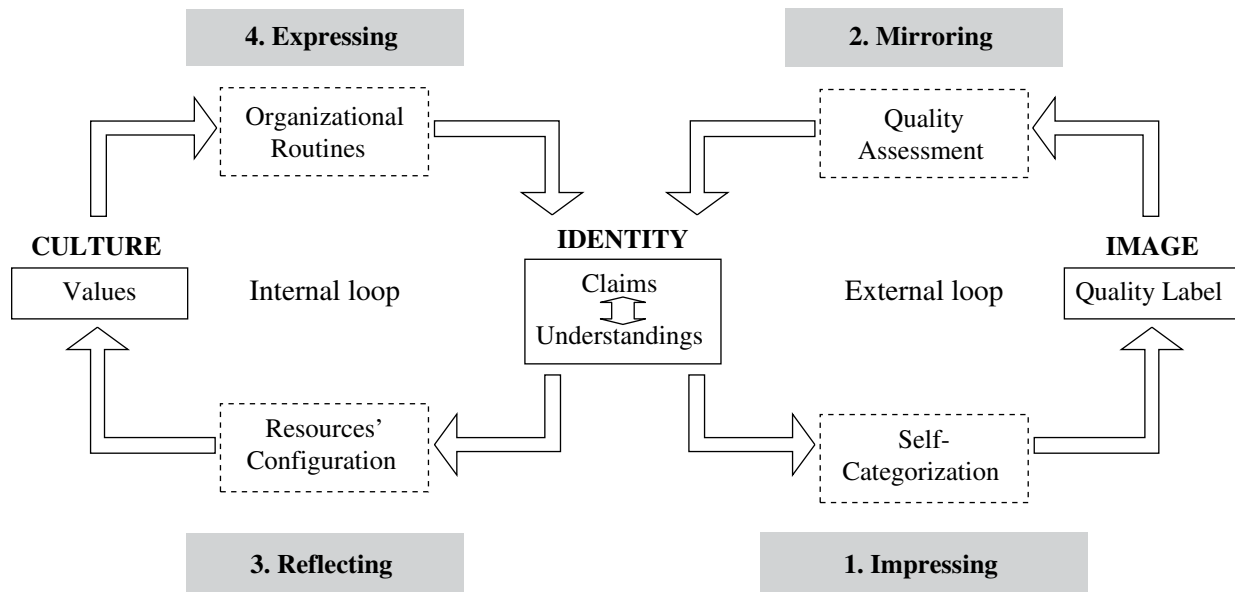
#### **IMPRESSING PROCESS: THE ROLE OF SELF-CATEGORIZATION**

Several times during the period 2003-2006, the impressing process took place at EMS, and left impressions on



FIGURE 3

## Identity Change through Accreditation (ICA) Model (Extended from Hatch and Schultz, 2002)



the accreditation agency. It includes the self-assessment report submission to the accrediting team, and the peer review visits and interviews. Indeed, when the President of EMS started to organize the application to EQUIS and to have contacts with EQUIS in 2002, EMS members wrote a self-assessment report in 2003 that left impression on the accreditation agency, as well as the external auditors. Through its application, EMS aimed to categorize itself in the EQUIS elite group. By doing this, EMS left some impressions on the external accreditation agency about EMS ambition to be within a group of prestigious and recognized business schools.

“It was initially for a recognition issue. And then we discovered that to achieve that recognition issue, we had to improve”. Professor and EQUIS coordinator

“If all good schools have it, why not have it? But it is like you just follow the herd”. Professor

“Since there is a system being developed, you cannot say that you are outside the system. The negative side is that once there is a credible way to affirm that you are good, it is not credible anymore not to use this mechanism”. Professor and academic research director

At the same time, competitive reasons also explain how EMS defined itself in a national market, and tried through EQUIS to bypass national competitors by accessing a prestigious international group, gaining thus a temporary competitive advantage.

“EMS hoped to get it before its historic competitor just to get a distinctive sign on the national market. I think that the underlying logic is clearly market oriented”. Dean of the faculty of social sciences

“In our country, our direct competitors being accredited by EQUIS, so it is part of the game, it was the obvious accreditation”. Dean of EMS (1999-2005)

“You need to be among the best on an international level, but to be among them, it is assumed that you distinguish yourself strongly from what exists on a local level. So, this is mainly competition with national competitors”. Professor and academic programs director (1999-2003)

In July 2003, external auditors visited EMS and met different faculty, members and students. Based on their experience with EQUIS criteria and understandings of EMS, the auditors had more impressions about EMS during their peer review visit. Especially during the second visit of auditors in 2006, EMS members showed extensively what they wanted to be, and insisted more on their impressions toward the reviewers.

“We have had a more professional process of exam. That means that we have studied our stuff, this is the SAR. We have tried to write well the results, to choose who would meet the auditors, which meeting to organize. We dressed ourselves well, we had put our ties”. Dean of EMS (1999-2005)

“The second time, we dealt with the packaging much more. So the look and feel, the graphics, the style... so, which goes back to the point about commercialization. So, our first work looked like an academic work. Our second report looked like the annual report of a company. So, we spent much more time in the look and feel of the report [...] We submitted the report to some people outside before”. Professor and EQUIS coordinator

**MIRRORING PROCESS: THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSESSMENT**

As the process by which identity is mirrored in the images of others, the mirroring process during accreditation concerns all the feedbacks received from the accreditation agency. It covers the ‘confirmation of eligibility’, when a steering committee appreciates the eligibility of a school through its profile and perspectives. In the same line, the final decision of the awarding body – part of the accreditation agency – is strongly related to the process of mirroring, as the final decision to give or not the accreditation label reflects the matching between identity claims and image. The sending of the reviewers’ report to EMS is also related to the identity mirroring process, as organizations receive the reviewers’ analysis. In the case of EMS, no formal negative answer was given from the awarding body in 2003. However, the negative report of reviewers had more or less the same effect on EMS members as many of them thought they were worth being granted by EQUIS. In 2003, the auditors’ report mirrored thus their image of EMS relative to the EQUIS criteria. Globally, this was assimilated to a failure for all professors. The EQUIS process has thus made salient an identity discrepancy between EMS current identity, especially its leader’s claims, and its image for the external accrediting agency. As a result, the identity understandings of organizational members dealing with who they were as an organization were challenged.

“I think EMS discovered that it was less international than it thought it was”. Professor and EQUIS coordinator

“We have not tried to answer, as if it was an exam, to certain critics, but we have taken the problem from a deeper perspective, and asked: what is the positioning of EMS?” Head of international relations

“So, [there was] deception but at the same time, there was a feeling of fairness. It was just a misfit between what EMS was and what EQUIS asked for”. Head of EMS administration

“We have the business school model, and we have the university model. And we want to create a school of management. Because we don’t really want to be just a university anymore, but we are afraid to become a business ...” Professor

Looking at the reasons for failure mentioned by reviewers, some EQUIS criteria were referred to as being strongly rooted in identity arguments. For instance, EMS was claimed to be not international enough concerning the faculty profile. However, EMS was well known nationally for sending a lot of students abroad, and EMS really thought to be well internationalized. The first quality assessment thus made clearer the meaning of certain EQUIS criteria. Another example was the poor management of faculty. As part of a university, EMS did not really “manage” its faculty. And these changes in identity understandings in 2003 were then followed by a common will for organizational changes and effort through EMS, with the aim to get accredited.

“So, this refusal to get accredited has led to a process, a second wave, where people have made effort with a view to reach that objective”. Dean of EMS (1999-2005)

“We were not ready. We had no governance, we had no structure, we didn’t know where we wanted to go. So, the council decided: what do we do? Do we go on with EQUIS and do we change things or not? We have said yes”. Professor

“These are critics that are established. I’m going to give an example: the absence of strategy. You can say that it was a leadership problem from the president. Actually, you should realise that we are a management school that has never had a written strategic plan”. Dean of EMS (1999-2005)

In June 2004, a workgroup presented the result of its work, including a differentiation strategy with a revised mission statement for EMS in line with the requirements of an academic research-based institution. In short, the modified identity understandings after failure had led to support new formal identity claims.

“I think that what was improved is the set of thoughts about the direction where we want to go, the objectives, the strategy, strategy formalization. There was no strategy before”. Professor and EQUIS coordinator

“Especially the first time EQUIS forced us to compare ourselves to other schools. And it forced us to formalize and make explicit many things that were informal and implicit, like all values, our culture, our strategy, our objectives, etc”. Professor

“There has been a learning effect that took place for strategy formulation. It became much more operational, even if this may seem a paradox. Better formulated, more precise, formulated in terms that EQUIS wanted to hear. With general objectives, specific objectives, implementation plan, which look much more like a real strategy”. Dean of EMS (1999-2005)

In June 2006, the mirroring process led however to a positive quality assessment, and the EQUIS label for EMS. As such, the accreditation in 2006 confirmed the existing fit between EMS identity and image at the time.

**REFLECTING PROCESS: THE ROLE OF RESOURCES’ CONFIGURATION**

Defined as the process by which identity is embedded in cultural values, the case study of EQUIS process at EMS suggests that changes in resources played an important role, as they appeared mainly in the period 2004-2005. Following the ‘green days’ and workgroups, EMS started indeed to embed its new vision within the organization. These changes included the creation of an advisory board with representative from the corporate world, an autonomy convention, the creation of centres of excellence, and

administrative reorganization, an international foundation, incentives for research, and mandates for a management team. Among these changes, some were associated with a reinforcement of an academic orientation (autonomy, centres of excellence, international foundation), while others supported the development of a corporate orientation (advisory board, administrative reorganization, research incentives, management mandates).

“EQUIS has been a catalyst. For instance, the reflection on centres of excellence is one of the consequences of EQUIS”. Professor

“Concerning private funding, there has been money given to EMS to facilitate the EQUIS process. No only to pay auditors, but to put EMS in better conditions to get EQUIS”. Professor

“Interaction with the corporate world ... This is one of the points where EQUIS has pushed a little bit too. There has been the activation of the so-called advisory board. And this is certainly the most visible impact”. Professor and academic research director

Globally, these organizational changes in resources and in the management of resources were perceived by several professors as having transformed EMS culture so that internationalisation and formal control became more developed.

“But couldn't we try to have some foreign professors or researchers? Couldn't we subscribe to this in our recruitment policy? So, it is also a change in mentalities”. Dean of the faculty of social sciences

“I think the true utility was about being asked to be accountable. So, it was new for the persons, and some didn't like it”. Professor and EQUIS coordinator

#### EXPRESSING PROCESS: THE ROLE OF ACTIVITIES

Concerning the process by which culture makes itself known through the expression of usual activities, our case study suggests that the production of a self-assessment report is a major illustration. Writing a self-assessment report obliged EMS to understand and express its strategic position and resources' configuration, its strengths and weaknesses, hence to show evidence of a good awareness of its identity. Further, the case study suggests that EMS routines and practices started to change since 2005, expressing cultural values of research and corporate orientation. For instance, a ranking of academic journals was introduced to allocate research incentives, as well as to promote research outcomes. Although it was punctual, a teambuilding activity was proposed for the faculty to develop cohesion in a more corporate way. New administrative processes were focused on the internationalization and external communication, especially for visiting faculty. The new Executive MBA emphasized the willingness to share management knowledge with corporations, hence getting closer to the

corporate world. English courses and research activities, seminars and meetings were organised on a more regular basis. These renewed usual activities or routines led to progressively influence identity understandings as well as support new identity claims.

“The executive MBA is apart. It is really a change that is very influenced in my opinion by EQUIS. Its birth has been very influenced by EQUIS. For sure.” Dean of EMS (1999-2005)

“One of the things EQUIS introduced is more explicit performance management processes. And those management processes among others apply to faculty members, which in a typical university are not much evaluated, not much followed, etc”. Professor and EQUIS coordinator

“More courses in English certainly. But this was a little bit within the objectives anyway. But EQUIS has accentuated and accelerated the move. Without EQUIS, maybe we would still wonder: wouldn't we create courses in English? EQUIS has ensured that it is now done”. Professor

In 2005, EMS reapplied for the accreditation with a new formal mission statement, a new formal strategy, and a new English name. At the time, all these renewed identity claims were then supported by routines and resources in the organization. This led the auditors to grant EMS with the accreditation label in June 2006.

## Discussion

In this paper, we have studied the processes of identity dynamics during an accreditation process and explained how accreditation influences these with complementary theoretical lenses. Our aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the processes connecting internal and external constituencies. In so doing, we have also established some bridges between previous studies on accreditation that had focused separately on the internal or external dimension. We have illustrated a framework that sheds light on our understanding about the management of accreditation change processes. In this section, we discuss first how our framework (Figure 3) helps to better understand the internal and external processes of identity dynamics during accreditation. Second, we discuss the role and interactions of identity understandings and identity claims during accreditation at EMS. Finally, we build on the EMS case to discuss other situations potentially faced by any business schools when involved into an accreditation process, based on whether there are changes in identity claims and (or) identity understandings.

First, the ICA model helps to have a much deeper understanding of the internal and external dimensions of identity dynamics during accreditation. It proposes an articulation of different research streams in organizational identity.

Rather than integration or a merger, an articulation means a bridge between different streams, while not denying their specific contribution. Indeed, the ICA model enriches Hatch & Schultz (2002) framework with social identity theory and habitual routines approach. While social identity theory is more externally oriented as it involves a comparison with an external group, the habitual routines approach is more internally focused on usual activities and practices. To some extent, social identity theory allows introducing the notion of “strategic groups” that impacts identity (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997) and is inherent in accreditation. In addition, the sequence of self-categorization followed by a quality assessment from the accreditation agency make the processes of impressing and mirroring more concrete. As for the habitual routines approach, it allows introducing organizational changes in resources’ configuration and usual activities, which are a vector of identity change within the framework of Hatch & Schultz (2002). As such, the concepts of resources’ configuration and organizational routines make the processes of reflecting and expressing more concrete. In the case study, all the modifications in resources took place on a roughly one-year period, and allowed then activities and practices to change. Globally, the ICA model helps well better understand the dynamics between culture, identity and image that characterize the internal and external stakes of an accreditation process. Further, the ICA model suggests also how an equilibrium between dual (or multiple) identities (Cheney, 1991; Pratt & Foreman, 2000) can possibly change for a business school during an accreditation process. As Albert & Whetten (1985) had suggested, hybrid identities are characterized by a tension between a “normative” identity and a “utilitarian” identity. Within universities, business schools may be the most visible places where this tension occurs daily between “academic values” (normative identity) and “corporate values” (utilitarian identity). In the case of EMS, an original situation between dual identities – characterized by overstated academic values and neglected corporate values – has been severely challenged by the first failure to get accredited, but a new equilibrium – characterized by better supported academic values as well as corporate values – has progressively emerged through changes in resources’ configurations and routines, before being eventually communicated to the accreditation agency.

Second, the ICA model views organizational identity as a set of identity claims and understandings that answer to the question of “who we are as an organization”. Although identity claims and understandings continuously influence each other, the case study suggests that identity understandings and identity claims played a specific role at different times, leading to eventually change organizational identity at EMS. These results confirm Ravasi & Schultz (2006) findings that an identity threat triggers a sensemaking process, which leads then to revised identity claims. At first, the accreditation failure at EMS has severely challenged identity understandings of organizational members and led

to a sensemaking process through “green days”. The existence of a desirable quality label had indeed implied a new self-categorization for EMS that was implemented through the strategic choice of entering the EQUIS accreditation. Such a choice concerned the whole organization and was made explicit by organizational leaders. More precisely, the initial self-categorization started already in 2001 when EQUIS was put on the strategic agenda of the school. From that moment, EMS defined itself as an international management school that would apply and be part of the EQUIS community. Being recognised as such was important for the intended image of EMS, especially in the mind of its President. Ensuring quality was also a good reason to apply, but seemed to come as a second argument. Interestingly, the EQUIS idea was not initially suggested by faculty members. To some extent, it was decided in a “top-down” approach by the President of the school. However, the first quality assessment was not positive as expected, and created an identity discrepancy. Perceived as an identity threat, this discrepancy has then greatly challenged – and started to progressively modify – the identity understandings of organizational members. Five years after the first accreditation failure, identity understandings at EMS had deeply changed, as confirmed by all interviewed persons. In a second step, the identity claims have been progressively revised with the emergence of a new vision and eventually a new formal mission statement, strategy and English name. All these revised identity claims were then accompanied and supported by – as well as they supported – several organizational changes initiated at EMS during that time. Referring to the internal loop of ICA model, EMS has modified its resources’ configuration (e.g. research centres), which has progressively challenged its existing organizational culture and values. At EMS, the first organizational change clearly appeared in the structure, autonomy and allocation of resources, as a consequence of the formally expressed new strategy. As such, these changes in resources answered directly to EQUIS criteria of autonomy, coherent structure, relationships with the corporate world and internationalisation. The case study at EMS suggests further that usual activities and practices started only to change progressively, once structural changes in the resources’ configuration were implemented. For instance, activities of corporate relations started only when a reorganization of the administrative team had been conducted, leading to a new position for corporate tasks such as organizing fairs, creating corporate events, or involving managers within courses. In addition, the modified resources’ configuration supported also change in organizational culture. For instance, the international foundation contributed to make EMS culture more open internationally, through the invitations of more foreign guest faculty, changing thus “the way things happen around”. Then, a modified culture at EMS has supported further changes in routines, like recruitment procedures, and revised identity claims. The ICA model is thus consistent with Ravasi & Schultz (2006) framework,

but it relates the internal and external processes of identity dynamics more clearly with organizational changes in resources and activities during an accreditation process.

Third, the study of EMS identity after the accreditation failure illustrates several changes in identity claims (e.g. mission statement, strategy, school name) and understandings (e.g. more international, corporate-oriented, and formal). However, nothing suggests that both identity claims and understandings should necessarily change for all business schools involved in any accreditation process. If that is not the case, it seems then inappropriate to characterize such a situation as representing an “identity change”. Therefore, it may be useful to consider different identity-related situations that we represent in Figure 4.

Based on Figure 4, we suggest that both identity claims and understandings should be modified for a real change in organizational identity to happen, as it happens for the case at EMS (case D). Therefore, only one cell on Figure 4 corresponds to EMS, while the three other cells somehow extrapolate this situation. Case A could correspond to schools where accreditation would have changed neither identity claims nor identity understandings, as it may be the case for the most reputed international schools. Case B could correspond to schools that would have decided to get inspiration from publicly available accreditation standards to change their internal processes and activities, leading to a cultural change, without any change in identity claims referring to a quality label. Case C could correspond to schools where accreditation would have led to a strengthening of external communication, notably through the accreditation label, without any significant change in internal processes and identity understandings shared by their members. Finally, case D corresponds to EMS where there has been a change in both identity claims and understandings, which we suggest is the only case of an identity change. The conceptual interest of Figure 4 is to link the two identity components, namely identity claims and understandings (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) with culture and

image (Hatch & Schultz, 2002) to help characterize different identity-related situations. Based on Figure 4, we suggest that identity understandings are potential drivers for any cultural change, while identity claims are potential drivers for any (intended) image change. Nevertheless, this hypothetical statement needs further empirical validation.

### Implications And Research Avenues

Based on this study, we develop some implications for managing change to reach an accreditation goal within business schools, and then we propose some research avenues. Our managerial implications derive from the ICA model and we relate them to Kotter (1995)’s guidelines for effectively managing change. In particular, we differentiate three steps through which an identity lens can shed light on and help change management: (1) the mirror test, (2) an identity work and (3) capability development. (1) The mirror test refers to the application stage for an accreditation. It is based on a business school’s leader self-categorization of his/her school within a specific group of accredited organizations that are perceived as comparable regarding certain quality criteria and standards, and then a quality assessment provided as a feedback by the accrediting agency. The mirror test can then reveal a gap or discrepancy between the current identity and image, which can then be perceived as an identity threat. Such a negative feedback from the mirror test triggers identity questions and provides some foundations for justifying future change within the business school. Referring to the literature on change management (Kotter, 1995), a mirror test leading to a negative feedback is a potential strong catalyst for a creation of urgency, and also a possible mobilizer for organizational members to form a coalition as organizational identity touches an organization at its most fundamental and persistent level. (2) An identity work consists in the revision and mutual adjustment of – and between – identity claims and identity understandings. Interestingly, Ravasi & Schultz (2006) suggest the concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving to explain the dynamics between identity claims and understandings. The authors define sensemaking actions as including the “*reevaluation of core members’ interpretations of core and distinctive attributes of the company*” while sensegiving actions refer to “*managerial actions that support the presentation and illustration of new identity claims to internal and external audiences*” (2006:440). Further, these concepts have already been used to study strategic change within a university (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In the case study at EMS, the identity threat that resulted from the accreditation failure pushed the school to think collectively about its very soul during one year in a somewhat “bottom-up” approach. Such an internal debate actually corresponds to an identity conversation, aiming at making identity claims explicit and adjusting identity understandings. Although the EMS failure to get EQUIS involved first a revision of

**FIGURE 4**

**Change in identity understandings and identity claims**

	No Change in Identity Understandings	Change in Identity Understandings
No Change in Identity Claims	(A) <i>Identity Stabilization</i>	(B) <i>Cultural Change</i>
Change in Identity Claims	(C) <i>Image Change</i>	(D) <i>Identity Change</i>

identity understandings through workgroups and “green days”, it is not obvious that identity understandings should always change at first. Referring to change management literature (Kotter, 1995), an identity work allows the creation of a collective vision by sharing identity understandings but supports also the communication of this vision through the elaboration of revised identity claims. (3) Capability development consists in the modification of resources’ configuration and organizational recurrent activities. Those changes are justified by previously revised identity claims and strategic plans, and progressively support a new organizational identity. This last step also influences the cultural setting of the school through the modification of artefacts and symbols (e.g. list of publications, using English in emails) as well as values (e.g. incentives for research) and assumptions (e.g. competition and benchmarking). Referring to the literature on change management (Kotter, 1995), capability development contributes to create short-term wins through the modification in the resources’ configuration (e.g. recruitment of foreign faculty) but also to anchor change in organizational culture by promoting new recurrent activities (e.g. research seminars or executive education programs).

As for research avenues, we suggest to study other cases in different settings. For instance, EMS has a specific university context that makes it culturally unique and moderates any attempt to formulate general statements. Indeed, university departments are usually known for their culture of autonomy, freedom and consensus. Therefore, it would be interesting to analyse an accreditation process within non-university settings to observe, for instance, whether usual activities and practices need also such a period of time before being modified. Further, the ICA model suggests some interactions between identity claims and understandings, leading eventually to different situations at a specific point in time, as illustrated in Figure 4. More cases to illustrate different situations as suggested by Figure 4 are needed, possibly highlighting trajectory through time among the four different situations. Finally, we suggest studying more in depth the actions and difficulties faced by practitioners (e.g. teachers, researchers, corporate guests, and administrative staff) within business schools to adapt to accreditation criteria.

For many business schools, accreditation failure or loss can represent an identity threat, which is likely to modify their cultural settings and image. In the ICA model, accrediting agencies can be viewed somehow as “image retailers” but also as “capability enablers”, hence eventually as possible “identity catalysts”. Nevertheless, the contribution of accreditation agencies to business school image should be appreciated by taking into account the previous reputation of a school. For business schools’ leaders, viewing accreditation through an identity lens allows to better anticipate and manage organizational change associated with the accreditation goal.

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