

Open and Distance Learning Accreditation Agencies- Doing What it Says on the Tin

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INTRODUCTION

As economies climb out of recession there is an even greater imperative to invest in human capital and develop the necessary workplace skills to aid national economic recovery in the globalised economy.

Based on the premise that countries which have been most 'successful' in globalisation have been those which have achieved the most favourable terms of engagement with the global economy, and education has been an essential precondition for this.

This paper will examine the role and practice of agencies that accredit courses offered by education providers in the open and distance learning mode that provide, in the main, vocational training courses. The rationale for doing is that students who look to improve themselves and their employment prospects, particularly those who fund themselves, may fall prey to unscrupulous education providers whose main motivation is to make money, not to provide a quality education.

The role of the accreditation agencies is to ensure that providers do what they say they do on their tins. Those who look at providers offering on-line/distance learning/ e-courses have a more difficult task, it is argued, than those who offer courses wholly or mainly within an institutional setting. An inspector calls and can assess a range of dimensions from the suitability of premises, which could include the price of a cup of tea in the canteen, to the course examination scheme. There may not even be or even have to be premises for those who provide distance learning courses. They may not even be located in the country as this mode is cross border. They can only be judged on various aspects of the quality of their courses, from course material, through examination strategies to student satisfaction levels. Indeed, there may not need any students to be asked for those providers who seek accreditation and possibly development, before admitting students to the course. Initially they require consultant services to guide them onto the right path. In these instances can accreditation agencies also act in the consultancy mode?

In a case study approach, accreditation agencies of distance learning providers in India and the United Kingdom, will be looked into, their modus operandi examined and fields of operation explored. Best practice will be identified and lessons drawn regarding their effectiveness. This paper will propose the setting up of a Commonwealth Accreditation Agency for Open and Distance Learning Providers [CAAODLP]

ACCREDITATION AGENCIES- AN OVERVIEW

'Accreditation is a system or process for providing public confidence and a tool for improvement used by educational institutions. It is process that ensures the school has been reviewed in terms of its academics, recruiting, admissions, faculty, and more. When you see that an institution is accredited by a recognized authority, you can be sure of its integrity and commitment to students.'

[\[http://www.onlineeducationfacts.com/online-education-facts/featured-agency.htm\]](http://www.onlineeducationfacts.com/online-education-facts/featured-agency.htm)

There are 261 Accreditation associations of higher learning both recognised and unrecognized throughout the world listed on Wikipedia including 9 'recognised' accreditation associations of higher learning in the UK and 16 in India¹. These figures are no doubt an understatement of the true number. Plenty of trawlers fish in the sea of higher education providers but the question is, 'How many distance education providers are caught in the accreditation net?' The second question is, 'How tightly woven is the accreditation quality assurance net?'

The Accreditation Net- What do Accreditation Agencies do?

Accreditation is a deliberate and thorough process and is entered into voluntarily for purposes of quality assurance and institutional enhancement. Accrediting agencies assess compliance with published administrative and academic standards and seek a continuous striving for excellence on the part of the institutions they accredit. As such the accrediting agencies serve students, society, higher education, as well as their accredited institutions and entities by striving to ensure academic excellence and ethical standards.

[/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_recognized_accreditation_associations_of_higher_learning\]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_recognized_accreditation_associations_of_higher_learning)

All accreditation agencies have both a set of quality assurance framework, often referred to as standards or ethics and often, a staged pathway for providers to meet them. A comprehensive accreditation framework for institutions that offer most or some of their courses on site might cover the following dimensions:

- A. Premises and Health and Safety
 - B. Management and Staff Resources
 - C. Learning and Teaching; Course Delivery
 - D. Quality Assurance and Enhancement
 - E. Student Welfare
 - F. Qualifications and Awards
 - G. Marketing and Student Recruitment
 - H. Relationship with Government Offices and Reporting Mechanisms
- [<http://www.asic.org.uk/>]

A good set of quality standards will have a comprehensive list of criteria for assuring quality. In the case of Qualifications and Awards, this could cover curriculum development; course approval mechanisms; the academic level of courses; the monitoring of student progress; the monitoring of pass/completion rates and the analyses of examination results; mechanisms for student feedback and finally, staff self development.

[ASIC Accreditation Handbook, pp 18-19]

Another way of approaching the assurance of quality is through adherence to a code of ethics which could cover relationships with students, information and publicity and awards at the end of the course. [<http://www.homestudy.org.uk/>]

There is often a staged pathway to full accreditation with 2 or 3 stages. Stage 1 could be a paper based exercise where the provider completes an application form detailing aspects of the operation. Stage 2 might involve a visit by an inspector to check on a number of the dimensions of their operation and the final stage, again another visit to complete the dimensional examination. If satisfactory, full approval will be given if not fully compliant, an interim certificate will be granted with a period of time in which to make adjustments towards full compliance. Once accredited an institution will be re-accredited every 1-3 years. [<http://www.the-bac.org/>]

Providers of courses seek accreditation for two possible reasons. Importantly, to comply with government regulations regarding immigration rules and the assurance of quality for the overseas market which might be in place, and secondly, to be able to display the accreditation agency's quality mark which they hope will attract students in a very competitive market.

Professional Accreditation

Another way of approaching quality assurance is to accredit professionals who work in the sector and possibly, by association, the institution that they work for.

The institution or individual members within it submits a CV for consideration and may receive a phone call seeking further clarification. If accepted and dependant upon the level of experience as a professional in the sector, the individual is categorised as either:

- Affiliate
- Associate
- Member
- Fellow

The individual may then use 'letters' after his/her name i.e. 'Fellow of...'.
If the organisation submits the applications and they are accepted, it can use a skills 'Quality Mark' on its website, letters etc. Membership brings benefits such as:

- Networking opportunities
- 6 free member events per year
- Access to web resources
- Membership directory listing
- A fortnightly membership newsletter
- Email alerts about events and contract opportunities
- Access to the Online membership magazine
- A free copy of Learning Magazine
- Discounts on events
- Discounts on various services
- Overseas contract opportunities
- Export support and advice
- A membership certificate and card
- Designatory letters signifying the level of professional membership held.

[<http://www.thebild.org/>]

Open and Distance Learning Accreditation Agencies

Those accreditation agencies that concern themselves with open and distance learning, wholly offsite provision, would concentrate upon the learning, teaching and course delivery dimension but may of course include some aspects of the other dimensions listed above apart from Premises and Health and Safety.

The Open and Distance Learning Quality Council, UK [ODLQCUK] assesses providers of open and distance learning courses against their own stated objectives and a set of ODLQCUK standards which cover the following dimensions

Outcomes
Resources
Support
Selling
Providers
Collaborative Provision

The stated aim of these standards is to guarantee quality in all open or distance learning, including home study, correspondence courses, e-learning, blended and work-based learning. The ODLQCUK accredits 60 institutions mainly based in the United Kingdom. [<http://www.odlqc.org.uk/standard.htm>]

Accreditation in India

The vision of the Distance Education Council, India is to:

Distance Education Council shall provide academic guidelines to promote excellence, encourage use of innovative technologies and approaches, enable convergence of all systems and sharing of resources through collaborative networking for access to sustainable education, skill up gradation and training to all.

[<http://www.dec.ac.in/>]

It does so through a comprehensive series of norms and standards covering all aspects of the student experience. The DEC accredits, at the course level, 26 institutions in the country.

The phenomenal growth of distance education in India is acknowledged by the DEC and the mode is offered in Open Universities and Distance Education Institutions. The number of dual mode universities offering programmes through the distance mode now stands at more than 140. Nearly 25% students of higher education in the country are enrolled in the ODL system because the growth in the infrastructure for face-to-face instruction has been unable to match the educational demands of the ever-increasing number of students. [Recognition of Open and Distance Learning Institutions [ODL] Handbook 2009', Distance Education Council IGNOU, Maidan Garhi, New Delhi-110068]

The quality assurance accreditation 'net' of the DEC is very tightly woven. There is a 37 page form for institutions seeking recognition to complete which seeks information on all aspects of the institution's operation. There are guidelines on the following aspects of an institution's operation. [Ibid pp 7-14]

- Programmes to be offered
- Staff
- Teaching Learning Strategies
- Evaluation System
- Delivery System
- Infrastructural Facilities
- Library and Resource Centre
- Audio-Visual Production Facility
- ICT Facilities

The DEC recognizes institutions on the basis of their preparedness to offer programmes through distance mode depending upon their infrastructure, human and other resources, learner support system, and teaching learning. Recognition is the certification for offering education through open and distance learning (ODL) mode. It is, therefore, mandatory for institutions to get recognition from the DEC.

[Ibid p 6]

What Are the Essential Elements of Accreditation?

We can draw the following conclusions regarding what constitutes the elements of a good quality assurance framework pertaining to providers of education/training in the Open and distance learning mode:

- All dimensions of the student experience fall within the net
- It is partnership between the agency, the provider and the student.
- All processes, from the provision of information to completion of the course, are transparent
- Quality assurance is a continuous process with periodic checks, of between 1-3 years
- There are information points for both providers and students to garner information about best practice, professional updating for providers' staff and rights and duties in the process.
- There is a student complaints process which includes a helpline.
- There is adherence to national and government legislation, rules and regulations.

Conclusion- A Commonwealth Accreditation Agency for Open and Distance Learning Providers

The advances in information and communications technologies (ICTs) that created the knowledge economy are also having an impact on the way educational services are delivered....As the price of electronic equipment and Internet access falls, access to these knowledge media will increase and the globalisation of communication will permit the globalisation of tertiary education.

[Marshall, S, 'Globalisation and Cultural Uniformity', in 'Foreign Providers in the Caribbean: Pillagers or Preceptors. Marshall, S. [eds] et.al. 2008]

The growth in the number of open and distance learning providers in India has been noted. There are at least 1,207 providers in the UK in all sectors of the education industry [<http://www.hotcourses.com>] It would be impossible to identify the actual number with the 54 Commonwealth countries let alone those based in non-Commonwealth countries who can, of course, be accessed. Distance education provision does not have borders.

Some stakeholders see the proliferation of Distance Education (DE) providers as a welcome relief. Others, while acknowledging the necessity of using DE to promote equity and access, perceive the unregulated growth as a threat to the quality of distance higher education

[Quality Assurance Toolkit for Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes', Commonwealth of Learning 2009, p3]

The issue to be addressed therefore is quality assurance of distance education provision within the Commonwealth. How could this be achieved in order to protect Commonwealth students from unscrupulous distance education providers?

It is proposed that an accreditation agency be set up to monitor provision within the Commonwealth. The vision of a **Commonwealth Accreditation Agency for Open and Distance Learning Providers** would be:

To ensure that Commonwealth Citizens have access to a quality and value for money learning experience within open and distance learning provision within the Commonwealth

The agency would work with current national accreditation agencies, forming a community of best practice and work with those countries who do not have an agency to help establish one. The objective of the Agency is to help establish national frameworks to include guidelines for negotiating licensing and accreditation requirements as well as quality assurance and legal safeguards. Borrowing from Potter's experience in the British Virgin Islands, guidelines should include:

- Any institution seeking to offer programmes locally should be licensed and registered through the Ministry of Education.
- Activities of the institution should be closely monitored and kept under review to ensure quality assurance, consistency and standards in its work.
- The institution(s) must be required to contribute to national development.
- A business plan must be submitted to the government. This must clearly outline the financial stability and viability of the institution.
- The institution must be recognised internationally.
- Programme offerings must be relevant and of a standard and quality that will enable employment or further studies locally or abroad.

[Potter, M, 2008, 'External Tertiary Education Providers in the British Virgin Islands' p.60 in Marshall, S et al [eds], Foreign Providers in the Caribbean: Pillagers or Preceptors?, Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver.]

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