ABSTRACT
ISO 26000 represents a new type of voluntary standard. This paper discusses key aspects of the diffusion and adoption of this new standard. We have surveyed experts who developed ISO 26000 and collected data on their perceptions of macro and micro aspects of ISO 26000. We find similarities between our data on ISO 26000 and studies on the adoption and diffusion of other standards. We have also identified key differences – in the diffusion of ISO 26000 in the developing world and in specific organisational practices. Our study helps to set the direction for future longitudinal studies and research in this area. By drawing parallels with existing literature on voluntary standards, managers and policy makers will understand the areas of overlap with existing standards as well as challenges specific to ISO 26000. We also provide suggestions for the ICIT community to advance the research into voluntary standards.

Keywords: Social Responsibility, ISO 26000, experts, diffusion; adoption; voluntary standards

1. Introduction
The family of ISO Management Systems standards has been growing in the last decade and recently expanded into new areas such as energy efficiency, greenhouse gas emission, life-cycle assessment and also into a broad area of social responsibility. ISO 26000 – international guidance standard on social responsibility has been particularly important. This standard has pioneered a new developmental process, which involved multiple stakeholders in its development (ISO/TMB/WG/SR, 2006). The standard emerged over five years and was introduced in 2010. With the involvement of other global institutions (such ILO, GRI and others), ISO 26000 has shown a promise to be a significant addition to a fractured landscape of social responsibility standards. Yet the uptake on the standard has been impacted by controversies around third party certification (Castka and Balzarova, 2008c). The lack certification – combined with the introduction of national standards that adopted ISO 26000 as a basis and provided certification – contributed to confusion about the role of the standard and its uptake.

Unsurprisingly, the literature of the adoption and diffusion of ISO 26000 has been lagging behind the literature on other ISO standards - such as ISO 9000 (Corbett, 2006), ISO 14000 (Albuquerque et al., 2007) and studies on their integration (Karapetrovic and Casadesus, 2009). In the context of ISO 26000, researchers have mostly focused on the development of ISO 26000 and a wide range of empirical research on multi-stakeholder involvement in standardization has been conducted over the last few years (Balzarova and Castka, 2012; Castka and Balzarova, 2008a; Castka and Balzarova, 2008b; Helms et al., 2012). However, the understanding of the adoption and diffusion has been sporadic- apart from conceptual studies (Castka and Balzarova, 2008b), little has been done in this area. In this paper, we aim to fill this gap. Unlike previous studies, we provide empirical data to discuss the problem. The data was collected from the experts who developed ISO 26000. A survey was undertaken during one of the plenary meetings of the ISO Working Group on social responsibility and a total 32 experts contributed to the survey. In the paper, we discuss the findings in relation to spatial diffusion of the standard, type of organisations that are likely to adopt the standard and also in terms of the adopting challenges at the firm level. We also present experts’ views on the importance of other standards for social responsibility. In our discussion, we draw parallels with other ISO standards and hence contribute to the literature by providing the first estimates on the adoption and diffusion of ISO 26000 standard. Our research paves way for the future longitudinal studies on ISO 26000.
2. Background Literature

The diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1962) frequently serves as theoretical underpinning for research into the diffusion of management systems standards and other organisational practices. In this literature, management systems standards are classified as “administrative innovations” (Teece, 1980) rather than technological innovations and refer to innovative practices in management and administration. Apart from management systems standards such as ISO 9000 (Ivanova et al., 2014), the diffusion of innovation theory was used to investigate adoption of corporate governance (Venkatraman et al., 1994), IT practices (Angst et al., 2010) and other management practices.

Rogers (1962) describes the diffusion process through various perspectives. For instance, innovation life cycle describes the stages of the diffusion process. This perspective has been used to describe, for instance the adoption of ISO 9000. At the firm level, Ivanova et al. (2014) define various stages in the adoption process as (i) decision to adopt, (ii) strategic planning, (iii) system design, and (iv) deployment. Ivanova et al. (2014) also describe a set of factors that affect the effectiveness of the adoption process such as focus on internal improvement, top management support, design of the system around existing processes, use of information technology, positive employees’ attitude, and employees’ usage of the system. Such factors appear in other general literature on quality management practices (Zutshi and Sohal, 2004a). At the policy level, empirical research describes the factors influencing adoption and diffusion of standards across the globe. For instance, (Corbett, 2006) describes the diffusion across supply chains and demonstrates the key role of multinational corporations in the diffusion of ISO 9000. A useful summary of this research is provided in (Castka and Corbett, 2015).

The diffusion of innovation literature also proposes that the innovation’s characteristics impact the adoption and diffusion of innovations. In the context of standards for sustainability and social responsibility, (Castka and Corbett, 2016a) show how key characteristics of standards (stringency of their requirements and quality of their governance) influence the diffusion of 41 standards. They argue that better governance positively affects the diffusion and high stringency is not actually detrimental. Similarly (Darnall et al., 2016) demonstrates that third party certification contributes to trust of standards behind eco-labels hence its acceptance amongst consumers.

Combined, the literature suggests that the diffusion and adoption of standards can be viewed from macro and micro perspectives. At the macro level, the literature aims to understand the spatial diffusion of a standard (Albuquerque et al., 2007). For instance understanding the adoption patterns over time (early adopters, later adopters) provides an insight into the dynamics of the diffusion process. At the micro level, the literature scrutinized organisational practices and their impact on the adoption of a standard (Castka and Corbett, 2015).

The literature on ISO 26000, a standard that we scrutinize in this paper is largely focused at the development stage in the process (Balzarova and Castka, 2012; Castka and Balzarova, 2008a; Helms et al., 2012). These papers use the context of ISO 26000 to develop general theories for multi-stakeholder standard development. For instance, Helms et al. (2012) describe the settlement process and contestation in standard development. Few papers focus on the diffusion of ISO 26000, namely the work by (Castka and Balzarova, 2008b). Castka and Balzarova (2008b) use the institutional theory to describe the uptake of ISO 26000. They make several propositions in relation to SR orientation of organizations/networks, differences in regulatory systems, and the role of governments and national environments. Their work is also an example of the use of institutional theory in describing the uptake of a standard. However, a macro/micro perspective (as we have discussed in the previous paragraph) is lacking and this is what aim to deliver in this paper.

3. Research Inquiry

The current literature might be indicative of the complexities of the uptake of ISO 26000 and it is indeed possible that the diffusion patterns will be similar to other standards. Yet at the same time, the literature has not provided any empirical evidence to support the claims. For instance, it is unknown which countries and geographical/economic areas are likely to adopt the standard. At the same time, it is unknown which organisations will adopt and what will be the impediments to adoption. In a nutshell, a
macro/micro outlook on the diffusion and adoption of ISO 26000 is needed. Such insights can provide a useful foundation for future studies on the diffusion of ISO 26000 or in fact other standards for social responsibility.

The empirical data for this paper were drawn from a survey of experts. The respondents were selected from a group of standard developers, who were nominated by their respective countries as “nominated experts of ISO Working Group on Social Responsibility” and who have developed ISO 26000. We have collected the data during one of the plenary meetings of ISO/TMG/WG SR and asked experts to fill in a 4-page long questionnaire. Experts were approached individually and a researcher also collected several observation data. For instance, we have asked experts to explain their ranking in the questionnaire to get a qualitative insight into the problem. The questionnaire contained a section that collected basic respondent details; section on the importance of ISO 26000 and other standards; section on types of organisations and their likelihood to adopt ISO 26000; a section on geographical diffusion and section on firm level difficulties during the implementation process. The items in the questionnaire were developed based on previous studies (Corbett and Luca, 2002) and modified to incorporate aspects that were unique to ISO 26000. For instance, for a section on firm level adoption, several specific items from the ISO 26000 were added (such as “identification of core social responsibility issues”). These new items were discussed with the experts prior to finalizing the survey instrument. The items (and further details) are presented in the results section in this paper.

A total of 32 experts have answered the survey (about 120 experts attended the plenary meeting). 13 experts represented developing countries, 14 developed countries and two experts represented liaison organizations. The experts belonged to the following stakeholder categories: five experts represented the industry group, six represented the government, three experts represented consumer group, two labour group, four experts represented NGOs and 10 represented a broad category of experts labelled as “SSRO”. Our sample matches the distribution of the Working Group (ISO/TMB/WG/SR, 2006).

Using experts as informants has become more central practice in the recent research into voluntary certification (Castka and Corbett, 2016b; Chakrabarti, 2010). Researchers also argued that experts – if carefully selected – provide an accurate insight into various policy related issues – providing that the data is collected from highly experienced set of experts (Highhouse et al., 2009). For that reason, we have tapped into the most knowledgeable experts in the field: our informants have developed the standard and represented their national standards bodies. Our experts also led the introduction of the standards in their respective countries (ISO/TMB/WG/SR, 2006) and participated at the global events related to standards uptake. This group of people is unarguably the most knowledgeable set of experts for the study on the diffusion of ISO 26000.

4. Results

Our sample is relatively small (32 experts) and therefore we do not aim to present complex statistical analysis of the data. Rather, we present the data in a descriptive form and use the data to discuss the problem. The following section presents the results and the subsequent section discusses the findings and compares it to the literature.

4.1 Importance of social responsibility standards

There are numerous standards for social and environmental responsibility. Apart from ISO 26000, AA 1000 and SA 8000 are often referred to as the most important standards in this area (Gilbert and Rasche, 2007) and so are other instruments such as GRI guidelines or UN Global Compact (Rasche, 2009). We have asked the experts to assess the importance of a selection of standards (Figure 1). And ranked them on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not important; 5=extremely important). The experts clearly perceive ISO 26000 as the most significant instrument followed by ILO conventions and UN Global Compact. Standards such as AA1000 and SA 8000 are perceived as the least important. It should be noted that both the International Labor Organization (ILO) and UN Global Compact have signed Memorandum of Understanding with ISO and have been liaison organisations through the ISO 26000 standard development process. Based on the expert views, it seems that the most important standards (at least in terms of social responsibility) seem to be instruments that are either global and/or based on a consensus of
multiple stakeholders. In contrast, standards that are developed by a relative narrow group of actors are perceived as less important.

Figure 1: Importance of social responsibility standards (Mean scores)

4.2 Type of organization adopting the standard

ISO management systems standards are designed as meta-standards (Uzumeri, 1997) that are applicable to all types of organisations. The initial uptake of management standards (such as ISO 9000) was dominated by large multinationals – especially from the manufacturing sector. Later, service organisations as well as governments have started to adopt ISO standards. Yet overall, the uptake of ISO standards (at least ISO 9000 and ISO 14000) has been dominated by for-profit organisations.

We have asked the experts to determine, which organisations are most likely to adopt ISO 26000 (Figure 2). The results, based on a 5-point Likert scale (1=very unlikely; 5=most likely), suggest that businesses are likely to be the most important adopter of ISO 26000. However, it is noticeable that the experts from developing countries expect a very similar uptake across a wide spectrum of organisations. The experts from developing countries expect NGOs to be the most dominant users of ISO 26000 (based on responses from 13 experts from developing countries; all on which have score either 4 or 5 on 5-point Likert scale). The results from the experts from developed countries show higher variation and also the standard deviation is higher and the mean scores suggest that businesses are likely to dominate the uptake of ISO 26000.

Figure 2: Uptake of ISO 26000 by organisational type (Mean scores)

4.3 Geographical diffusion

In the context of ISO standards, it is often reported that Europe, Asia (in particular Japan) and Australia tend to be the first adopters of management standards. These geographical locations also tend to dominate in terms of number of adoptions (ISO Survey, 2014). It seems that a similar diffusion scenarios are likely for ISO 26000. We asked “In your opinion, where will ISO 26000 diffuse the most? (1=not at all; 5=significantly). Based on the data from the experts (Figure 3), Europe and Asia seem to be the most likely adopters of ISO 26000. However, other locations do not seem to be lagging behind significantly. Africa – with the lowest score – is still rated above average in terms of probability of adoption. Overall, these results suggest that the diffusion of ISO 26000 could be potentially across all continents and should match the diffusion patterns similar to ISO 9000/ISO 14000 diffusion.
Figure 3: Likelihood of adoption of ISO 26000 (by geographical region; mean scores)

4.4 Adoption challenges

The literature on adoption of management standards argues that people and strategic issues are amongst the most important aspects of adoption of management standards (Castka and Balzarova, 2010; Zutshi and Sohal, 2004b). Our study shows similarities. We asked the experts “How much importance do you assign to each area” (1=none; 5=very high). Figure 4 shows experts’ rankings of the most important factors. Similar to research into other standards, the results suggest a high importance that is assigned to top management commitment. The results also point at the importance of identification of core issues and working with stakeholders. Overall it seems that the most important aspects relate to the determination of the meaning for social responsibility for each organisation.

Figure 4: Important areas leading to adoption in ISO 26000 in organisations

5. Discussion

ISO 26000 is a new and challenging instrument for social responsibility. As the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) acknowledges, this is the most complex standard in the group of management standards. At the same time, the research shows that various standards – even though different in scope and requirements – often show surprising similarities (Bowler et al., IN press). Likewise, organisations have been increasingly integrating standards into single management systems (Asif and Searcy, 2014; Karapetrovic and Casadesus, 2009; Karapetrovic and Jonker, 2003) – another sign of the interlinked aspects of standards. Our findings has also demonstrated some similarities amongst standards yet we have also identified differences between those standards and ISO 26000.
First, in geographical terms, it seems that ISO 26000 is likely to diffuse in a similar manner as the previous ISO standards. The experts point at Europe as a location with the most adopting organisations. Europe has been previously reported as being the key driving force in early stages of adoption of ISO 9000 (Corbett, 2006) and ISO 14000 (Viadiu et al., 2006). It seems that strong institutional foundations for ISO standards might serve as the driving platform for the adoption of ISO 26000. Even though there is no empirical evidence at the moment on this matter, we speculate that the adoption levels of other ISO standards might predict the future uptake of ISO 26000. Consequently, the critical aspects of ISO 14000 diffusion, such as number of active NGOs, stringency of environmental legislation or environmental awareness of countries’ citizens, might predict uptake of ISO 26000. Future studies should also consider the importance of participation in the standard development and its influence on the uptake of a standard at the national level. In the context of ISO 26000, it seems that the increased presence of experts from developing countries can explain the uptake in, for instance, Africa. This aspect of standardization has been largely omitted from the literature.

Second, for-profit organizations might be the most dominant player in the uptake of ISO 26000 – as they dominate the uptake of other ISO standards. However, the insights from the expert from developing countries suggest that the uptake in the developing world might be different. It seems that various other types of organisations, such as NGOs or governments might adopt ISO 26000 to comparable levels with for-profit organisations. In general, the differences between perceptions of experts from developed and developing countries deserve further attention and the future research should compare the uptake in the developing and developed world and describe the key factors contributing to the diffusion of ISO 26000 in these different locations. Such insight would also add new perspective in the diffusion literature.

Third, at the organizational level, it seems that the conceptualization of social responsibility (in a unique setting of an organisation) is key for successful adoption of ISO 26000. Broadly, stakeholder management and identification of core social responsibility are the main areas, where organisations are likely to struggle. Again, the connection between other standards is obvious: issues of top management commitment and procedural maturity are key for ISO 26000 as well as other standards. Yet the stakeholder management and social responsibility identification are unique and very specific to ISO 26000. Future researchers might focus in particular on those areas first.

Finally, we have also presented experts’ viewpoints on other standards for social responsibility. The results suggest that ISO 26000 is seen as the most important instrument in this area. However, we need better understanding on the role and relative importance of these instruments.

This study aimed to provide the first insight into the diffusion and adoption of ISO 26000. Our study concentrated on a holistic overview of the problem at the macro/micro levels. Future studies should scrutinize the various aspects that we present here in more detail. Further attention is also needed to a longitudinal view on the diffusion. Though our study is cross-sectional, we hope that we have provided enough insight for future research directions in this area.

References


Authors’ Backgrounds

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