

The **GAC Accreditation** Advantage:

RESEARCH STUDY REPORT



The Project Management Institute Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Education Programs (GAC) is the world's leading independent specialized accrediting body for project management degree programs. The mission of GAC is to ensure the quality of academic degree programs in project management and to assist faculties and universities in the improvement of degree programs.

Summary

This research report frames the academic and competitive benefits realized by degree programs accredited by the Project Management Institute Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Education Programs (GAC). This accreditation advantage also applies to students as they enter today's competitive business environment.

Organizations across a wide range of industries are increasingly adopting project management as a new management paradigm and they expect educational institutions to prepare students with the knowledge and tools to meet the demands of this new model. As a result, more schools are turning to the PMI Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Education Programs (GAC) to ensure that their level of instruction and course content

leads to graduates who are world-class project management practitioners, equipped to meet their organizations' business requirements.

A qualitative research study of 17 schools, commissioned for the GAC and completed by SIS International Research in 2010,¹ concludes that GAC accreditation advances a school's project management curriculum within the institution, differentiates it from similar programs at other schools, enhances recognition of a program as a thought leader in the field and serves as a powerful marketing tool that both attracts potential students and confers significant advantages to graduates as they prepare to enter an increasingly competitive workplace. In addition, accredited programs realize increased opportunities for corporate partnerships.

SUMMARY STATISTICS ON OUTCOMES

GAC Schools Report:

- Enrollment increase since initial GAC accreditation: 80 percent
- Increased number of faculty hires: 53 percent
- PMI local chapter collaboration (program promotion, adjunct faculty and lecturers; participation in other program-related events): 75 percent
- Collaboration with project management training providers: 47 percent
- Project Management Professional (PMP)[®] credential preparation added to program's course offerings to benefit practitioner students: 53 percent

Introduction

Around the world and across sectors, project management has emerged as a core ingredient of business success. Escalating global competition, price pressures and growing regulatory and legal risks are challenging organizations to perform at peak efficiency. Increasingly, bottom-line results are based on clearly defined processes and best practices.

According to *U.S. News & World Report*, project management is now the third most in-demand skill, behind only leadership and business analysis. Yet, a talent gap looms. A study of 600 senior executives worldwide found that although 95 percent recognize the need for skilled talent, 75 percent say their organizations lack the skills critical for success. Project management topped the list of "most important skills."²

A growing number of schools recognize that a GAC-accredited program is a prime means to strengthening the quality of the content and the level of instruction in their project management programs. The GAC's primary objective in the accreditation process is to ensure that

educational programs in project management adequately prepare students to meet the current and anticipated needs of business and government organizations for qualified professionals working in the field of project management.

Meeting Industry Needs

The demand for project professionals—especially those with project management education and training—is growing rapidly. According to the 2009 *PMI Project Management Salary Survey—Sixth Edition*, people working in project management-oriented jobs earn an average of US\$90,000 annually. Meanwhile, individuals who have obtained the Project Management Professional (PMP)[®] credential have an additional earning power of US\$10,000 annually compared with those without it. In other words, the value of project management knowledge has tangible earning power globally.³

The demand for project managers is exceeding supply, as more companies adopt a project management culture and project numbers continue to grow globally.

In a response to this industry need, many schools include courses or modules specifically focused on various aspects of the profession, as well as offering graduate and undergraduate programs in project management. A growing number of institutions also require that students studying business, engineering and IT complete specific project management coursework, either at the undergraduate or post-graduate level.

“Since most business strategy is now implemented on a project basis, being purposeful about project management is often the difference between success and failure,” says James Szot, associate director at the Project Management Program Executive Education Center, University of Texas, Dallas, Texas, USA.

Today, the value of a formal project management education ripples through an organization and beyond. It builds a foundation for more effective and efficient business processes and better interpersonal communication.

To achieve maximum results, companies need people with the full arsenal of project management skills and knowledge.

“While one can learn a few project management tools and techniques in a two- or three-day workshop,” Mr. Szot explains, “a more thorough educational program that goes beyond the basic tools can produce a more competent and confident manager and leader.”

Establishing Quality Benchmarks

In the project and portfolio management arena, success is tightly aligned to the effective implementation of best practice methodologies. At the center of all this: the need for clearly defined processes of scope, schedule, budget and quality. Formal project management techniques help organizations bridge functional silos while introducing systems that increase knowledge transfer and seed organizational development.

Similarly, schools advance their reputations and benefit their students by following established best practices for teaching project management skills.

This is one of the more compelling reasons the GAC accreditation has gained stature. By implementing a thorough review process and developing accreditation standards tied to real-world learning outcomes for graduates, GAC measures the scope and quality of project management academic programs. Students in accredited programs are assured that instruction meets the GAC Accreditation Standards as outlined in the *GAC Handbook of Accreditation of Degree Programs in Project Management—Third Edition*. Graduates of these programs also receive 1,500 hours of project management experience credit toward earning the PMP[®] and PgMP[®] credentials.

“Accreditation ensures that the program meets a standard set of benchmarks for quality and content of the program,” explains Robert P. Ouellette, PhD, project management program director in the information technology systems department at the University of Maryland, University College Graduate School of Management and Technology (UMUC), Adelphi, Maryland, USA. The school’s project management programs were accredited by GAC in 2009. “GAC accreditation puts into place a continuous quality-improvement path for the program. Therefore, accreditation is not just a one-time process. It’s a path for continuous improvement of the program.”

A global platform for accreditation provides enormous benefits for participating educational institutions by encouraging knowledge transfer.

“The same level of knowledge in project management creates greater understanding within the project management community the world over. It helps popularize project management technology and skills,” says Zhong Zhen, deputy director of the project management teaching and research center at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in Shanghai, China, whose engineering master’s in project management program became GAC accredited in 2007.

Accreditation also helps create a level of consistency among educational programs.

“One of the advantages of teaching a standard project model is that it creates a common vocabulary and view of the underlying processes,” says Gary L. Richardson, PhD, program coordinator for the technology project management graduate program at the University of Houston, Houston, Texas, USA.

In the past, schools often varied greatly in their approach and scope for project management teaching. “Having a sponsoring organization [such as the GAC] take on the role of defining global standards benefits everyone,” Dr. Richardson says.

Improving the Classroom Experience

As organizations increasingly adopt project management best practices, they seek a consistent level of skill and knowledge among practitioners. By gaining GAC accreditation, programs ensure classroom content is in line with today’s business environment—giving graduates a head start on advancing their careers.

“Using the GAC Accreditation Standards as a template for generating content and structuring coursework, schools can align coursework and content with the demands of today’s marketplace,” UMUC’s Dr. Ouellette explains.

The overall GAC framework helps schools align instructional methods and teaching materials so they better mesh with organizational needs. In the final analysis, accreditation provides a mechanism for “monitoring what is actually taught by faculty,” he says.

And, as the school implements content guidelines, it can shift and adjust its program accordingly. For example, UMUC introduced sessions aimed at helping instructors learn teaching methods that match evolving project management learning requirements, as a way to keep teaching current and relevant.

UMUC, which established a formal project management program in 2003, offers project management as a specialization under three master’s of science degree programs: information technology, technology management and management.

The university relies on standards, case studies and other PMI published texts, but also reviews syllabi and materials published by GAC-accredited programs in other schools. “The fact that GAC-accredited programs share data is a huge benefit,” Dr. Ouellette says, “as it provides a level of insight and information from a variety of sources that otherwise wouldn’t be available.”

At the University of Houston, school officials have used the GAC accreditation standards to map learning guidelines and a specific course structure. By comparing GAC best practices and existing course syllabi, Dr. Richardson says it was possible to identify content gaps that might otherwise have gone undetected.

“We have a clear perspective on actions to take in order to boost the learning level for students,” he explains. Yet, at the same time, “it has not diminished our ability to teach in a way that makes sense for the school.”

The school offers an introductory “feeder” course that funnels students into project management coursework, including a master’s of science in technology project management; a Master of Science in technology project management, information systems security; and a Master of Science in technology project management, logistics technology. The University of Houston also offers a certificate in professional project management, which provides high-level exposure to the theory and practice of project management.

At the same time, students who aren’t pursuing a degree can take specific project management courses à la carte, including PMP® certification preparatory courses.

Mr. Szot, at the University of Texas at Dallas, sees the GAC accreditation process as a way for the institution to gain a broader view of a program. The process of preparing

an initial self-assessment, undergoing a thorough review and then generating annual reports helps ensure that a continuous improvement process takes place. The school's project management program, founded in 1997 and accredited in 2005, offers both a master's of science degree in management and administrative sciences and a master's of business administration degree with project management concentrations.

Strengthening the School's Reputation

As project management gains prominence, and educational institutions respond to the changing needs of business, the demand for project management instruction grows. And that translates to a greater emphasis on building a breadth and depth of programs.

As the number of institutions teaching project management continues to rise, so too does the potential student pool. A 2009 MediaMark study of PMI members found that 61,000 of the respondents plan to pursue an advanced degree in the next two years. Of that number, 32,500 respondents plan to pursue a master's degree in project management within the next two years. What's more, 22,400 plan to pursue a doctorate in project management within the next two years.⁴

That means more high-quality applicants—and more competition among schools to attract the most appealing students.

For many schools, the program improvements that come from GAC accreditation lead to subsequent enrollment growth and create a powerful selling point for the school—increasing enrollment at four out of five accredited schools, according to the SIS International survey.

The University of Houston, for example, has gained widespread attention for its project management program as a result of GAC accreditation—helping it grow from approximately 20 students to nearly 150 in just a few years.

The school is also building its global reputation. With the PMI GAC website as the initial point of contact, a group of engineers from China visited the Houston campus for on-site project management training in November 2009. Nineteen engineers completed the program and later passed the PMP-credential exam, with another group scheduled to study at the school in the near future.

“Daily requests for program information are coming from more global sources across the world,” Dr. Richardson says. “Since the university has spent zero dollars on marketing this program other than through PMI and GAC channels, all of this activity almost certainly would not have happened without GAC accreditation.”

The school has also leveraged its accreditation to create strong ties to a local PMI chapter and attract leading project management practitioners to serve on its advisory board. Currently, five former PMI chapter presidents are serving in this capacity.

GAC accreditation offers other benefits that aren't always immediately apparent.

“The connection to PMI brings a different level of maturity to the student body at SKEMA,” explains Claire Dray, former project management program director for the French business school's executive MBA program. She adds that being affiliated with a GAC accredited program encourages young researchers and doctorate candidates to apply for PMI research funding.

Thus far, SKEMA has had five studies funded by PMI. “It also encourages researchers to participate in PMI research conferences and to be involved in the peer review processes for conferences and for the *Project Management Journal*,” Ms. Dray explains.

The ESC Lille School of Management, which joined with CERAM Business School to form SKEMA in 2009, began teaching project management principles and coursework as early as 1979 and received GAC accreditation in 2005 for its project management master's and doctoral programs, as well as its master's of business administration degree program. Presently, the institution has more than 220 students enrolled in the project management program, including about 90 in its doctoral module.

Enrollment has expanded steadily since 2005, attracting students from a variety of locales, including the Middle East, China, Japan, India, the United States, Canada and Brazil.

Upon graduation, SKEMA students have launched careers in an array of major firms worldwide, including General Electric, Areva, IBM Global Services, Thales Group, Dassault Systèmes, Boeing, Renault-Nissan, Valeo, BNP Paribas Bank, Société Générale and LVMH Group.

Along with the marketing benefits, GAC accreditation creates strong networking opportunities. Not only are there chances to share knowledge and expertise among faculties at different schools, students can also participate in international exchange programs at accredited universities.

The project management program at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China has participated in exchanges and knowledge transfers with other schools, including the University of Applied Sciences Landshut, Germany, and the University of Maryland, USA. Professors at the respective schools have compared curricula, strategic concepts and teaching practices, among other things. In 2010, Shanghai Jiao Tong University welcomed 10 doctoral students from Landshut for internships at companies in Shanghai.

Moreover, universities that forge relationships with private companies and governmental organizations tap into additional project management acumen. These relationships can translate to practitioners serving as guest lecturers, as well as the development of programs to help students connect with potential employers. The University of Houston, for example, has established a start-up systems engineering program taught by experts at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, USA.

Not only does a well-designed project management program provide the skills and knowledge to perform better on the job, it sometimes leads to pay increases and other gains. The University of Wisconsin-Platteville reports that 20 percent of respondents to a survey of graduates received a salary increase and 10 percent were promoted after graduating from their project management program.

Making the Grade

Many leading schools are now expanding their project management curricula by developing independent courses, a concentration of courses or an entire track with a certificate or degree as the final product. Regardless of the exact approach, educational leaders must make a commitment to building a quality program that meets the needs of both students and employers.

Ensuring quality project management learning for students is a primary goal of the GAC Accreditation Program. At present, more than 70 degree-based programs, in eleven countries, have earned GAC accreditation. In some instances, GAC-accredited programs rely on traditional teaching methods. But an increasing number are also turning to distance learning and entirely new educational formats for structuring project management learning.

There's no single method for developing a project management program to meet GAC standards. It's still up to faculty to build appropriate content into the instructional process and customize it and the course syllabus for a school's specific needs and requirements. GAC-accreditation standards aren't prescriptive; rather, they are outcomes based and can be applied to coursework relevant across multiple disciplines.

BUILDING A BETTER LEARNING MODEL

A growing number of GAC-accredited programs are turning to outside expertise to complement program instruction and provide perspectives and knowledge that enhance student learning.

At the University of Applied Sciences in Landshut, Germany, business professionals and expert practitioners collaborate with the school and provide guest lectures. These instructors bring a real-world perspective to classroom instruction. And at the University of Houston, Houston, Texas, USA, practitioners—including past PMI chapter presidents—teach as adjuncts within the project management program.

The situation is much the same at the University of Texas at Dallas, USA. "We believe in continuous improvement, and we are always looking for ways to enhance our program," says James Szot, associate director at the school's project management program executive education center. "We collaborate with peers from other universities, our industry advisory council, leaders from the local PMI chapter and of course our students. This helps ensure our content is contemporary and relevant."

Ultimately, the best project management instruction is both tactical and strategic in nature. GAC accreditation creates a framework that programs use to imbue students with the knowledge they need to function in today's business environment, enabling them to apply project management skills effectively on the front lines of daily work.

The end result? When project management learning takes place in an effective and relevant way, students improve their abilities in four key areas: critical thinking, communication, interpersonal relationships and collaboration. These are the same skills that many businesses report managers lack at the level required in today's business world.

Around the world, the demand for project management education shows no signs of abating. Many countries' higher education institutions and agencies are placing a growing emphasis on incorporating project management into their curricula. In China, for example, 104 schools now teach project management through engineering master's degree programs. The Chinese government has declared project management an academic priority and has directed schools to teach a relevant curriculum. Additionally, the Ministry of Education in China has endorsed GAC accreditation as the quality bar for all of its engineering project management master's degree programs.

Today's global economy places enormous performance and financial demands on organizations of all sizes. Factor in a growing focus on managing work on a project basis, and it's apparent that a school's ability to offer superior project management learning goes a long way toward building its reputation and providing the intellectual capital to fuel our knowledge-based economy. Earning GAC accreditation is the best way for programs to ensure they do just that.

Conclusion: The Educational Imperative

As the business world evolves, academic institutions experience increasing pressure from the industry to equip the next generation of project managers with the knowledge and skills required to succeed in this rapidly changing environment. By gaining GAC accreditation, programs can better serve the needs of today's students and the larger business world, gaining recognition as centers of excellence in project management learning.

Educational institutions must help companies, governmental agencies and other organizations find better project management solutions for today's complex business challenges. Forward-thinking educational institutions are taking action. After they establish a program, they continue to examine it and search for ways to create additional content, new specialty areas and more sophisticated learning methods. GAC accreditation is at the forefront of this trend.

1. *Impact of GAC Accreditation*, SIS International Research. Results based on a survey of staff and directors of 15 GAC-accredited programs conducted between February and April 2010.
2. 2008 Economist Intelligence Unit study commissioned by PMI.
3. *PMI Project Management Salary Survey—Sixth Edition*. Results based on a 2009 survey of nearly 35,000 global project management professionals.
4. June 2010 *PM Network* Reader Survey, Research USA.



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