

Understanding Accreditation in Theological Education

1. Why academic recognition?

Around the world in recent years theological educators often search for some form of external recognition for their theological colleges. Why this concern for academic recognition?

The answer to this question is most easily understood by asking another question: why do organisations around the world routinely arrange for external financial audits? Why do they do so even when they know for certain that their financial systems are operating with integrity, and that their financial books are in excellent order?

The answer is the same for both questions. In both cases public confidence is wanted and needed in order to be responsibly effective. In both cases doing things well isn't enough; public credibility for what is being done well is also essential. And so they look for some means to validate externally the quality of their internal operations.

By undergoing an audit, or by undertaking accreditation, responsible Christian organisations and institutions seek to reassure a diverse public that things are being done properly, in keeping with public standards and expectations, and in ways that will withstand public scrutiny.

These are ways in which we attempt to render ourselves publicly accountable for what we claim to be achieving financially or educationally. "Take thought for what is honourable in the sight of all" (Romans 12:17) is a basic principal of responsible stewardship.

So theological schools pursue academic recognition because they are seeking to demonstrate the quality of their achievement in a way that will secure appropriate credibility in the public marketplace.

2. Why accreditation?

In attempting to understand the implications of accreditation for theological education, it is useful to observe that accreditation is only one among a variety of approaches commonly taken in seeking academic recognition. We can better understand accreditation by noticing its particular approach within this larger frame of reference.

For example, third-world theological schools have sometimes attempted to secure a measure of academic recognition by affiliation with a well-recognised first-world graduate school or seminary. The academic credential given to the graduates is then usually in the name of the overseas school, and is therefore covered by that school's recognition. Less successful have been attempts by theological schools to affiliate with government-sponsored universities in the local country, or with the departments of religion at these universities. Such relationships do exist, but usually only for programmes below the first-degree level, and the transfer of academic recognition to the affiliated school is not often fully achieved. Alternatively, some schools have sought adequate academic recognition for their students by preparing them to sit for external examinations offered by institutions in the western world. For example, for some years this was successfully pursued by various schools through the University of London external BD programme. Also the departments of religion in some third-world universities may offer external diploma examinations for local theological schools.

Academic accreditation represents a different approach to this need for recognition in theological education. The differences of this particular approach can best be brought out by comparing it with the use of terminal examinations set externally, which are so common in third-world national educational systems (think, for example, of the A-level and O-level examinations so familiar in areas of current or former

British influence). The advantage of using an external examination scheme for establishing academic credibility is that it is very precise and reliable in measuring educational achievement. This is possible because it focuses directly on the individual student, on that student's cognitive ability, and on that ability as a final educational outcome.

Accreditation in theological education, in contrast, focuses principally not on the student but on the institution; it attends not so much to the educational outcome as to the educational process (as a medium of that outcome); and it can look not only at cognitive achievement but at all dimensions of leadership development, including spiritual formation and the acquiring of professional or vocational skills.

In consequence the actual educational achievement is less definitive and precise, less rigorously measurable, when using accreditation rather than terminal examinations. But for just that reason accreditation is also more easily adaptable to a spectrum of educational patterns and intentions. Its particular advantage is that it can accommodate a variety of educational objectives, educational methods and educational outcomes, and nevertheless express, compare and certify the variety of achievements in a common currency.

Accreditation has therefore become the favoured route to recognition especially in situations where a sensitivity to cultural contexts calls for variety in the curricula. Such needed curricular variety cannot be easily accommodated when using a single set-examination uniformly applicable to students from all participating schools regardless of contexts. Accreditation is also valued where the church community requires training for a variety of leadership roles, rather than for a single standardised role. And accreditation is valued where ministry requirements suggest the use of a variety of educational models, rather than a single traditional model. It is not surprising therefore that accreditation has proved especially popular for theological education in the third world, since it seems able to generate needed academic credibility without imposing an inappropriate uniformity.

3. Functions of accreditation

It is important to note that accreditation has at least two basic functions. These can be described as follows:

(i) The accreditation process is designed, first of all, to enable an educational institution to come to a clear analysis of itself in relation to commonly accepted standards of quality, and in that light to plan and execute for itself an orderly programme of improvement.

(ii) The accreditation process is also designed to enable an institution to demonstrate its achievements in relation to commonly accepted standards of quality, in such a way that the soundness of its operation can be recognised and appreciated externally and its credibility thereby secured within the wider community.

The process has therefore at once both internal and external objectives, both the achievement of quality, and at the same time the establishment of credibility (which we have been focusing on above). These are the two essential points of reference for the accreditation process.

4. Limitations of accreditation

There are definite limitations to what accreditation can offer for theological education, and it is best not to overestimate the potential contributions.

4.1 *Accreditation can prove unhealthy.* The natural human quest for respectability is a road fraught with temptations not always easily recognized or controlled. The perils implicit in the desire to be “like unto the nations round about” is by no means restricted to Old Testament times. Hence not all prices asked in the marketplace of academic recognition should be paid. Indeed the desire for academic acceptance can cater to tastes and interests that are not entirely healthy. And one must therefore acknowledge that unless undertaken with disciplined motivations, accreditation can prove a stumbling block for theological education.

4.2 *Accreditation is not what theological education most needs.* Even when accreditation is pursued for the right reasons, it is important to bear in mind that accreditation is not what theological education

most needs. Theological education has an essential, strategic role to fulfil worldwide in the pressing need to provide adequately trained leadership for emerging church communities. Accreditation may play a useful part towards meeting this need, but it can only be a subordinate, supportive part. Pursuing academic recognition too single-mindedly can divert a theological school from its fundamental calling and contribution under God.

4.3 *Accreditation is not needed by all theological schools.*

Accreditation is designed for a specific, limited service, namely the provision of academic recognition within the wider community. But for those theological schools that make their contribution in categories or levels of leadership development where wider academic recognition may have little relevancy, the pursuit of accreditation could prove superfluous.

4.4 *Accreditation can often provide theological schools with only limited recognition.* Most of the accreditation programmes for theological education in the third world are only able to establish recognition for their clients within delimited ranges; they can usually secure credibility among similar institutions locally, continentally, and even globally. But secular government and university circles in both the third and first worlds will normally only acknowledge the academic credibility of private third-world religious institutions with the greatest reluctance, and most accreditation programmes for theological education have yet to transcend these limits.

5. *Benefits of accreditation*

What are the benefits that theological educators might nevertheless expect from accreditation? Based on actual experience, accreditation may prove helpful to third-world theological schools in at least six ways.

5.1 *Accreditation furnishes a mechanism for external valuation of an institution's courses, credits, and degrees.* This enables other colleges, universities, employers, and accrediting bodies to determine the particular worth of the educational achievements being declared.

Thus where students may need to go on for further training, accreditation can often provide a convenient, credible continent-wide or even international standard in support of their admission. The same would apply where transfers between schools or programmes might be desirable, or when academic achievement is being evaluated by potential employers.

5.2 *Accreditation can assist in securing greater credibility within a school's own church constituencies.* Accreditation can—for students, their churches who send and receive them, the proprietor of the institution, and other interested and affected parties—offer an objective procedure to determine the extent to which the institution is achieving its mission in relation to the commonly accepted norms for theological colleges at this level. While sponsoring church groups may often be far more impressed by the practical effectiveness of a school's graduates than by any academic accreditation, nevertheless schools certainly find that their sponsoring church bodies are impressed and reassured by academic recognition, even when not fully conscious of its implications. As a result the accredited school often finds that the sponsoring church becomes more readily cooperative and affirming in job placements for students, in oversight responsibilities, and in assistance with personnel and finances.

5.3 *Accreditation can be a highly successful instrument for achieving the benefits of guided self-assessment.* The accreditation process can provide the opportunity for a formal review and evaluation of the institution's mission, objectives, resources, and product; with the benefit of external verification of findings by sympathetic and experienced colleagues. Schools that have undergone the rigorous experience of self-evaluation within the accreditation process usually testify to exhilarating results, to the feeling of now having their house in order, their energies better harnessed, and their sense of direction better focused.

5.4 *Accreditation can be a highly successful instrument for stimulating institutional renewal.* Again and again schools have found that the accreditation process contributes the practical motivation and leverage not otherwise available for instigating long-needed

adjustments and advances in their operations. Staff and administration and governing boards find themselves unexpectedly working in concert for a common goal, in a climate that is accepting of change and development.

5.5 *Accreditation can help the participating school discover how it measures up within continental and international expectations for institutions functioning at its level.* The school gains an estimation of its strengths and of its weaknesses when measured in relation to this wider norm, which it can then compare with its own self-estimation and sense of mission. Accreditation customarily strengthens the morale of administrators, teachers, and students, as they observe their institution somehow managing to demonstrate its quality, to external examiners, across a range of measurements, according to standards commonly accepted in the wider educational community. Achieving accreditation can have a substantial impact on a school's self-image, and result in constructive new attitudes and a fresh atmosphere among participants.

5.6 *Accreditation has also proved a sound basis for attracting and retaining external assistance.* Institutions achieving accreditation have discovered that international bodies take notice, and that scholarship awards for staff training, book grants for library development, and capital funding for new facilities are more easily secured.

6. Conclusion

Academic accreditation isn't everything in theological education, but it can offer substantial benefits to theological schools, both in achieving an appropriate level of operational quality, and in securing an appropriate measure of public credibility for that achievement.

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03/02

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