

# Accreditation Issues in Open and Distance Learning

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## Abstract

*Despite the acceptance of Distance or eLearning method globally, various issues relating to accreditation of qualification/course undertaken through Distance learning method are still unresolved. Accreditation means differently for individual or group of people and organization. Various stakeholders placed diverse accreditation criteria and, accreditation serves different purposes, which among others, including for ascertaining the skill, knowledge, quality, professional standard and competence achieved. In addition, being accredited means authority concern could award funds and financial allocation to the institution. How different stakeholders perceived various matters and placed great importance on what constitute quality that deemed accreditation are worthy of investigation. Is quality in Distance learning education more to do with ICT acquisition and application; the design of curriculum, assessment including teaching and learning methodologies?*

*And, can diversity in this aspect leads to a common acceptable criteria, or benchmark that could engender Mutual Recognition Agreement in the context of regional, bilateral and multi-lateral initiatives? Few examples on such initiatives will be cited.*

*Within this continuum, definitions, criteria and purposes of accreditation should be clarified, and agencies or*

*authorities involved in accreditation activity, at national and international level be identified. In the present context of market or knowledge based economy, particularly, under the Free Trade Agreement or within the General Agreement on Trade and Services, issues pertaining recognition and accreditation of qualification in relation to trans-border or cross border education and internationalization of education, including ODL or eLearning are inevitable. It is ironic that education is closely associated with quality, hence accreditation, while at the same time education is already accepted as tradable commodity – commercially driven. Is it possible to strike a balance in this phenomenon?*

*There are many new issues, new predictions, and new trends concerning accreditation in eLearning. With limited time for presentation, only a number of key issues will be discussed in this paper.*

## **Introduction**

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has come a long way and that the practice of ODL has been developing and evolving in many different forms in recent years. Although there has been considerable debate, nationally and internationally, about appropriate terminology, and a number of different terms are commonly used which refer to the same or similar sort of activity, the phrase is now routinely applied to a very wide spectrum of activities.

Distance learning, or distance education, is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology, and instructional systems design that are effectively incorporated in delivering education to students who are not physically “on site” to receive their education. Instead, teachers and students may communicate asynchronously (at times of their own choosing) by exchanging printed or electronic media, or through technology that allows them to communicate in

real time (synchronously). Distance education courses that require a physical on-site presence for any reason including the taking of examinations is considered a hybrid or blended course or program.

Types of distance education courses:

- Correspondence conducted through regular mail
- Internet conducted either synchronously or asynchronously
- Telecourse/Broadcast where content is delivered via radio or television
- CD-ROM where the student interacts with computer content stored on a CD-ROM
- PocketPC/Mobile Learning where the student accesses course content stored on a mobile device or through a wireless server

There is also great diversity in the large number of actual arrangements - and even more in potential arrangements - to which this presentation is directed. As the nature of institution-centred and of collaborative provision develops and changes, and as the potential for distance learning is explored further, the boundaries between different forms of higher education are becoming less easy to recognize.

Distance learning is increasingly being looked to by many institutions as an economical way of expanding their activities, widening opportunities for students around the world, and making effective use of the new technologies which are rapidly emerging. The 2006 EDUCAUSE Current Issues Committee stated that at the beginning eLearning was an add-on to traditional education but by the year 2006 it has become a mission-critical component of education. Time Magazine stated that by the year 2020, eLearning will be the mainstream and classroom-based learning will be the supporting part.

Despite the acceptance of ODL method globally, there are a number of unresolved issues. Important amongst these are the issues of quality and accreditation of ODL. According to *Qazi (1990, p.158)*, the issues tend to be based on the competitive character of ODL vis-a-vis the formal system, and the existing heavy bias in favour of the latter. The diverse trends of ODL in various countries complicates the problem even further.

In addition, these issues tend to focus on the value of educational credentials which are linked with employment. Low quality qualifications appear to lead to low levels of employability, whereas high quality qualifications lead to high levels of employability respectively. This raises fundamental questions relating to who should determine quality for what purpose, what constitutes quality and what criteria should be used to judge it?

## **Definition of Accreditation**

Accreditation may have a number of meanings. In the context of education, accreditation refers to a range of aspects which have been assessed and evaluated as having met a required standard of quality. The products of accreditation may be termed differently. For instance, 'qualification' or 'institution' or 'course or program' may each be accredited.

According to *Zook and Haggerty (1936, p.18)*, accreditation basically refers to a process whereby an organization or agency recognizes a college or university or a program of study as having met pre-determined qualifications or standards. In the case of educational institution, accreditation involves compliance with a set of standards or requirements established by an agency or organization set up for the purpose of accreditation.

Educational awards or certificates, particularly at the tertiary level, are an important credential issued by educational institutions. They are a way of certifying that a person has acquired certain skills, qualities, knowledge and abilities in a prescribed program or course of study. Although an accredited educational award does not necessarily secure any form of employment or benefit to the holder, accreditation does exert a positive influence on the holder's status, particularly in the context of employment opportunities. Such status depends on whether the individual is a graduate of an accredited or non-accredited institution.

In a similar way, the accreditation of programs of study in such fields as architecture, dentistry, medicine, law, engineering, pharmacy, optometry and veterinary medicine plays an important part in the process of obtaining the required state license to practice one of these professions.

Accreditation is, therefore, purposeful in a number of ways. Professionals seek accreditation in order to insure their livelihood by protecting themselves from inadequately trained competitors. Prospective students seek assurance of quality in colleges and universities. Government officials, employers and corporation officers, on the other hand, require confirmation of at least the minimum competence of institutions, while the public and the institutions themselves need protection from fraud and deception. A society places great dependence on lists of accredited institutions. Overall, accreditation is a method employed in order to determine quality, and it is a form of quality control.

Some policymakers have argued that accreditation has had a very undemocratic and negative influence on many forms of educational reform. Others, however, particularly in countries where accreditation is legitimately supported by the government, believe

that accreditation plays a key role in the improvement of educational quality and standard. Such accreditation processes usually involve certain criteria and procedures such as a series of evaluation stages requiring perhaps visitation on the part of the evaluators. The extent to which quality of qualifications gained through Distance Education is a cause for concern and the implications of those concerns are topics worthy of study.

The following are some of the common definitions of accreditation:

- Accreditation is the recognition or certification of an institution that has been reviewed and meets specific measures of quality.
- Accreditation is the evaluation tool used to ensure a high level of quality in higher education. Accreditation is the process that gives public recognition to institutions that meet certain standards, and accreditation is the school's mark of legitimacy.
- Accreditation is the act of granting credit or recognition, especially with respect to educational institution that maintain suitable standards

## **Accreditation Issues**

Accreditation adds value to an education institution's systems and gives both the local public and international higher education community confidence in their programmes, whatever the delivery mode. Accreditation is advantageous to both educators and students, and helps ensure wider acknowledgement and transferability of the qualifications and credits the institution confers.

*Issues relating to quality and accreditation of qualification and educational institution have become an international agenda. Every nation seems to place high premium in this*

*matter simply because of the demand for international market, international compatibility and compliance, the move towards internationalization in education, the so-called cross-border, trans border or transnational of education. While a nation is proud of being able to expand access in education and that it has achieved equality of educational opportunity, especially through the use of ODL method, the fulfillment of a much needed system that could provide constant re-training, re-skilling and continuous upgrading opportunities for its workforce, is much to be desired.*

The success story of ODL may only be confined within the countries' boundaries, and very rarely extend beyond its territories. As such, it has been said that the true test of ODL success lies within the context of international recognition. Internationally, accreditation as it has evolved to the present day started in the United States with the University of Minnesota, which accredited certain high schools from which they were prepared to accept students. In 2005, UNESCO estimated that 60 countries worldwide have accreditation systems. Most focus on contact education but there is increasing interest in Distance Education, particularly e-Learning.

*Within the context of globalization, there are indeed a number of relevant issues raised in relation to accreditation. Important amongst these include the issues of credit transfer, quality assurance, qualification framework, mutual recognition agreement, mobility of students, professional and workers and the need to have a common benchmark and quality standard including establishing code of conduct or practice or protocols for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education.*

*Developing nations face increased international credit transfer and competition for students. In cross-border education delivery, the providing DE institution must collaborate effectively with the host country's government and be sensitive to the host country's culture and higher education policies. To achieve this, accreditation - the external certification of quality and standards - is as important as internal self-regulation.*

## **Cross-border Education**

Since the 1980s, cross-border higher education through the mobility of students, academic staff, programmes/institutions and professionals has grown considerably. In parallel, new delivery modes and cross-border providers have appeared, such as campuses abroad, electronic delivery of higher education and for-profit providers. These new forms of cross-border higher education offer increased opportunities for improving the skills and competencies of individual students and the quality of national higher education systems, provided they aim at benefiting the human, social, economic and cultural development of the receiving country.

While in some countries, the national frameworks for quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications take into account cross-border higher education, in many countries they are still not geared to addressing the challenges of cross-border provision. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive frameworks for coordinating various initiatives at the international level, together with the diversity and unevenness of the quality assurance and accreditation systems at the national level, create gaps in the quality assurance of cross-border higher education, leaving some cross-border higher education provision outside any framework of quality assurance and



accreditation. This makes students and other stakeholders more vulnerable to low-quality provision and disreputable providers of cross-border higher education.

The challenge faced by current quality assurance and accreditation systems is to develop appropriate procedures and systems to cover foreign providers and programmes (in addition to national providers and programmes) in order to maximize the benefits and limit the potential drawbacks of the internationalization of higher education. At the same time, the increase in cross-border student, academic staff, researcher and professional mobility has put the issue of the recognition of academic and professional qualifications high on the international cooperation agenda.

The increased cross-border mobility of students, academic staff, professionals, programmes and providers presents challenges for existing national quality assurance and accreditation frameworks and bodies as well as for the systems for recognizing foreign qualifications.

## **Challenges in cross-border education**

Some of these challenges are described below:

- National capacity for quality assurance and accreditation often does not cover cross-border higher education. This increases the risk of students falling victim to misleading guidance and information and disreputable providers, dubious quality assurance and accreditation bodies and low-quality provision, leading to qualifications of limited validity.
- National systems and bodies for the recognition of qualifications may have limited knowledge and experience in dealing with cross-border higher education. In some cases, the challenge becomes more complicated as cross-border

higher education providers may deliver qualifications that are not of comparable quality to those which they offer in their home country.

- The increasing need to obtain national recognition of foreign qualifications has posed challenges to national recognition bodies. This in turn, at times, leads to administrative and legal problems for the individuals concerned.
- The professions depend on trustworthy, high-quality qualifications. It is essential that users of professional services including employers have full confidence in the skills of qualified professionals. The increasing possibility of obtaining low-quality qualifications could harm the professions themselves, and might in the long run undermine confidence in professional qualifications.

*As a follow up to this, countries have to strengthen their quality assurance and accreditation system, and that they have to be part of a bigger network by having to become a member of regional and international organization. In addition, they have to provide more transparent information on procedures and systems of quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications. These efforts should have a global range and should emphasize supporting the needs of developing countries to establish robust higher education systems. Given that some countries lack comprehensive frameworks for quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications, capacity-building should form an important part of the overall strengthening and co-ordination of national and international initiatives. In this light, UNESCO and the OECD have worked closely together in the development of the Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education. The implementation of these Guidelines could serve as a first step in the capacity-building process.*

The quality of a country's higher education sector and its assessment and monitoring is not only key to its social and economic well-being, it is also a determining factor affecting the status of that higher education system at the international level. The establishment of quality assurance systems has become a necessity, not only for monitoring quality in higher education delivered within the country, but also for engaging in delivery of higher education internationally. Consequently, there has been an impressive rise in the number of quality assurance and accreditation bodies for higher education in the past two decades. However, existing national quality assurance capacity often focuses exclusively on domestic delivery by domestic institutions.

## **QA and Accreditation in Some Countries**

*The following are examples of development in this area:*

1. *In the UK, in addition to its Royal Charter, Act of Parliament and Privy Council to address in the establishment of universities and institutes of higher learning, it has the Higher Education Quality Council, the Higher Education Funding Council, the Open Distance Learning Quality Council and Quality Assurance Agency involved in some ways or other in the areas of quality assurance and recognition of qualification.*

To date, Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning has been produced. The guidelines have been developed with the assistance of a working group initially convened in 1997 by the former Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), and continued by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). They build on the generic

Guidelines on quality assurance produced by the HEQC in 1996 and on institutional quality audit reports, undertaken in the first instance by the HEQC and latterly by QAA.

In addition, Higher Education Quality Council is responsible for having to create a closer relationship between quality assurance within higher education and the quality assurance processes associated with other external agencies such as the professional and statutory bodies. HEQC so far has undertaken a study in this area that forms part of collaborative work with such bodies, which contributed to an understanding of the role of professional and statutory bodies in accrediting courses and centres in higher education institutions. It constitutes the most comprehensive and detailed account yet published of the practices and procedures of professional and statutory bodies.

As a follow up to this, there is a need of establishing a new single quality agency whose primary objectives will be the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards in higher education. In this context, the review within the collaborative initiatives involving institutions, the quality and funding councils, and professional and statutory bodies, is of particular relevance.

The Open and Distance Learning Quality Council in the United Kingdom (ODLQC) offers institutional accreditation to “all providers of home study, distance learning, online or e-Learning and other open learning or flexible learning courses” that meet their standards. Their website gives details of these standards, how to apply for accreditation, the process of accreditation, a list of currently accredited providers and advice on quality. The standards are divided into six sections: outcomes, resources, support, selling, providers and collaborative provision. Good practice guides provide some interpretation of the standards.

They also have special notes for international providers seeking accreditation.

In addition to meeting the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council's standards, applicants have to provide information on the legal and quality assurance frameworks in the countries they are based in; whether there are statutory or regulatory distance education authorities, and whether the applicant is registered with them; and whether the applicant's programmes are already accredited.

2. *In Australia, the Department of Education, Science and Technology provide national quality assurance and accreditation. Australian universities are self-accrediting, but the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) conducts institutional audits and publishes online reports and best practice.*

AUQA is to address the following:

- Major growth in Transnational (TN) education operations of Australian HEIs over past ten years
- Almost 200,000 non-Australian students are enrolled in Australian universities and attending in Australia
- Over 60,000 students are enrolled in Australian universities and living in other countries
- AUQA's scope includes the quality of national as well as TN offerings.

To date, AUQA visits to Partners & Offshore Campuses are totaling 90 partner/transnational campus visits as mid October '06 including 10 Partners in Australia. Based on the visits, AUQA has come up with the findings and the following are some examples:

- Major growth over past ten years.
- But recently also significant retrenchment of non-viable or poor quality activities.
- Most early growth was ad hoc rather than co-ordinated. This is changing quickly.
- The pressure to attract revenue from offshore teaching activities does influence behaviour.
- There is increasing use by universities of private corporate arms to manage the transnational activities in a commercial manner.
- The transnational activities are often run as a 'commercial' activity rather than an 'academic' activity.
- This can tighten commercial risk management, but potentially disenfranchise academic governance.
- A university's usual QA system does not necessarily suffice for its transnational activities.
- Host countries have highly variable QA requirements.
- There is scope for more explicit standards in offshore education.
- But there are philosophical challenges to having common standards

Although AUQA is an influential body and that it has some international involvement in its activities, it endorses the need to have further collaboration by establishing Memoranda of Co-operation with several other agencies, for specific purposes, namely with the following agencies:

- HEQC, South Africa
- NZUAAU, New Zealand
- HKCAA, Hong Kong
- NAAC, India
- MQA, Malaysia
- SEEI, Shanghai

3. *In New Zealand, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority is responsible for the approval, accreditation and audit of programmes and institutions. They use a set of generic criteria but there is some reference to distance education. They also build capacity in the system through workshops.*

Broad accreditation criteria include:

- goals and objectives;
- systems to achieve goals and objectives (governance, personnel, resources, student support, programme delivery, assessment and research); and,
- achievement of goals and objectives.

Concerning DE, the accreditation workbook suggests that processes for managing distance learners should ensure the learners' needs and expectations are taken into account and supported. Also noted are the need for employing experienced DE staff; having appropriate resources; providing information and support to students; the programme development and review process; systems for monitoring student satisfaction; valid and reliable assessment; and systems for recording student progress. They also insist on approving DE-oriented delivery mode changes to ensure the systems in place support the change. As systems are core to DE, the approval criteria are also guidelines for institutions planning to move to a blended tuition mode.

4. At international level, UNESCO has undertaken many key initiatives in this particular field. Amongst the initiatives include: UNESCO/Council of Europe has produced a document on 'Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education'; UNESCO regional conventions on recognition of qualifications and establish national information centres as stipulated by the conventions; The UNESCO Recommendation

concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel and other relevant instruments need to be taken into account by all institutions and providers to support good working conditions and terms of service, collegial governance and academic freedom; and, the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications.

### **ODL and issues relating to General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS)**

Trade in educational services has received serious attention and has invoked heated reactions by various stakeholders ranging from governments, private sector investors, unions and student associations. High quality in higher education can positively influence labour's factor conditions of a country's economic development. Trade in higher education is inherently cross-sectoral affecting trade, economics, education and culture.

Services in higher education are a growing activity which is extending to:

- the new providers of higher education
- new modes of delivery, such as distance learning via the Internet, radio and television; and
- new activities, such as educational support services and educational testing services.

Internationalization of higher education has intensified within the WTO/GATS context. Providing education although remain to a large extent the responsibility of governments, faced with budget cuts and limited spending power, governments may want to consider participation by private sector providers.



## UNESCO report on quality provision in cross-border higher education - 2005

### Guidelines for Governments

“...it is recommended that governments:

(1) establish or encourage the establishment of a comprehensive and reasonable system of fair and transparent registration, or licensure, based on quality assurance criteria and procedures of the receiving country of all higher education providers including distance higher education;”

“(5) where appropriate develop or encourage bilateral or multilateral recognition agreements, facilitating the recognition or equivalence of each country’s qualifications based on the procedures and criteria included in reciprocal agreements;”

General Obligations apply to all services ( e.g. Most Favored Nation (MFN) and transparency) MFN treatment requires that members “*accord immediately and unconditionally to services and service suppliers of any other member treatment no less favourable than it accords to like services and service suppliers of any other country*”.

If the scenario permits individual to have the opportunity to study in one’s country without having to physically move to or be present in another country in order to get foreign degree or qualification, then hopes of most countries to attract foreign students to come and study in the country and hoping to generate income will certainly be affected. In essence, ODL or whatever mode of study that allows students to get foreign qualification will be treated as a threat rather than an asset.

Australia acknowledges that foreign students studying in Australia contributes substantial amount to its income. Malaysia, on the other hand, aims of getting at least 100,000 foreign students in the near future. Questions raised as to whether these aims could ever be achieved and sustained if ODL has achieved a stage whereby issues relating to quality, accreditation and recognition have been resolved. If this happens, one wonders whether there is ever going to be a need to study abroad if one is interested in getting foreign degree from well-established institution of one's own preference. If global market allows free market economy fully, and that trade and services including services in education sectors be determined by market forces, than ODL has achieved it most important objective, democratization of learning.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Accreditation issues in ODL are indeed an international concern involving various sectors. It requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders working together all in the name of achieving quality in education. Although it is acknowledged that ODL can extend access, provide opportunity for working adult to be trained and re-trained to acquire new skills and knowledge including upgrading oneself, it is also important to maintain quality at all cost.

For the purpose of achieving quality and addressing quality issues, Quality Assurance and accreditation bodies play important roles. In this respect, QA and accreditation agencies should establish and maintain regional and international networks that can serve as platforms to exchange information and good practice, disseminate knowledge, increase the understanding of international developments and challenges and improve the professional expertise of their staff. In addition, they should also strengthen their cooperation among

themselves in order to facilitate the process of determining whether a qualification meets basic quality standards, as well as to engage in cross-border cooperation and networking with quality assurance and accreditation bodies. This cooperation should be pursued both at regional and cross-regional level.

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