



# AABS ACCREDITATION WHITE PAPER

# AABS ACCREDITATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA COLLECTION

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## Purpose of this Paper

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the significance of effective data management practices in achieving and maintaining accreditation from the Association of African Business Schools (AABS). It aims to provide insights and guidance to business schools seeking accreditation by emphasizing the role of data management in meeting AABS standards and requirements.

This paper emphasizes the critical role of data management in the AABS accreditation process. It explains how effective data management practices enable business schools to collect, analyze, and utilize data to demonstrate alignment with accreditation standards, track performance, and drive continuous improvement.

Please note that the types of systems for data management and the steps to data system implementation suggested in this paper are not prescriptive. They are rather suggested to guide schools that are starting their data management journey. Some schools may already have an existing system in place. In this instance, this white paper is designed to provide potential suggestions for improvement, based on the context of individual schools.

This paper was inspired by the AABS, H2 Software and Quality Education Development (QED) 2023 accreditation webinar<sup>1</sup>.

## What is Data Management and How Important is it for AABS Accreditation?

Data management is the process of collecting, storing, organizing, securing, and utilizing data to ensure its availability, accuracy, integrity, and usability throughout its lifecycle (Stedman and Vaughan, 2022)<sup>2</sup>. This involves various activities and practices to effectively manage and leverage data as a valuable asset in a business school. Effective management of data is critical for analytical

<sup>1</sup> Powell, J. and Van Der Heijden, H. 2023. The importance of data management. AABS Accreditation Webinar, 21 June 2023 (<https://youtu.be/jJkf26Fy9Ss>)

<sup>2</sup> Stedman, C. and Vaughan, J. 2022. What is the data management and why is it important? TechTarget Network. Available from <https://www.techtarget.com/searchdatamanagement/definition/data-management> [Accessed on 23 August 2023].

information to assist with decision-making and strategic planning.

Data management is very beneficial to business schools and implementing robust data management practices is of great help in the context of AABS accreditation. Well-managed data can support evidence-based decision-making, enhance institutional effectiveness, drive strategic planning, enable benchmarking against peer institutions, and contribute to continuous quality improvement.

Joanne Powell, QED Accreditation Expert, in her presentation at the AABS Accreditation webinar, suggests that when considering any accreditation process, there are key principles an institution needs to take into consideration:

- Principle 1. Support from the Top
- Principle 2. Demystify the Accreditation
- Principle 3. Conduct a Gap Analysis
- Principle 4. Project Planning
- Principle 5. Communications
- Principle 6. Allow Sufficient Time
- Principle 7. Manage the Data
- Principle 8. Prepare for the Long Haul

In this paper, we will focus on Principle 7, Data Management. The other principles will be discussed in our next papers.

AABS Accreditation is a process of continuous improvement, comprising several key steps. Data management is critical to AABS Accreditation as it provides the core basis of evidence to back up your narrative effectively. However, that's not the only reason to emphasize data management. Effective data management practices also help schools maximize the value of their data assets, enhance operational efficiency, support informed decision-making, improve students' experiences, enable innovation, and ensure compliance with regulatory requirements. This is a foundational element in the digital transformation journey of business schools, enabling them to harness the power of data for strategic advantages. In a nutshell, effective data management can provide:

- High-quality and reliable information: good data management leads to more consistent and reliable data – which in turn can provide higher-quality information.
- Increased transparency: better quality information provides clarity for stakeholders, leading to greater understanding and transparency. It also helps to evidence decisions



and avoid empty narratives.

- Accurate reporting to facilitate tracking information over time and where needed conduct comparative analysis and future planning with ease.
- Evidence-based decision-making (based on quality information and analysis of key trends)
- Potential competitive advantage
- Quick turnaround in case of changes: good systems facilitate fast adaptation.
- Time to develop 'what-if' scenarios and forecasting
- Better data security and privacy

Data is increasingly gaining importance in making well-informed strategic decisions (Stedman and Vaughan, 2022). The lack of its effective management may result in inconsistent and irrelevant data sets as well as poor data quality issues causing faulty findings. Hence, data needs to be analyzed and evaluated from time to time and this important exercise relies heavily on the type of system used to store data.

### Types of Systems to be Used to Manage your Data

A wide range of systems and techniques can be used in the process of data management. Professor Hans Van Der Heijden, Owner and Director of H2 Software Ltd, suggests three possible systems to be used:

#### The Use of a Manual System

This is a common practice in many schools and is often used as a prime system. Spreadsheets such as Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets, are very flexible and familiar for capturing, organizing, and analyzing data.

Regardless of the flexibility and ease of use, this system also comes with a number of limitations and challenges. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Summary of benefits and limitations of Manual Data Management Systems

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less Costly</li> <li>• Good for simple and light data</li> <li>• Data calculation and analysis (mathematical operations, generate basic statistics...)</li> <li>• Data Organization (use of rows and columns)</li> <li>• Data visualization (basic charting and graphing options)</li> <li>• Data sharing and collaboration</li> <li>• Data storage and backup</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively manual</li> <li>• Time-consuming</li> <li>• Difficulties in handling large data sets</li> <li>• Unstable and unsecure data</li> <li>• Difficulties in maintaining consistency and reliability.</li> <li>• Potential for human error</li> </ul>

As business schools grow and data complexity increases, it is advisable to consider more sophisticated data management systems with advanced features, automation, data integration capabilities and better data governance.

#### The Use of Specific Application Product

The use of a dedicated data management software provides several advantages over manual spreadsheets. It deals with the limitations of the manual system, such as data security and improves scalability, automation, advanced analytics, data integration capabilities, and enhanced collaboration. See Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Summary of benefits and limitations of Specific Application Products**

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key functions (depending on the specific purpose of the software) available 'off-the-shelf'</li> <li>• Allows a level of customization</li> <li>• Robust data integrity, transactional support, scalability, and advanced querying capabilities</li> <li>• Can deal with more complex datasets and relationships</li> <li>• Support consistency of analysis</li> <li>• Data integration</li> <li>• Higher security of data</li> <li>• Saves significant time and effort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional investment required (though may be moderate)</li> <li>• Creates some dependency on external providers</li> <li>• Can be resource intensive if the package is large and/or requires significant software integrations</li> </ul>

The selection of the right software depends on specific requirements from one school to another, for example, data complexity, integration needs and of course budget considerations.

**The Use of "Next Level" Product**

This refers to the use of an advanced or innovative product that offers significant enhancements or capabilities beyond existing or known solutions in the market. When it comes to data management, a "next level" product can introduce groundbreaking features, technologies (such as AI), or approaches that improve the efficiency, scalability, security, or usability of data management processes. This is a customized system that a school can acquire based on its needs. See Figure 3 for a summary breakdown of the pros and cons.

**Figure 3: Summary of benefits and limitations of "Next Level" Software Products**

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broad range data analytics</li> <li>• High level of customization</li> <li>• Ability to deal with very complex data</li> <li>• Higher level of critical analysis and predictive analysis capabilities</li> <li>• Advanced data integration and security</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very costly / Significant ongoing investment likely</li> <li>• Requires Staff expertise / intensive training</li> <li>• Possibility of significant application integrations leading to ongoing system maintenance requirements (I addition to data maintenance)</li> </ul>

**Which AABS Standards Require Effective Data Management?**

AABS Accreditation comprises of eleven international standards eight of which are divided into three areas, Institution, Stakeholders and Portfolio. Below is a clear break down on how some of these areas relate to data management. More details on standards can be found on the website (<https://www.aabschools.com/accreditation#standards>).

Standards	Requirements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholders: this area comprises standards 5,6 and 7 which are Students, Faculty, and External Relations respectively. It assists AABS evaluate the school's different stakeholders' groups and more specifically, how they are managed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faculty is valuable to an institution expertise and reputation. Institutions are required to provide the number of full-time faculty, that means faculty members solely employed by the institution and actively involved in teaching, research, administration service and/or other responsibilities, including faculty on sabbatical, administration leave, and pre-tenure leave and excluding those on leave without pay. Part-time faculty members on the other hand comprises those who are not solely employed by the institution such as visiting faculty, practitioners, and instructors. Institutions are required to provide the total number of faculty members for each department. The total number per department is then broken down to reflect the percentage of those holding doctoral degrees, their gender, and nationalities. Another important factor in the data provided here is the average academic and/or practical work experience.</li> <li>Faculty to students' ratio is then computed as well as the Total Faculty Full-time equivalency (FTE).</li> <li>AABS has facilitated the calculation of the total Faculty FTE by providing a clear formula as follows: Total Faculty FTE= Total full-time faculty + (total teaching load taught by all part time faculty/normal full time faculty teaching load).</li> <li>Students are key stakeholders of an institution and the later should implement appropriate selection policies to safeguard the minimum academic and professional standards. A completed headcount for the last completed semester is though required in terms of applications, acceptances, and new enrolments. Total enrolment information is also required in terms on gender and nationalities.</li> <li>The evaluation of an institution's relationship with its stakeholders provides a key indication of the successful positioning in the market it serves.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Portfolio: this area comprises standards 8 and 9, which are programs and research respectively. It covers the variety and content of programs offered by the institution, program development and design, research, teaching and assessment methods. Schools are required to supply data on program offered at all relevant levels and research outputs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research information for the last three completed academic years must be provided. The number of published books, case studies, technical reports, research report etc., how many faculty published as well as the percentage of total number of full-time faculty.</li> <li>Information on the number of Program offered for the last completed academic year is required.</li> </ul>

## Data System Implementation

Institutions are increasingly developing or finding varied systems to store, safeguard, and rapidly access their data information. Regardless of the system chosen, the following six steps suggested by Joanne Powell can be useful for your institution.

### Step 1

Assess Institutional Needs: It is important to know which kind of data is required and for what purpose. For the AABS Accreditation, some schools use internal reports from their research repository. As mentioned above, AABS is very clear with regard

to the data required and this may be seen under standards 5 (Student), 6 (Faculty), 8 (Programs), and 9 (Research). However, it might be also useful to consider whether additional data is required for other purposes (internal reporting; other external reporting commitments) and how these needs can be managed together.

### Step 2

**Define Roles and Responsibilities:** People responsible for the management of data and their roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined to allow accountability. An effective system is maintained by people who constantly input accurate and up-to-date information.

### Step 3

**Develop Data Policies and Procedures:** internal policies and procedures must be created to align with international standards and AABS Accreditation requirements. Typical policies include those related to data privacy, security and safety, data governance, and quality standards. The procedures should clearly articulate where responsibility for data quality and integrity sits.

### Step 4

**Establish Data Collection and Storage Infrastructure:** necessary infrastructures need to be implemented to support the collection and storage of data. Having a repository makes it easier to export the required information to the Self-Review Report. Whatever the solution, it should be scalable, secure, and aligned with best practices in data management.

### Step 5

**Implement Data Quality Assurance Measures:** define data quality standards and implement measures to ensure data accuracy, reliability, and consistency. It can be beneficial for a school to assign responsibility to a team for data validation checks, periodic audits, and reviews. Using a system here can facilitate the timely detection of errors and missing data. It is worth noting that, no matter the type of system used, an institution must ensure that there are validation processes in place for information accuracy.

### Step 6.

**Provide Data Training and Support:** ensure staff members are trained using the appropriate resources and know their specific roles and responsibilities within the data management framework. This creates awareness and

accountability. A commitment to ongoing training also supports a culture of continuous improvement. Once this has been completed, the next question is "how do we ensure the maintenance of the selected data system?"

## Data System Maintenance

Data maintenance refers to the ongoing activities and processes carried out by an institution to ensure smooth and reliable data system operation. Maintenance of a robust data system is crucial for institutions planning to embark on the accreditation journey. Once a system has been implemented, schools must ensure that it is constantly updated especially for accreditation purposes and internal planning for the future. It is also important to adapt processes to fit specific needs and institutional contexts.

This is essential to prevent potential issues, optimize performance, and ensure data security. Also, Understanding the AABS accreditation requirements and standards is key. The following three elements in the process of data maintenance can be considered:

1. **Monitor and Evaluate:** an institution needs to regularly update its data to track progress against standards for reporting and planning purposes and eliminate errors and inconsistencies. Data quality assurance procedures need to be implemented to ensure the accuracy and completeness of data. This leads to the integrity and quality of the data collected. Institutions must also maintain comprehensive documentation of their data system, process, and procedures and keep them up to date. All stakeholders must be involved in the progress for relevant feedback and possible improvement. All stakeholders involved in data collection and management should be provided with regular training/updates, so they understand the importance of data accuracy and compliance with the AABS accreditation standards.

2. **Maintain Data Security and Privacy:** The team should safeguard data with appropriate security measures to protect it against breaches and or unauthorized access then create standardized reports and dashboards easily accessed by accreditation teams, showcasing the institution's compliance with standards. In the context of maintenance, it is vital to regularly review and update security



measures to address any emerging threats and to maintain data confidentiality.

**3. Foster Continuous Improvement:** AABS accreditation is all about the continuous improvement of institutions. Hence, institutions need to embrace the promotion of a culture of improvement through feedback and innovation to better their quality from the AABS perspective. Accreditation standards and criteria are constantly changed or updated, and institutions need to stay informed at all times of all these changes. The appointment of a project leader to keep track of any change in the standards is a key element. As accreditation standards evolve, so your data system, processes, and procedures should adapt accordingly.

The above three elements can help an institution ensure that it maintains a robust data system accreditation requirement effectively and consistently.

Further developments in the maintenance of data and systems may see a future where accreditation will take place continuously, with accreditation bodies directly tapping into the school's data and information systems instead of requiring this data at periodic intervals (Hommel et al., 2022)<sup>3</sup>.

## Conclusion

In today's data-driven world, institutions embracing data management as an integral part of their accreditation journey have a high probability of not only meeting the accreditation standards, but also of positioning themselves for long-term success. This is simply because good data management goes beyond accreditation: It supports the institution to convert data into useful information that provides a basis for evaluation and planning across a range of activities. This white paper has sought to shed some light on the importance of data management and the role it plays in the accreditation process. Efficient data management improves decision-making and enhances an institution's overall educational quality. Hence, the dynamic landscape of higher education requires a solid data management foundation.

AABS Accreditation goes beyond recognition of academic excellence, it is a testament of commitment to continuous improvement. Institutions prioritizing data management will navigate the accreditation process more efficiently and contribute to the advancement of business education. This can also drive innovation and foster accountability internally.

## Authors' Biographies

### *Sandrine Tshishimbi*

Sandrine Tshishimbi is the AABS Accreditation Manager and an MBA Candidate. She holds a Bachelor of Commerce in Banking and Post-Graduate Diploma in Risk Management.

### *Joanne Powell*

Joanne Powell is Head of Advisory Services at Quality Education Development (QED), a long-established advisory company that supports business schools with continuous improvement, international business school accreditation and leadership development. Joanne has extensive experience in education, training and assessment. Prior to joining QED, she worked as an educator, a chartered accountant and as Head of Assessment for Chartered Accountants Ireland. Joanne is also certified as a DISC Trainer (DISC Personality Profiling) and a Leadership Facilitator. She has worked with business schools across six continents, supporting them with accreditation and continuous improvement processes, including those related to the set up and implementation of data management for accreditation purposes. She is currently a member of AACSB's Middle East and North Africa Advisory Council (MENAAC).

### *Prof Hans van der Heijden*

Hans van der Heijden is the owner and director of the software development company H2 Software Ltd, whose main line of business is the development of business school accreditation software. He is also a part-time Professor of Accounting at the University of Sussex Business School. At Sussex, Prof. van der Heijden was in charge of the School's successful EQUIS accreditation, and he developed an initial accreditation management system for this purpose. The software has since evolved into a full-fledged data management system for multiple accreditations, including AABS, AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA, and it is now in use in many business schools all over the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Hommel, U., Mijnhardt, W., and Van Der Heijden, H. 2022. Accreditations & Rankings in 2030: Reducing Biases, errors and Workload through Automated Data Processes, MBA International Business Review, October 2022, pp. 48-51.