

+ Case study: Evolution of Accreditation from a PSRB and an HEI perspective

**Building new partnership with PSRBs as we design
education of the future**

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Contents

Contents	2
1 Introduction	4
2 Key challenges in Computer Science accreditation	4
3 Evolution of the accreditation process	4
4 Key Insights	5
5 Conclusion	6

1 Introduction

This case study follows Professor Alistair Irons' journey with the British Computer Society (BCS) accreditation process over approximately 20 years. From his early experiences as a programme lead managing accreditation at his institution to becoming Chair of the Academic Board and Vice President, the narrative illustrates the evolution of accreditation practices in computer science education in the UK.

2 Key challenges in Computer Science accreditation

1. **Excessive documentation requirements:** Initially, the process required "huge baskets full of documentation" that needed dedicated shipping, creating substantial administrative burden.
2. **Confrontational approach:** The early accreditation model was adversarial rather than developmental, creating tension between institutions and the accrediting body.
3. **Discipline diversity:** Computer science encompasses diverse specialties (pure computer science, software engineering, cybersecurity, digital forensics) that don't always align with standardised accreditation criteria.
4. **Employer recognition gap:** Unlike other disciplines, employers rarely specify the need for graduates from accredited programs, questioning the value proposition.
5. **Institutional variation:** The impact and perceived value of accreditation varies significantly across different types of institutions.
6. **Evolving subject matter:** Computing is constantly evolving with new fields (AI, cybersecurity, big data), requiring accreditation processes to adapt quickly.

3 Evolution of the accreditation process

Phase 1: Traditional Approach

- Paper-heavy documentation requiring physical delivery
 - Confrontational assessment methodology
 - Limited dialogue between institutions and accreditors
 - Rigid application of standards across diverse computing disciplines
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Phase 2: Reform and Development

- Shift toward developmental engagement rather than confrontation
- Movement from adversarial assessment to peer support and good practice sharing
- Improved recognition of computing's diverse specialties
- Introduction of separate accreditation for placements (borrowed from IET)
- Gradual digitisation of documentation processes

Phase 3: Value Enhancement

- Focus on making accreditation more valuable to students and institutions
- Reducing redundant work by aligning with internal QA processes
- Standardising terminology and improving communication
- Strengthening industry relevance while maintaining academic standards
- Building a repository of good practice to share across institutions

4 Key Insights

1. **International perspective:** Some international institutions found BCS accreditation valuable for exempting them from local QA requirements, while UK institutions experienced it as duplicate work alongside internal QA processes.
2. **Reputational impact:** Despite apparent indifference, institutions reacted strongly when accreditation was removed, revealing its underlying importance to institutional reputation.
3. **Professional status challenges:** Computing lacks the license-to-practice requirements of other professions, making professional body accreditation less immediately relevant to employers.
4. **Cultural resistance:** Changing established practices met resistance, with some stakeholders showing "unwillingness to change" despite clear inefficiencies.
5. **Collaborative approach:** The most significant improvement came from transforming accreditation from a confrontational process to a developmental engagement between peers.

5 Conclusion

This case study demonstrates how professional accreditation in computing has evolved from a bureaucratic, confrontational process toward a more collaborative, value-added approach. It highlights the ongoing tension between maintaining standards and reducing administrative burden, while illustrating how professional bodies must adapt their processes to remain relevant in rapidly evolving fields like computer science.

The journey also underscores the importance of leadership in driving cultural change within accreditation processes, showing how persistent efforts by individuals like Professor Irons can transform institutional relationships and practices over time.

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