

## **Certification, Accreditation and the professional**

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### **Summary**

#### **Introduction**

That professionals are committed to quality is crucial for the success of any company (Drucker, 2000, Van Delden, 1992, Weggeman, 1992). This goes for commitment to internal quality management as well as commitment to external quality management. Vanhoof & Van Petegem (2007) bring back the difference between the two to the question who is responsible. Internal quality management is done by the organization itself. In external quality management the assessment of the activities is done by people from outside the organization (e.g. a certification body or the Inspectorate). The focus in this study is on certification. A well known example is certification according to ISO 9001-standard.

The main research question is: *“What are the conditions for professionals to be willing to contribute to the certification process?”*

Chapter one describes the relevance of the issue by an exploration of literature on the effects of certification. The effects of ISO 9001:1994 and even more of ISO 9001:2000 on the organisation that are reported by most of the research are positive. Although Casadesus en Karapetrovic (2005) talk about erosion of ISO over the years, there is proof of increasing internal and external benefits of ISO from different economic sectors in different countries. In any certification system there is a tension between accountability and improvement.

Most benefits occur if the certification is voluntary and focused on improvement (Chan & Lee, 1999; De Vries, 1999; Dick, 2000; Singels et al., 2001; Wiele & Brown, 2002; Wiele et al., 2004). External motivation causes mostly only external benefits, internal motivation causes external as well as internal benefits. Some researchers report positive implementation effects on the attitude and behaviour of employees. But although motivating people for ISO 9000:2000 is reported to be easier as for older versions of ISO 9000 the largest problems with the implementation of ISO 9000 are:

1. motivating the management;
2. motivating the employees;
3. risk of increasing bureaucracy.

The accreditation process in Higher Education makes an interesting case for the research on the willingness of professionals to contribute to the process of external evaluation. We have narrowed down the topic of the case to the accreditation system in the Netherlands and Flanders. In the Netherlands and Flanders a semi-private body called Nederlands Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie (NVAO) accredits programs. It is compulsory. Non conformance to the standards can have the consequence of closure of the program for new students as long as the standards are not met. In this system there is a strong tension between accountability and improvement.

This case has been chosen for the following reasons:

1. The tension between accountability and improvement has been built in the NVAO-accreditation system since it is supposed to have both functions.
2. Lecturers in higher education are highly educated professionals.
3. The commitment of the professional to quality management is needed especially in education where the interaction between the people involved is crucial (Hettie, 2003; Marzano, 2003; Waterreus, 2008). It is the lecturer that will have to act upon the proposals for quality improvement that result from the accreditation.
4. It is known that highly educated professionals are little motivated by control (Van Delden 1992; Weggeman, 1992 and 2006; Drucker, 2000).

Little research has been done in this area. "*Lecturers' attitudes towards quality assurance initiatives are an underexposed aspect in research on quality assurance*" (Westerheijden et al., 2006; p. 12).

Within the case the question is posed what the conditions are for lecturers in universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands and Flanders to contribute to the accreditation process.

Based on the research on ISO 9000 and on accreditation in Higher Education (McInnis et al, 1994; Henkel, 1997; Newton, 2001; Nault & Hoey, 2002; Harvey, 2002 and 2004; Watty 2003 and 2006; Brennan en Williams, 2004; Worthington and Hodgson, 2005; Anderson, 2006; Hoecht, 2006; Onderwijsinspectie, 2006; Van Kemenade, 2007a and 2007b; Algemene Rekenkamer, 2008) a theoretical concept has been designed as start for the research. This model predicts, that lecturers are willing to contribute to the accreditation process because they have a positive attitude towards accreditation, they share the same values and they feel in control of the process; if the object and procedures motivate; the rules are acceptable and the auditors are experts (see figure 25).

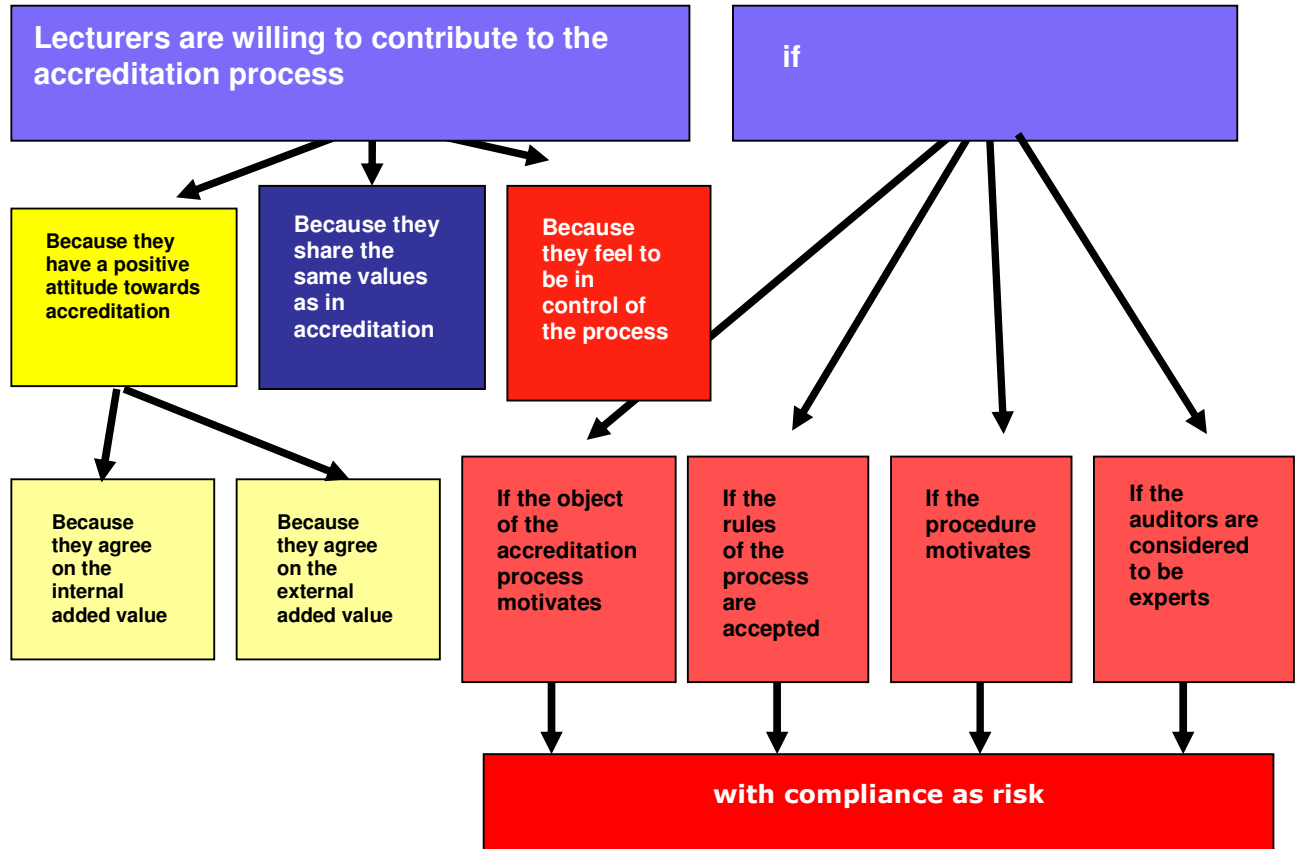


Figure 25: Preliminary theory

As the figure shows compliance or in the words of Barrow (1999) dramaturgical compliance is a risk, when prerequisites are not met. Chapter two gives evidence that indeed accreditation and certification are strongly related and that lecturers are professionals to justify the choice of the case. It focuses on three main areas of theory: a model to describe certification systems taking into account the importance of value systems (see figure 26); the definitions of certification and accreditation and the lecturer as a professional.

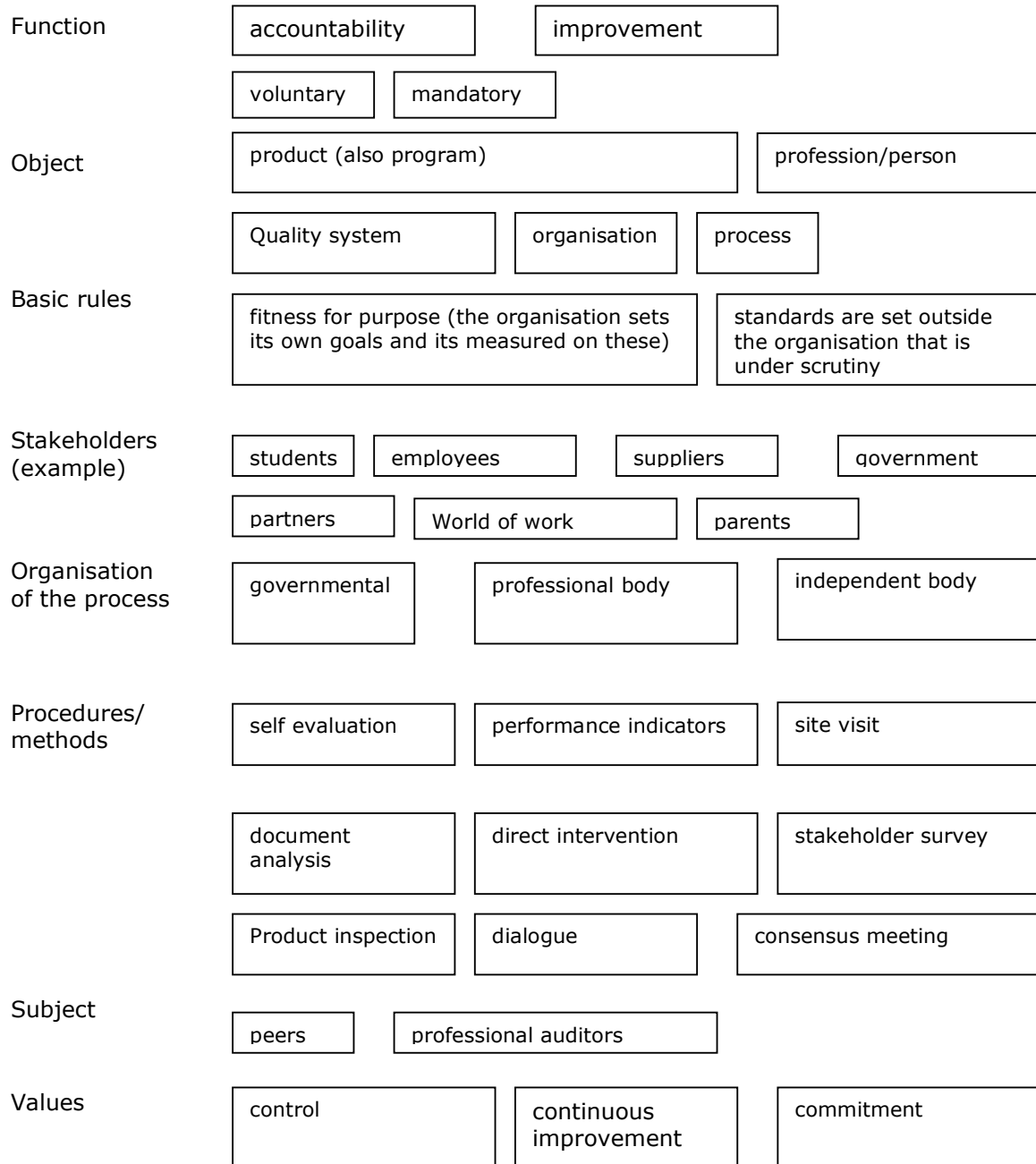


Figure 26: Model to describe external assessment systems

Quality is defined as compatibility to values. Three value systems are proposed: the control paradigm, the continuous improvement paradigm and the commitment paradigm. Furthermore certification according to ISO and the NVAO-accreditation system are described. If we define accreditation after ISO 17011:2004 as: third-party attestation related to a conformity assessment body conveying formal demonstration of its competence to carry out specific conformity assessment tasks, accreditation in higher education is more comparable to what ISO calls certification. Certification is: *"the issuing of written assurance by an independent external body that has audited your management system and verified that it conforms to the requirements specified in the standard"*<sup>1</sup> Accreditation in higher education in fact is a form of certification.

Professionals are defined to be highly educated (Mintzberg, 1979; Van Delden, 1992), and highly motivated (Kerr et al., 1977; Weggeman, 1977). They are strongly autonomous craftsmen (Van Delden, 1990 en 1992; Ramondt & Scholten, 2005; Hoyle, 1980; Weggeman, 2007), whose knowledge is specialised and personal bound (Schön, 1987; Mintzberg, 1979; De Swaan, 1986; Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Polanyi 1996; Kwakman 1999; Drucker 2000 en 2005; Wijffels 2005; Weggeman, 2007) and they feel to be members of the professional group (Weggeman, 2007). The lecturer appears to have most of the characteristics of a professional. Although the autonomy of the lecturer in Higher Education in the Netherlands and Flanders has decreased the last twenty years and the connection to the professional group is weak.

Between chapter two and three an intermezzo is added that describes the case of the music recording rating and labeling system in de U.S. and the reaction on it by a professional, the rock musician and composer Frank Zappa, who called it: *"treating dandruff with decapitation"*.

### **Results of the case study**

In chapter three the results are presented of the empirical research. The research was done in three steps both quantitative and qualitative.

#### *Step one*

At first a survey has been done in a small group of lecturers (63) at three departments within Fontys University of Applied Sciences: Podotherapy, Marketing Management and Drama. In this survey the lecturers are asked about the accreditation process they were in. Based on the Dinamo questionnaire validated by Metselaar (1997) a questionnaire was designed to measure the willingness and resistance of lecturers towards the Dutch accreditation process at the time of the writing of the self evaluation report. The questionnaire consisted of fifty questions. Answers were recorded on a five point scale. The response was 49 % (n=31). The survey was done at the time that all three departments were in the process of writing the self evaluation report. The aim of this small survey was to formulate research questions for a larger survey concerning the resistance to accreditation (Step 2).

When we look at the scores above 3.5 and below 3 we see the following results. Accreditation was said to increase the workload (2.74) and stress (2.55). Little added value was seen of accreditation for the improvement of leadership in the organisation (2.48). Accreditation is said not to have an important place in the work of the lecturer (2.61) and it is not much an issue of discussion with other lecturers (2.45). The majority of the respondents would opt for accreditation, if

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.standardsinfo.net/isoiec/aboutstd.html>, accessed April 2, 2007

they had the choice (2.83). The respondents consider help of quality specialists necessary (3.63). They say they do not know what the consequences of accreditation are for their position (2.66). The accreditation does not come at the right moment (2.37). However the willingness to cooperate is large. The respondents say they are willing to put effort in the accreditation process (3.86) and to give it their time (3.54). When we look at the factors mentioned in the model we see that resistance to accreditation can be found in the consequences of accreditation for the work of the lecturer, the emotions towards accreditation, the commitment to accreditation, the lack of knowledge and experience, the timing and its acceptance (See table 60).

<b>Factors of resistance</b>	<b>Score on five point scale from very little to very much</b>
Consequences for the workload	2.74
Added value for the improvement of leadership	2.48
Increase of stress	2.55
Accreditation has an important impact on my work	2.61
I talk a lot with my colleagues about accreditation	2.45
If I had a choice, I would choose accreditation	2.83
For accreditation we need the help of quality experts	3.63 ( <i>means yes</i> )
I know what the consequences of accreditation for my position are	2.66
Accreditation comes at a right moment for me	2,37
I am willing to put effort in accreditation	3.86
I am willing to spend time on accreditation	3.54

Table 60: Result of the questionnaire concerning resistance

### *Step two*

In the second step of the research a large group (1500) lecturers of Universities of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands and Flanders have been approached to fill in an online questionnaire that consisted of seven statements (yes/no) and four general questions. The response was 24,4% (n=365).

To the statement if the respondent would choose accreditation, if he had the choice 49,9% says yes, 50,1% says no. Furthermore 88,2% of the respondents state that accreditation increases the workload. There is a significant difference in experiencing workload between the people that choose accreditation and those who do not (.033). That accreditation also increases stress, is confirmed by 67,7% of the respondents. They who do not choose accreditation, experience more stress (.003). A great majority of 80,3% states they need the help of quality specialists in the accreditation process. In total 68,5% of the respondents do not think that accreditation limits their personal freedom.

### *Step three*

Step three of the research consisted of a Delphi-survey in two rounds, the first on paper, the second in a meeting. For the Delphi-process 36 people were invited: 10 lecturers, 10 managers, 10 quality managers and 6 representatives of the NVAO and 'certification bodies' (In Dutch: Validerende en Beoordelende Instanties, abbreviated as VBI). From those invited 30 (83,5%) joined in the first round. In the second round 23 of them participated in four separate meetings: 5 lecturers; 4 managers; 10 quality managers en 4 representatives of accreditation and certification bodies.

The added value of accreditation in general has been confirmed in the Delphi-meetings. There are however some impediments for lecturers to contribute to the process: the subject of accreditation is not their main interest (being the discipline and the student); the rules are so complex quality experts are needed to help; the consequences are so severe that window dressing and peer exploitation occur and some of the auditors were not skilled enough in the auditing process.

Furthermore it was mentioned that the accreditation process is less accepted, if the internal quality management system is not in place and there is not enough management support. Some of the lecturers are not enough committed to organizational issues. One of the key problems concerning accreditation is that it is about control and that is not the preferred value of the professionals. As one of the participants put it: *"Lecturers want to give marks, not get them"*. And another one: *"Accreditation is experienced as a system from outside because it has little to do with improvement"*.

Loyalty to the program is one of the reasons why lecturers contribute to the accreditation process in spite of the impediments (see Table 61).

Vr		Total score (n=36) 1 <sup>e</sup>				Lecturers round (5)		2 <sup>e</sup>
		Mean	sd	Mean	Sd	Mean	sd	
1	Accreditation is about the content of he program.	5,7	2,0	5,37	1,68			
<b>1a</b>	Accreditation is amongst other issues about the content of the program					<b>7,8</b>	2,0	
1b	Accreditation is more about the secondary processes than on the content of the program.					5,2	2,3	
2	Accreditation is about students.	5,2	2,0	5,12	2,17			
<b>2a</b>	Accreditation is amongst other issues about students.					<b>8</b>	1,6	
2b	Accreditation is more about other stakeholders than students.					4,2	1,9	
3	Accreditation limits the professional freedom of the lecturer.	2,6	1,8	2,9	1,6	1,6	0,9	
<b>4</b>	Accreditation has become the business of quality managers more than of lecturers.	5,5	2,3	5,7	2,9	<b>7,4</b>	1,5	
<b>5</b>	Accreditation increases the workload of lecturers.	6,2	2,2	<b>7,6</b>	1,8			
<b>5a</b>	Accreditation increases the workload of some lecturers.					<b>8,6</b>	1,3	
<b>5b</b>	Accreditation increases the workload of lecturers to some extent.					<b>8,2</b>	0,4	
<b>6</b>	Accreditation increases stress on the employees of the program.	6,7	2,1	<b>7,1</b>	2,6	5,4	2,0	
<b>7</b>	Workload and stress on accreditation are enforced by the way the management copes with accreditation.	6,7	2,7	<b>7,7</b>	1,7	<b>7,2</b>	0,8	
8	Lecturers contribute to the accreditation process out of loyalty to the program.	6,4	2,2	6,7	1,3			
<b>8a</b>	Lecturers contribute to the accreditation process out of loyalty to the program and their own interest.					<b>9,2</b>	0,8	
9	Lecturers are uncertain about the consequences of accreditation.	5,2	2,2	5	2			
<b>9a</b>	Lecturers are well informed on the possible consequences of accreditation.					<b>8,8</b>	1,1	
<b>9b</b>	Lecturers are uncertain about the state of the art of the program.					<b>6,8</b>	1,9	
10	If lecturers could choose, they would choose accreditation.	3,7	1,7	4,2	2,1			
<b>10b</b>	If lecturers could choose, the would choose a more simple instrument than accreditation.					<b>7</b>	1,4	
<b>11</b>	Lecturers think that accreditation has added value.	6,8	1,7	<b>7,4</b>	1,9			
<b>11a</b>	Lecturers think that accreditation has internal added value .					<b>7,6</b>	1,8	
11b	Lecturers think that accreditation has external added value .					5	2,5	
12	Keep lecturers out of the accreditation process.	1,5	1,3	1,8	1,3			
12b	Involve lecturers in the site visits and not in the preparation of the accreditation process..					3,6	3,7	
<b>13</b>	Lecturers should be willing to show the weaknesses of the program.	6,3	2,6	6	1,8			
<b>13b</b>	Lecturers should be willing to show the weaknesses of the program internally, but not externally.					<b>9</b>	1,4	
<b>14</b>	Lecturers should be committed to organizational issues.	<b>8,2</b>	2,6	<b>7,1</b>	3,3			
<b>14b</b>	Lecturers are committed to organizational issues..					6,5	1,3	

Table 61: quantitative score Delphi (ten point scale)



## Conclusion of the research

Chapter four gives the conclusions of the research. Professionals indeed are willing to contribute to the certification process because they agree that certification has internal added value. There are however possible impediments concerning the certification process, the professional and the organisation.

Professionals have problems with a certification system, that has control as its dominant value. If the object has little to do with the customer or the discipline motivating professionals is hard. Professionals do not like bureaucratic rules and prefer to have a dialogue with peers, that are also skilled in the process of auditing.

Professionals are willing to contribute out of loyalty to the organisation and self-interest. Some professionals would need to be more committed to organizational issues then they are right now (See figure 27).

The problems with certification increase, when there is little support from the management in the organization and when the internal quality assurance system is not in place. Especially if the consequences are severe, the organisation might have quality managers taking over the activities to be done for the certification.

Professionals might feel not to be the owners of the process anymore.

There is a risk window dressing occurs (dramaturgical compliance), if on or more of the above mentioned prerequisites are not met.

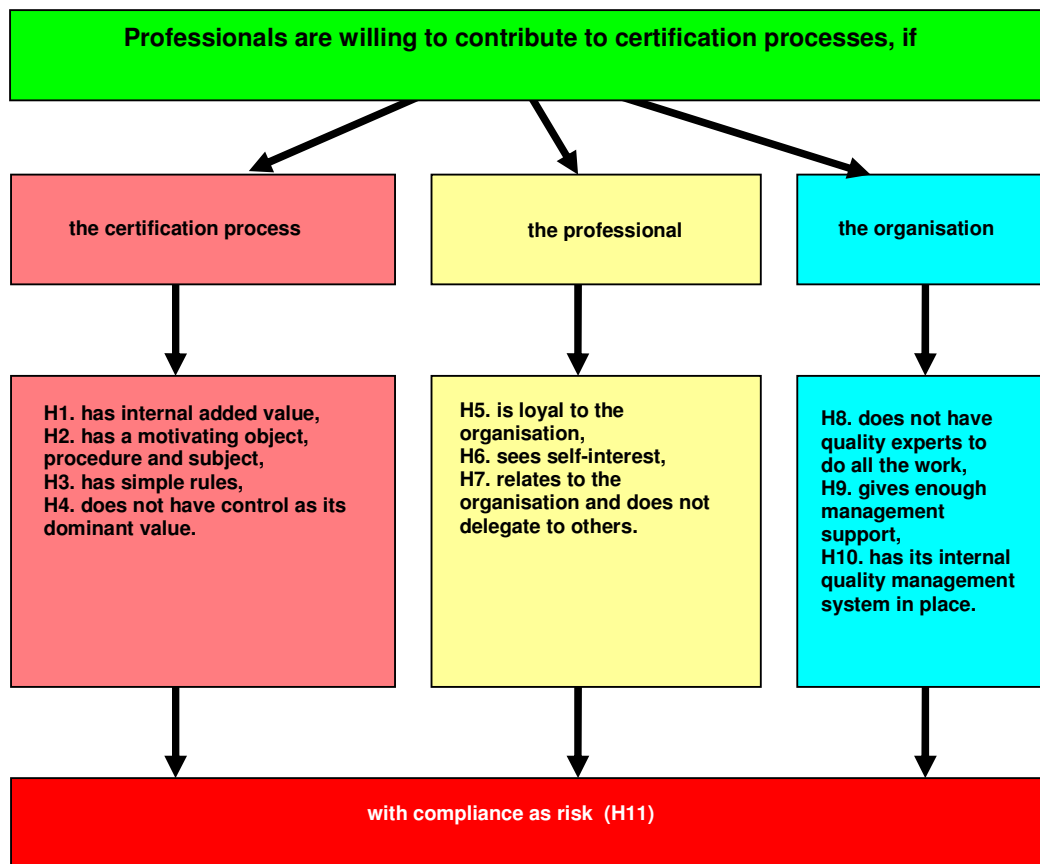


Figure 27: Conclusions

The result of the case study leads to the following eleven hypotheses that should be tested in further research:

#### Certification process

H1: If professionals see the internal added value of certification, they will be more willing to contribute to the certification process.

H2: If the object of certification do not motivate (do not focus on content and customer), nor the procedure (no dialogue with peer experts) professionals will be less willing to contribute to the certification process.

H3: If the basic rules increase bureaucracy, professionals will be less willing to contribute to the certification process.

H4: If the certification system has control as its dominant value, professionals will be less willing to contribute to the certification process.

#### Professional

H5: If professionals are loyal to the organisation, they will be more willing to contribute to the certification process.

H6: If the professionals have self-interest in certification, they will be more willing to contribute to the certification process.

H7: If the professionals are not enough committed to organisational issues, professionals will be less willing to contribute to the certification process and try to delegate it to others.

#### Organisation

H8: If the certification process is so complex and has so many risks, that the actual work will be done by quality experts, the professionals will feel less the owner of the process and will be less willing to contribute to the process.

H9: If the certification lacks support from the management, professionals will be less willing to contribute to the certification process.

H10: If the internal quality management system is not in place, professionals will be less willing to contribute to the certification process.

H11: If one or more of the prerequisites are not met, professionals can react to certification through (dramaturgical) compliance.

There are two restrictions to the generalisation of the results of the case to the theory. In the first place the case was done in an organization larger than 25 employees, with at least two management layers and a responsible person for quality assurance assigned (the universities of applied sciences). The results might not be valid for smaller companies. In the second place the study has been done on an accreditation system that is mandatory and has severe – financial - consequences for programs that do not meet the standards. It is likely that the results will mostly be valid for similar certification systems and less for voluntary certification.

This research has interesting implications for existing and future accreditation and certification systems. We do not plea to adjust external evaluation systems to the demands of the professionals. If a control system to guarantee the minimum level is needed, accreditation could be the answer. However in that

case its aim should be mere accountability and that should not be interfered with other aims like improvement (Van Kemenade et al, 2008). It can be severe in its consequences and can have inquiry as a method rather than dialogue. It should not ask for self evaluation, an instrument from the improvement paradigm. You need skilled auditors, not necessarily peers. This is not the value paradigm of the professional, be aware of possible window dressing and peer exploitation within the organisation.

If improvement is the aim and you want to involve professionals, you will have a better chance for shared values. Choose the objects that interest them, leave out the bureaucracy, use the dialogue with peers as an instrument, although these peers should also be skilled in the auditing process. Get management commitment and leave out too much involvement of the quality managers. Let the professionals own the process.