

ACADEMIC ACCREDITATION AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Traditional and Alternative Perspectives

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Since the arrival of the Internet, non-traditional distance-learning degree programs have emerged in strength as a viable, cost-effective and practical alternative to traditional, residential, classroom-based learning. Relaxing many traditional attitudes towards assignment scheduling, these ‘alternative’ degree programs are truly student-centred inasmuch as the logistical aspects of the program can be directed and managed by the students themselves from the comfort and convenience of their own homes. Attracting mainly mature students who seek to earn or finish a degree on a self-paced schedule, many of these new online schools offer courses at rates that compare very favourably with the high cost of traditional degrees; not so surprising when one factors in the costs of maintaining full-time faculty and premises at established campuses.

Life Experience Credits. For some, the novel concept of awarding a limited number of credits to prospective students based upon proven work or life experience related to the course of study has proven extremely popular, with the remaining credits necessary for graduation being earned through written or practical assignments. Behind this credit-for-work-experience concept is the commonsense recognition that actual time spent in any given occupation has at least a parallel equivalency in traditional academic instruction. The master-chef applying for an advanced degree need not for instance, take the “elementary cooking” part of the domestic studies course, but instead can receive a given amount of credits towards his degree goals - provided of course, that he can first satisfy the course evaluators of his knowledge and skills.

In contrast, traditional schools have almost invariably required the student’s daily *physical* attendance, and tend to award credits only for academic coursework or assignments completed under their own direct supervision, usually (but not always) in the classroom setting. With the exception of the awarding of ‘honorary’ or conferred degrees, rarely if ever has the evaluation of students’ pre-existing expertise played any part in traditional schools’ evaluations or admissions processes. Meanwhile, the combination of low costs, flexible scheduling, and the added convenience of home based study has placed distance-learning universities in a unique position to harvest students from all over the globe with relative ease.

Academic Accreditation.

Understandably, many traditional bricks-and mortar institutions are becoming increasingly worried about this rising challenge to their historical monopoly of the adult education market. Perhaps not so surprising then, that some acrimony has arisen between traditional institutions and those seeking to promote these novel alternatives. In particular, the thorny issue of academic accreditation is becoming a major debate; chiefly a contentious one; between the traditional bricks-and mortar, campus-based universities and colleges, and certain independent ‘non-traditional’ or ‘alternative’ entrepreneurial agencies that offer non-campus-based courses. Complicating the debate on the one side is the fact that some traditional schools and universities are themselves also now beginning to offer courses by distance-learning correspondence, whilst on the other side; a number of unscrupulous outfits have jumped on the distance-learning bandwagon for purely commercial reasons, and, capitalizing upon the lack of adequate legislation, continue to employ a colourful range of unethical and immoral tactics to solicit business, including selling unearned degrees under fraudulent guises. With the term ‘accreditation’ apparently meaning many different things in various parts of the world, the main issue of contention it seems, is the question of who exactly has the authority to qualify courses of study as either ‘acceptable’ or ‘accredited’ or not, and indeed, who qualifies the qualifiers?

Note: For the reader’s better understanding; in context of this commentary “accreditation” may best be understood as; ‘the formal or official recognition of the value of any particular course of study.’

For example; some alternative schools, staffed by traditionally-qualified educators, now claim the right to ‘accredit’ their own courses of study based either upon their own academic qualifications and the merits of the program, or, upon accreditation granted by ‘outside’ authorities. At face value, and presuming upon the integrity of the scholars themselves, there can be no moral nor ethical objections to any qualified person offering courses of study that are ‘accredited’ by the author – provided of course that any such details are clearly and honestly laid out for prospective students to consider. But these independent accreditation claims are increasingly seen by many career academics as directly undermining the authority of traditional institutions (in the United States in particular), which have strong vested interests in maintaining the moral, commercial, and political influence of their own private accreditation agencies. Commercial and political issues aside; the moral argument put forth in public is that independent or non-campus based programs are more vulnerable to, or more likely to be engaged in; unethical, immoral, or fraudulent activities. Furthermore, (say the traditionalists) lacking the concrete structures and traditional practices of conventional education systems, any degrees earned through such institutions are somehow less than merit-worthy. In light of their own increasing participation in online schooling however, this

argument is becoming increasingly untenable. To make matters worse; if we are to believe the claims of certain websites, a handful of established institutions are in fact already secretly collaborating with dubious online outlets to award diplomas under highly questionable conditions.

Charges of fraudulent activity or unacceptable academic standards are thus somewhat understandably (but regrettably, not always fairly) directed at independent, and / or online universities, whilst in return, such institutions increasingly accuse hard-line traditionalists of impeding public recognition of non-traditional schools – once again chiefly for commercial reasons. After all, for each student who opts for such a distance-learning degree, there is one less contributor and direct participant in traditional systems of education. Concern is such that some state authorities in the U.S. have already moved to protect their traditional institutions by introducing restrictive legislation aimed at curtailing the activities of online universities, whilst in turn; some such censured schools have successfully litigated in defence of their operating rights and professional reputations; and some, quite rightly, have been closed down altogether. There is no denying that the whole accreditation system needs a speedy review if we are to avoid either a hostile polarization of operational philosophies, or, a total collapse of global educational standards into the murky realm of con artists, thieves, tricksters, and self-appointed bogus educational authorities. Meanwhile, zealots on both sides of the debate are beginning to emerge as professional jealousies are aired in private and public, and one suspects that the mudslinging has only just begun. However, before approaching any possible solution to these issues, we must first understand the way that schools, colleges, and universities worldwide usually gain recognition.

National Methods of Accreditation.

In most countries, the Ministry of Education qualifies its own teachers and the courses of study offered to the general public. Depending upon the national political situation, there may or may not also be a series of private schools that rest upon their own good reputations rather than rely upon government recognition to garnish students from the general population. Hence the terms ‘Private’ or ‘Public’ schools. New schools that have yet to establish a good academic reputation however, usually find it beneficial to seek approval from their Ministry of Education, so that they may induct students from the general population whilst building a good following – at which latter time, they may consider going ‘Private’. In most countries therefore, the route to respectability for new schools or universities lies in the Government’s direct recognition of the merits of any particular school or program.

Note: In certain case of late; even the recognition by a foreign government is proving insufficient to guarantee the integrity of any given school. The examples of Robertstown and St Regis 'Universities' based in Liberia are cases in point.

In America however, things are very different. There are six *regional* accrediting agencies in the USA, and approximately another forty-eight specialized accrediting agencies. These agencies are NOT established by the government, but are comprised of a coalition of traditional schools, colleges, universities, and interdependent businesses, whose declared function is to establish, confirm, and maintain an acceptable academic standard for member institutions. Members of the governing boards of these accrediting agencies are chiefly (if not exclusively) comprised of traditional career academics and business leaders who have vested interests (moral, political, and commercial) in maintaining a consistency of academic standards amongst member institutions. And whilst ethical concerns are touted (quite rightly) as the founding origins of these agencies, it would be naive to believe that commercial and political interests do not heavily influence their day-to-day management policies and practices. Adding to the commercial motive for soliciting accreditation is the fact that institutions recognized by regional accrediting agencies in the U.S. can apply for many forms of government assistance including student grants and loans. The policy of recognizing degrees only from member (or affiliated) institutions is normal, and serves the twin purposes of maintaining a steady income to the schools and to the accrediting agency, whilst simultaneously fuelling the prestige and influence of the accrediting boards. This union between like-minded member schools, local businesses, and state authorities also serves to control the regional educational climate, which may or may not include censorship or censure-ship of those seen as a threat to traditional or corporate interests. Chief amongst those threats of course, are online schools that choose to operate outside of traditional norms.

Another issue of concern is the fact that accreditation standards fluctuate considerably between the six regional agencies in the US – and among the various specialized agencies. Thus a prospective distance-learning school that has been rejected by one accrediting agency might find itself readily accepted by another. As a result problems can arise when students try to transfer earned credits between agencies, or even between different schools within the same region. The final decision on acceptance or rejection may very well be left to the subjective views of the school's registrar or academic dean. Considerable license is also extended to accredited schools in recognizing the academic standing of prospective students; based purely upon that member school's interpretation of the merits of the credits presented. Exceptions to the rule can and are often made. Terms such as 'non –matriculated' or 'special status' for example, are used formally in traditional settings to accommodate a certain percentage of individuals whose academic credentials may fall short of the usual entry requirements. Other schools that rely heavily upon foreign intakes are at liberty to accept or reject (if they so wish) the degrees of foreign universities – evaluating each case on its merits - because naturally, those foreign universities do *not* have U.S. regional accreditation. In this manner, American accredited schools, colleges, and universities have an officially sanctioned

‘flexi-approach’ to the matter of accreditation, which we may assume is either relaxed or enforced subjectively as the student-flow and commercial circumstances require – or demand.

It is interesting to note that arguably the two most famous schools in the U.S.A., namely Harvard and Yale Universities, are *not* members of any U.S. regional accreditation agency. Nevertheless, Harvard and Yale degrees are indeed ‘officially recognized’ by these agencies in a reciprocal relationship which simultaneously proves and disproves the arguments both for, and against accreditation – as well as the perceived ‘value’ of the same. In short, in comparison to the national standards of most modern countries, the academic accreditation system in the USA lacks a uniformed standard of national consistency, and, because there is a strong commercial motive for regional policy decisions, it remains subject to questions concerning the moral and ethical aspects of the ‘educational vision’ of regional accrediting agencies.

The aforementioned ‘flexi - approach’ towards the recognition of foreign student’s academic credentials also raises certain ethical questions, especially when considered in light of traditional schools’ accusations of fraud directed at non-traditional schools. What, after all is the difference between a bricks-and mortar traditional institution that ‘bends’ their own rules in order to stay competitive, and a non-traditional school engaged in similar questionable business practices? Is the argument really about education, ethics, and morals, or is it actually more about the corporate survival of the establishment? Is the primary motivation for any given school’s admissions policy for instance, born purely out of ethical educational concerns or, are power, profit, and prestige the prime factors? The *true* value of any school’s degrees—whether traditional or not—surely rests upon the answers to these questions.

Types of Alternative Distance-Learning Degree Programs

In looking at possible causes for the accusations of fraud levelled at non-traditional schools, we uncover a broad array of correspondence-based learning programs that fall under some commonly recognized headings including; ‘distance-learning’; ‘virtual or online universities’; ‘alternative’; ‘life -experience’; or simply ‘non -traditional’ operations, that range anywhere from the blatantly criminal to the truly professional.. and just about everywhere in between. Mostly lacking physical campuses, it is difficult to assess with certainty the exact scope of many of these operations, but our concern today is simply to identify common principles and modes of operation that seem to fall into four general classes which I have taken the liberty of labelling:

- (i) The sludge-heap.
- (ii) Diploma mills.
- (iii) Non-campus based independent distance learning programs.
- (iv) Campus-based traditional distance-learning programs.

(i) Firstly; the sludge-heap.

This group comprises the “*no questions asked – no work or verifications needed for your degree*” types, whose sole intention is to profit by defrauding the unwitting private or public sector – in collaboration with so-called ‘students’ – through subtle or devious means. Offering unnamed yet secretive ‘bona –fide’ college degrees to anyone who will furnish their name and \$100 (for instance), such operations are patently fraudulent, albeit sometimes candid in their admission that they are “*merely exploiting legal loopholes*”. Sometimes claiming collaboration from established schools and colleges, and offering ‘transcript verification services’ to deceive potential employers, these are little more than pseudo-legal counterfeiting operations (at very best) - if not outright scams. It is this writer’s opinion that those who knowingly support, operate, or avail of these services should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. If what they are doing is not technically illegal, then it should immediately be made so, for it is most certainly unethical and immoral and brings the whole field of education into disrepute.

(ii) Secondly; the so-called ‘diploma mills’.

I make a distinction here between purchasing blatantly counterfeit diplomas (i) and dealing with so-called ‘diploma mills’ (ii) because although there is still a broad gray area of ethical concerns here, there appears to be a distinct difference between merely selling counterfeit pieces of parchment to any and all comers, and on the other hand; engaging the student in at least *some* level of accountability and course studies before awarding a diploma. Unfortunately, under the umbrella of ‘diploma mills’ falls a wide variety of unethical ‘distance-learning’ or ‘online’ programs ranging from those at the lower end of the scale who will award a diploma based purely upon an unsubstantiated life-experience statement and the payment of a modest fee – to those who require at least *some* academic input from their students or customers, but who *do not* have the academic resources nor any sincere intention of evaluating application documents nor of grading their students’ course submissions; having used the promise of a degree simply as a ruse to solicit customers. In conscious breach of their own stated guidelines and principles of operation (if they have actually published any) the required documentation or coursework merely gives a veneer of authenticity to the program whilst maintaining the trust of the often-unwitting student. Obviously, some students are fully aware of what is going on, in which case, they too are guilty of fraud if they later presume upon the integrity of their unqualified degree. Deserving some sympathy however are those sincere students who follow the stringent guidelines often outlined in the school brochure, and who may indeed have submitted work of a quality consistent with standards in any parallel institute of higher learning. Rightly proud of their achievements, as well as their investments of time, effort, and money, such students will nevertheless, and unfortunately, suffer the stigma of fraud if their host institution is later exposed as nothing more than a ‘diploma mill’.

(iii) Thirdly; non-campus based distance-learning institutions of integrity.

Very simply, this is that group of ethical providers of ‘alternative’ learning programs for those students who cannot, or do not wish to avail of a traditional institution’s offerings. The programs offered by these independent, non-campus-based universities may or may not allow *limited* credits for life experience, and may or may not accept credits from other institutions, but their coursework and degrees are offered and graded in a manner consistent with the educational norms of traditional institutions. Clear and honest in their advertising, and adhering strictly to their stated principles of operation, these are the institutions whose degree programs stand upon their own merit. Adjusted for the distance-learning student, and thus naturally different in format or study requirements, such degrees nevertheless parallel the general values of related degrees worldwide, and as such, deserve the respect and recognition of traditional educational establishments. Requiring many months of sincere study, and tagged with fees comparable to traditional degrees’ tuition costs, labelling such institutions or their graduates as ‘fraudulent’ in any way is certainly tantamount to slander. Indeed, it could justly be argued that those who do manage to complete these bona fide distance-learning degrees purely upon their own motivation – sometimes over lengthy periods spanning years – yet *without* the support structure and regulations of traditional schools, should be applauded for their superior achievements; both in their studies and in their applied personal discipline.

(iv) Fourthly; distance-learning programs from campus-based institutions.

These are the aforementioned distance-learning programs offered by already recognized or accredited traditional universities, either in conjunction with, or as a replacement for campus-based learning. Falling under newly-constructed logistical and academic guidelines, most such endeavours are still struggling to find their niche – handicapped as they are by comparisons with the high costs associated with traditional institutions, and their (thankfully diminishing) reticence to award limited credits for related and verifiable life experience.

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So we can see that the battle for fiscal supremacy in the developing arena of Internet education is undoubtedly a major factor prompting criticism of non-traditional schools by competing traditionalists. But those who make accusations of fraud must be very careful not to over-generalize. For just as traditional universities are very different in content and quality, clear distinctions must also be made between the different types of distance learning programs. Whilst those who are fraudulent operators should quite rightly be brought to task, those other institutions of integrity and vision who herald a new era of tailor-made education programs should be loudly applauded and encouraged.

Institutional Integrity.

Of course, prospective students need to ensure that the guidelines and principles laid in out in the brochures and websites of these new online universities are indeed being adhered to. If they are being respected, then any degrees awarded should stand upon their own merit, and be respectfully evaluated against the stated guidelines of the awarding university. On the other hand, whilst admonishing the operators of dubious non-traditional degree programs (i & ii above), we need also recognize the fact that there are many comparable problems within traditional educational systems. Indeed, upon hearing the facts, one might be forgiven for wondering upon what grounds *exactly* traditional institutions believe they have the right to determine with any real moral authority, what does and does not constitute an ‘acceptable’ degree program?

Speaking from direct experience, I have seen private schools artificially upgrade test scores so as achieve higher national ratings. Another institution directed teachers to give passing grades to failing students in order to appease disgruntled benefactors. Yet another school censured, suppressed, and in one notable case even covertly expelled a student who offered ‘novel’ perspectives on a religious studies program. In this particular case ‘correct denominational thinking’ was part of their evaluation procedure, and those who expressed divergent views – no matter how academic, eloquent, or philosophical – were penalized with lower grades. Perhaps this raises the argument for NOT awarding national accreditation to institutions (such as denominational religious schools) whose academic policies are founded upon discriminatory practices and subjective, theoretical indoctrinations? (A debate for another day perhaps?)

Another institution in the U.S., eager to get their operatives ‘into the field’ regularly awarded accredited masters degrees to foreign students despite their inability to communicate in basic English. There, systematic plagiarism was also rampant, and tacitly accepted and excused by key faculty on the grounds that some laxity was appropriate in a student body comprising 80% or more non-native speakers. What about teaching them English and stopping the cheating.. one might ask? What indeed is the true value of any degree if it is earned without self-respect? And at the end of the day there is still the matter of individual professors’ subjectivity, skill, knowledge, and integrity, as well as the aforementioned national, political or religious prejudices of any given school, college or university – conditions that rarely if ever, beset distance-learning programs. In fact, and somewhat ironically, it was just such unpredictable and often duplicitous conditions within traditional institutions of my acquaintance that led me to consider distance-learning in the first place.

Personal Commentary and Conclusion

My qualifications for commenting on this topic stem from the fact that my own education is the product of several different institutions in various parts of the world. This includes a variety of sports, health, and fitness certifications from seven different countries; business and management courses in Europe and Asia; religious education and ministry in four different U.S. institutions; and finally, advanced distance-learning degrees in theology and psychology of which, secure at the very least in my own integrity and effort, I remain justly proud. Furthermore, in my student years I took both part-time and residential (traditional) courses at the associate, bachelor's and master's level; have experienced 'matriculated' and 'special student' status; and was present in a U.S. institution of higher learning as it struggled somewhat desperately to maintain its tentative regional accreditation status.

I have at different times in the past suffered the indignity of non-recognition of various hard-won awards and certificates based purely upon national, political, or religious discrimination against the awarding institution – regardless of my personal expertise or skill in any given area, or of the amount of sincere effort expended in gaining those awards. Occasionally, I have gone on to re-qualify locally under a new authority, realizing in the process that there are great imbalances and discrepancies in subjective evaluations and opinions. For invariably, each program has had its own particular strengths and weaknesses.

I have also learnt to discriminate keenly between the principles and ethics publicly declared by any given school or agency – and their actual operating norms – and in the process, have tried to be compassionate in my observations and critiques, even whilst suffering unjust personal discriminations. Of special concern to me is the recurring and disturbing readiness of individuals and institutions – once they have gained a foothold in the ladder of public recognition – to abandon their ethical roots and surrender their often hard won integrity for the sake of political expediency or commercial gain. All too often, so-called 'professional opinions' including those surrounding this accreditation issue are tainted by selfish fiscal or sectarian motives. Sadly, in the resulting egocentric climate, it is the students, and the future of education itself that is the ultimate casualty.

Considering all of the aforementioned points, surely we can see that there is both a place and a need for distance-learning programs of integrity in today's global education market. Equally, it is also time to acknowledge that regional accrediting systems that operate *primarily* upon self-serving fiscal principles are not ultimately beneficial to education in general. Most certainly, as in the case of distance-learning entrepreneurs, the established accreditation agencies can serve as direct impediments to the development of new, visionary, or interdependent education projects. Relying primarily on regional accreditation as the benchmark of degree quality, with all of the aforementioned variables and compromises

plainly evident in traditional systems, is a poor substitute for first-hand assessments of any particular degree, program, institution, or graduate thereof. After all, what exactly are we measuring when we talk of the ‘value’ of any given degree if not the acquired knowledge, skill, and expertise of the holder? Obviously, what is needed is a globally-recognized system of accreditation based purely and simply upon the merits of any given program, and the quality of the graduates thereof. No prohibitive membership fees, no selective exclusions, and no covert political agendas save the promotion of learning itself. Such factors as course content and duration; the qualifications and experience of faculty; the skill level and success of graduates; and the school’s adherence to ethical guidelines would be the primary features of any such global accreditation. Degrees worldwide could then be awarded a ‘points’ value within different subject categories and thus be easily transferable from institution to institution regardless of whether credits are earned via traditional or alternative routes.

Sadly though, we do not yet have such an inclusive system, so how indeed do we evaluate any particular institution’s degrees? For obviously, even two individuals graduating from the same class in a traditional college with the same GPA will not reflect the same level of knowledge or expertise. It remains altogether a very subjective endeavour to ‘evaluate’ any degree from any given source.

Although it may take a little more work and effort, may I respectfully suggest that the only way we can accurately judge the merits of any particular degree and/or of any particular graduate is to evaluate case-by-case the standards of the attended institution, the quality of the work done, and the personal skills, knowledge, and integrity of the graduate. Given the wide variety and depth of content of educational programs out there, and acknowledging the troubling compromises being made by so many educational institutions on both sides of the coin, this for now, is the only sure way to make fair and informed judgments. Meanwhile, as we work on a collective solution to this problem, perhaps we should concentrate on seeking out the best – and not merely the worst – in each other’s educational efforts.

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