Accreditation and Recognition in Distance Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is the fastest growing sector in academia. Consequently, it is experiencing growing pains. Such pains come from various directions, with the major ones being accreditation and recognition. At all levels of education, let it be elementary, secondary, or postsecondary, the term accreditation is vaguely understood by most. As a result, the subsequent recognition of the earned credential can be at risk.

Absolutely speaking, in any country any form of authority is derived from the government from where it is delegated to its various agencies. For an accrediting body to have de jure authority, it must be under the mandate of a cognizant government agency with which it closely works assessing quality in education. There are occasions, however, where organizations with no government affiliation or mandate have acquired prestige in their field of profession to the point of serving as de facto accrediting agencies. Similarly to the non-accredited educational institutions, there are also accrediting associations that extend, what they call, peer accreditation—meaning that their authority to accredit is not derived from any government or quasi-government agency, but from the collective prestige of the association's membership.

There are many institutions of higher education that are fully authorized to operate under local government license, but have not passed through any accreditation process. Many such institutions may provide a very fine education, but the perception of that education in academia and in the workplace may not be high. As a result, graduates of such schools find difficulties in pursuing further education in the accredited schools, and in seeking a position appropriate to their qualifications.

While it would be unfair to claim that non-accredited colleges or universities do not provide quality education, it would be very wise to extensively scrutinize the claims of schools that are not accredited.

ACCREDITATION

Along with the global access to the Internet came cyber distance learning, which internationalized distance education. The various bodies that oversee the academic world realized the need for the establishment of quality control criteria for this new mode of learning. Concerned with the delivery of quality education, the academic accreditation agencies have established guidelines and review processes to properly assess education offered via distance learning. Falling in this category are hundreds of academic institutions collectively offering several thousands of courses worldwide.

In the United States, the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) "…has been the standard-setting agency for…distance education institutions…" (DETC, 2004, paragraph 1), and it is fully recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2004) and by the US Department of Education (The Degrees, 2004). Within the DETC, an Accrediting Commission is formed and charged with the responsibility of institutional accreditation of qualified academic institutions. The DETC-accredited member institutions "…offer more than 500 different academic, vocational, and non-vocational courses by mail or by telecommunications" (DETC, 2004, paragraph 2). The National and the Regional Accrediting Organizations in the United States appear in Appendices A and B, respectively.

CHEA, concerned with the credibility of distance learning, has provided a set of guidelines in assessing the credibility of educational institutions and accrediting associations, warning that "diploma mills and

accreditation mills…cast doubt on the reliability of legitimate degrees and accreditation" (CHEA, 2004, paragraph 3).

Also in the United States, the Association of Distance Learning Programs (ADLP), a division of National Academy for Higher Education, NAHE, is a self-appointed accrediting association having stated on its Web site that the association is concerned with the "certificates, diplomas, and degrees earned through online, distance taught, evaluation of experiential learning and other non-traditional means." Furthermore it is stated that ADLP's mission is to "provide a consistent measurement of the acceptability of (the non-traditional education provided by) private schools (K-12), adult high schools, vocational and technical schools, private colleges, and postsecondary education" (NAHE, 2004, paragraph 1). It should be emphasized that, presently, neither ADPL nor NAHE are associated with CHEA. However, their university membership includes numerous prestigious schools.

In the United Kingdom, the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council, ODLQC, is the guardian of quality in open and distance learning. Originally set up by the UK government in 1968, it is now an independent body, claiming that it provides accreditation "to all providers of home study, distance learning, online or e-learning and other open learning or flexible learning courses" as long as specified standards are met (ODLQC, 2004, paragraph 2).

In the European Union, the Education Quality Accrediting Commission (EQAC) is an international and independent body, registered in Europe (United Kingdom) and the US (Washington, DC). The EQAC on its Web site states that it:

...examines and evaluates higher education institutions from every country to promote sound education and good business practices. EQAC becomes today's international point of reference for people, companies, and colleges and universities concerned about the quality of higher education. EQAC will grant recognition and warranty to all the institutions that meet EQAC standards, through a voluntary, non-governmental guided self-regulation that is called accreditation, under the legal authority of the European Union and the United States of America. (EQAC, 2004, paragraphs 1-2)

Instrumental in the creation of the EQAC was the Together in the World Foundation, an organization that "develops programs and activities according to an interdisciplinary approach, in line with the orientations" established by UNESCO (EQAC, 2004, paragraph 6). UNESCO, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is the educational arm of the United Nations.

There are numerous counterpart associations worldwide aiming at safeguarding the quality of distance learning. In the Philippines the Commission on Higher Education, CHED, has formed a special Technical Committee of reviewers who assess the delivery of open learning and distance education (Padolina, 2004). In Australia, it appears that there is no centralized agency responsible for the *accreditation* of distance education, but instead the distance education providers themselves, such as the universities, are self-policing the quality assurance of their programs under the umbrella of the Distance Education and Open Learning Committee (Monash, 2004).

Considering the trans-border accessibility of distance education programs, accreditation has become a major issue that concerns academic overseeing bodies worldwide. Having recognized this issue, the University of Wisconsin has established the Distance Education Clearinghouse, which us a comprehensive Web site—being updated on a continuous basis—providing distance education information. (University of Wisconsin, 2004). There are indeed numerous Web sites on the accreditation in distance learning (Accreditation, 2004; Loane, 2004). However, the one maintained by the Instructional Technology Council is of special interest (ITC, 2004).

RECOGNITION

Distance learning has been facing a recognition crisis due to the lack of a well-known model of such learning. While the acquisition of knowledge itself provides the individual with intrinsic value, the representation of that acquisition—the diploma—has only extrinsic value, the worth of which depends on the perception of the evaluator. Assessing distance learning programs and degrees can be quantified to a certain extent, but recognition of these programs and

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