

THE VALUE OF ACCREDITATION FOR THIRD WORLD THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Introduction

The main purpose of this article is not to give answers to all the issues involved in accreditation of theological education in the Third World. The writer is only interested in posing some questions for consideration, which may lead to further research.

Our discussion is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the problem of accreditation as seen by the educators and the church: its meaning, what it does, and its benefits. The second part deals with the strengths of accreditation in regard to: its standards, self-study by the institution, and its results as seen in the graduates. The third part looks into the weaknesses of accreditation.

1. THE PROBLEM: AS SEEN BY THE EDUCATORS AND BY THE CHURCH

The term "accreditation" is new to the Third World church. The two known concepts are "certification" and "licensure," both of which only apply to individuals rather than institutions. The terms mean that the individuals holding certain credentials are authorized to perform specific services and practice their profession before the public. These are normally granted by the government. But the idea of recognizing an institution rather than an individual (so that having been in the institution one is automatically qualified) is somewhat foreign to the mind of the church.

According to the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation,¹ the term "accreditation" denotes that there has been a third-party examination and evaluation, usually by peers, through some mutually agreed-upon process in order to arrive at a quality determination of that which is being examined. John Mayor says that the term is commonly employed in education, and is granted by a professional or an agency of the state, and applies only to institutions, unlike the terms "certification" and "licensure," which generally apply to individuals. Because of this he goes on to say that if accreditation is confused with these other forms of

1. Theological Education 14: Issues in Accreditation, (Autumn 1977, Vol. XIV; No. 1, p. 11.

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recognition by the accrediting body, it can be a hindrance to the program and fail to meet its purpose.² Accreditation means recognition after the evaluation of an institution's curriculum, government, and resources by an external body. It means putting a "price tag" on the institution.

William K. Selden defines accreditation as "the process whereby an organization or agency recognizes a college or university or a program of study as having met certain predetermined qualifications or standards."³ All these definitions are given by the professional educators. But the church does not see the difference between the institutional status before accreditation and after accreditation. The main reason is ignorance of the system. The church needs to be introduced to the system in a direct way. But because this is not done, the question remains, "What is it?" The foreign agencies have not responded to the question. To the church accreditation may mean authority to grant degrees. It may mean school inspection by authorities, just as it is in the case of the public schools. Public schools are inspected by the government authorities, as each one decides in order to see how the school is doing, rather than to show the school what to do. While accrediting agencies do more or less the same thing, the approach and the purpose are different. But in order to impress this difference upon the people in the church, it is going to take more than office correspondence. It is going to take several meetings with the church, in order to explain to the people the meaning of accreditation and its benefits to the institution and to the church.

In concluding this topic I would like to say that theological schools in the Third World do have a problem of undefined importation of **predetermined** Western standards.

What Does Accreditation Do?

To answer this question let's look at the work of the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA). In response to the question, "How does ACTEA accreditation help?", the ACTEA secretary gives three things: 1) improvement, 2) credibility, 3) contact.⁴ The accrediting body should seek to help a theological institution to improve what it is already doing by suggesting guidelines which are in tune with its primary mission. It should lead the institution until it gains credibility by providing basic academic quality. This step should not only aim at academic recognition, but also at spiritual growth. Finally it should provide an opportunity for contact or fellowship with other theological institutions within the continent and outside the continent. This goes beyond William Selden's

2. John R. Mayor, **Accreditation In Teacher Education: Its Influence on Higher Education**. (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Accreditation, 1978), p. 6.

3. Ibid.

4. Materials from ACTEA, "Your Questions Answered," p. 1.

idea of predetermined standards. The standards should not be merely predetermined “do’s and don’ts.” They should be **commonly agreed** upon standards of quality as the ACTEA puts them.⁵ Not only the accrediting body, but also the institution and the church where the institution is located should be involved in setting those standards.

Who Benefits From Accreditation?

A response from a short-sighted point of view is “Accreditation benefits the institution. The institution gets all kinds of standards, suggestions and recognitions from the agency.” But its effectiveness depends on realities beyond the “price tag” put on it. If the accreditation agency and the recipient institution lose the sense of ascribing worth to and glorifying God in their endeavor, they are both playing the flute with no one to dance. Accreditation must seek to glorify God by improving the effectiveness of the institution in serving the community. By so doing the church reaps the benefits. It seems that if accreditation is not seriously studied and prayerfully applied, it can end up merely benefiting the institution and individual students, but not the church. This happens very subtly by raising the standards of education very quickly in order to keep abreast with the rest of the world. We forget the fact that it took the Western world very many years to bring their theological standards where they are today. By rushing the newly founded schools in the developing countries we end up turning out first class academic giants, but spiritual dwarves. This is why I am not in total agreement with today’s ideas that we are training “leaders” for the church. Lois McKinney talks about two things in relation to holistic approach to leadership training: identifying the levels of leadership in a given area, and finding out what kind of leaders do the churches need.⁶ I am not sure that that is what we need to find out. What we need to find out is the kind of education needed for the church of Christ. Foreign agencies must guard the Third World church against the danger of “sons of Zebedee-ism.”⁷ They must refrain from emphasizing leadership in connection with theological training. The church belongs to the Master Builder, Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:18). He is its Leader as His Spirit guides it into all the truth with the purpose of glorifying Christ. (Jn. 16:13,14). It takes more servanthood and humility to cause the church to grow than it takes authority and lordship over the flock. In fact, authority and lordship are absent in the teaching of Jesus concerning His church. The church needs spiritual servants rather than leaders. Producing spiritual servants takes more time than more of us realize. We must be careful to resist the temptation of wanting to mature the Third World church overnight, and thereby ruining the insitutional products not only by placing “price tags” on them, but also by leaving the church very many years behind.

5. Materials from ACTEA, “Your Questions Answered,” p. 1.

6. Paul Bowers, ed., **Evangelical Theological Education in the 1980’s** (ICAA), p. 36.

7. “Sons of Zebedee-ism” is based on Matt. 20:20-28, where the sons of Zebedee went to Jesus with the quest for promotion.

Accreditation agencies which allow for flexibility and changes in their standards help the graduates from the accredited institutions relate more effectively to the grass-root needs of the church. When such flexibility occurs, it is not only the institution or the students who benefit from the accreditation, but also the church.

Having said all that I must make it clear that before the accreditation benefits are experienced by the church they must first of all be experienced by the institution. Accreditation does help the institution maintain high educational standards. This takes place as the institution tries to maintain its status. The accreditation becomes the institutional voice and can be used for advertisement and promotion. The agencies do help by suggesting available materials for the library. Secondly, accreditation benefits are experienced by the teachers. Once the school receives accreditation, plans for faculty educational development are no longer an option. Professors must seek ways of sharpening their teaching skills in order to be able to face the challenge. Thirdly, accreditation benefits are experienced by the students. It helps the students overcome the embarrassment of being unable to gain acceptance in other schools or transferring their credits.⁸

II. THE STRENGTHS OF ACCREDITATION

If accreditation can be seen as a means, not an end, of promoting improvement of the theological education, there are many significant strengths that can be pointed out.

Regarding the Standards

Many schools in the Third World operate without laid-down standards at all. And those which have their own standards do suffer the ethnocentric fever that says their ways are the best. There are various ways therefore in which accreditation standards can benefit the institution.

1. The accreditation standards help to mediate between those institutions which have no guidelines and those which do have some. To the latter they serve as a corrective device. By comparing the two standards the institution can see that there are yet other good things besides those which they already have. They also help to point out that there are other ways of doing the same things more effectively. Because of the available standards, those schools without definite plans for the future begin to think in terms of spiritual and functioning growth.

2. The standards help the institutions to begin to think of long term goals of their ministry.

3. They serve to stimulate such institutions, to get them moving and to cause them to begin to employ their restored energy for more effectiveness.

8. Sherry S. Harris, ed., **Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education: Programs, Candidates**, (American Council of Education, 1981-82), pp. 383-386.

4. They serve as a diagnosis to check the institutional academic health as it relates to the ministry.

5. If well administered, these standards do help in developing guidelines for assessing educational effectiveness.

6. The standards help to stimulate broad considerations of theological issues beyond the local concerns. Whenever an institution does not have some standards against which to measure itself, it is likely to become ingrown. That is, there is a tendency to withdraw from the rest of the world as if the graduates are going to serve only the institution. Therefore, the standards help the institution to find out how much it has grown and how much it still needs to grow, as well as showing the direction it needs to grow.

B. Regarding the Self-Study by the Institution

1. Self-study helps the professional body assume responsibilities in a more realistic way. It is most likely that the professor will take things for granted, which may lead to educational coldness. Self-study confronts each professor with a responsibility of looking into his own area of specialization in response to the questions posed by the agency.

2. It promotes group experience among the teachers, as they work together toward a common goal.

3. It is a training experience as each teacher shares and adds guidance of somekind in the small committees.

4. It promotes communication with other institutions. Teachers and administration are forced to find out from other schools what things they have in common and in what things they differ. Simple things like what kind of food the students are given in other schools, what kind of accomodation, how much counseling, what kind of facilities can be overlooked by institutions.

5. It helps the students feel a sense of belonging to the school in a direct way. Students are involved in the process themselves, in analyzing their own areas such as student council, extra-curricular activities, and their devotional lives as a body of believers.

6. The board of governors is faced with the question of the overall administration of the institution. They are forced to think seriously concerning promotion of the school, recruitment of the teachers and plans for their further training, paying the teachers, and supporting the institution to insure its continuation.

7. Self-study encourages the development of a good filing system which is one of the deficiencies of administration in the Third World theological schools.

8. Lack of job descriptions is another weak spot in educational administration in the Third World. Self-study encourages it as each of the workers is required to submit an outline of what he does. This not only helps the institution, but it also helps the individual workers as well. It helps them to assess their own achievements based on what they write.

9. It also helps the administration to look at the institution from a broader view. This way some of the neglected areas are pin-pointed through this process.

10. Self-study is the best way to know whether you as a body of workers are capable of running the institution or not. To give lectures in the class is one thing, but to maintain the institutional goals and high academic standards is another. These aspects are not realized until one begins to measure his abilities against external criteria.

11. An accrediting agency can better assess the teachers through the self-study report than through mere presentation of their academic credentials.

12. Self-study can also help the accrediting body to evaluate their predetermined standards by the report given by the institution of what has actually taken place over against their formulated theories.

13. Self-study becomes a reference material for other institutions which are seeking accreditation.

14. It makes the administration much easier for future personnel than it was for the pioneers. That is, they don't spend much time developing policies and goals since they have them already. Instead they begin where the work is and move toward higher goals. This process is the most important of all the other steps leading to accreditation.

Regarding the Results as Seen in the Graduate

The most difficult thing here is to establish the connection between accreditation and the caliber of the graduates. This weakness comes as a result of training church workers in isolation from their field of work. A good example is sending the nationals overseas for their undergraduate degrees. After getting the degrees some are unable to relate to their own people. Others do not return to their countries to serve. These are weaknesses, but accreditation can be a real strength in encouraging the accredited institutions to unite their efforts to sponsor graduate schools in their several countries. In this way the students receive their ministerial training in the context of the country.

Another way of avoiding these weaknesses is by helping the accredited institutions to lay more emphasis on practical training rather than on theoretical impartation of knowledge. This not only helps to produce graduates to the needs of the people, but it also promotes a better communication of faith to the needs of the people. In trying not to lose the accreditation the school is able to maintain both spiritual and educational alertness and soundness.

As teachers make plans to continue education, some specialize in certain areas. All these benefits are first received and digested by the students. It means that the institution is able to supply the church with the right kind of training.

It is the responsibility of the accrediting agency to help the institution to maintain sound procedures of admissions. The applicants must be evaluated in terms of Christian character and experience prior to entering the institution for training. There should also be a clear evidence of call to the ministry. All this is to guard the school against taking in students who do not have a real commitment to the Lord. For when this is allowed, it is the church that eventually suffers and in reaction the institution is no longer valued.

Once the students have been admitted, counseling (spiritual nurture) should be taken seriously and prayerfully. It should be seen as a way of continuing what the admission procedure had started. This is to help the individual students discover and develop their spiritual gifts. A further step is to enable these students to employ their gifts for the building up of the body of Christ. Discipline must be maintained in order to ensure faithfulness. CABC points out that, where possible, disciplinary action should be taken in consultation with the student's church or sponsoring body.⁹ The key point is the spiritual life of the graduates rather than academic achievement. It is only when the latter is controlled by the former that the servant of God is effective.

Therefore the strength of accreditation can be seen in the graduates when the accredited institution provides education that is needed. The needed education is that which is accompanied by servanthood and humility, faith and love. It is that which turns students toward the church or the world taking full account of the needs of each – as to the church, maturity, and to the world, salvation (not in weapons or social service, but in Jesus Christ). Again, the emphasis in training should not be leadership, but servanthood. When the graduates go out expecting to be leaders and they do not advance quickly enough, they wage war against the church, and the church wages war against the institution. In trying to justify itself, the institution may begin to blame accreditation for not being helpful to the program.

9. "Standards and Procedures for Accreditation Postsecondary Level and Secondary Level," (Caribbean Association of Bible Colleges, First Edition, 1979), p. 7.

III. THE WEAKNESS OF ACCREDITATION

There are three areas of possible weakness in accreditation.

Regarding the Standards

The main questions to be asked in relation to the accreditation standards are: Whose standards are they? What theological absolutes do they represent? How flexible is the agency regarding these standards? These questions must be considered by the accrediting agencies before they sit down to evaluate Third World theological education. In failing to consider these questions the agencies are in danger of the following weakness:

1. The weakness of extremes. There are two extremes in applying the predetermined standards to a foreign institution. The first extreme is the one whereby the institution is not allowed to question any of the standards or procedures. Instead it is forced to measure its work against the agencies' "calibrated yard stick" whether in agreement with the purpose of the institution or not. This kind of extreme is seen in the government accrediting agencies. It is also possible in theological training. The second extreme, as it has been pointed out, is that the accreditation can move so far toward the concept of evaluating an institution or program in terms of its own statement of scope and purpose that no meaningful comparisons can be made.¹⁰ Whenever the accrediting agency takes the first extreme, it owns the institution and can direct it to train students in isolation from the church. Whenever it takes the second extreme, it becomes an honorary thing instead of being earned by the institution through hard work. But I believe that these weaknesses can be avoided by utilizing the standards along with the already established standards of the school in respect to the primary mission, and then, by making comparisons, to determine a more effective approach to theological education.

2. The problem of meaning. It has been pointed out that in the past accreditation has tended to define quality of education in terms of specific objective criteria (Ph.D's for the faculty, number of books in the library), but the validity of these criteria is open to question.¹¹ What may seem to define quality education in one situation may be deficient education in another. This must be taken into consideration by accrediting agencies in determining educational standards.

3. The problem of escalation. There is that danger of raising the standards of education so high that you cripple the church with intellectuals who know nothing about the church. This danger is usually encountered whenever the school's interest changes from that of the lost sheep to that of meeting the demands of accreditation. Also, emphasis on intellect results in two levels of people in the church, namely, the officers

10. Theological Education 14. 1978: Issues in Accreditation, Autumn, 1977, Vol. XIV, No: 1,

11. Ibid.

and the subjects, the superior and the inferior, the leaders and the led, the holy and the profane. While this may be a failure of the institution, accreditation serves as the catalyst.

4. Accreditation can be faced with the problem of getting schools interested in what they are trying to do. This is more real where the accrediting agencies are invited by the missionaries to the school without informing the church. Things do not move smoothly because of ignorance on the side of the sponsor, which is the church.

5. The danger of sophistication. Not only is there the problem of escalation of educational standards, but also there is a danger of sophistication of the program so that those who cannot meet certain criteria are ruled out. In America you ask a seminarian why he is going to school and he will respond, "to get a degree so that I can be a pastor, or youth leader, or a teacher." If the degree fails, the future of that person is threatened. The question is, Is it the degree or the program which prepares the student for the work? These are some of the inevitable weaknesses which the accrediting agencies must deal with.

The term "accreditation" can imply different things from what the church expects the school to accomplish. Therefore care must be taken in this matter. The agencies should not be so rigid in their standards that they rule out the possibilities of mature entry. There are people who do not have the academic qualification to enter theological college for training, but these people have church experience, good Christian character, are devoted to the church work, have mature age (over 30 years), and have demonstrated competence in the field of academics. Many secular universities in the Third World consider such people. Does this mean that agencies are not interested in people but in programs? It is encouraging that many accrediting agencies are open to such an idea though with some exceptions.

Regarding the Self-Study

The major questions are: What difference does accreditation make since we are the ones doing the work? What will we get after all this trouble? The work of self-study can become tedious unless the person steering the wheel knows which way to go and how to go that way. People get tired and discouraged. The period of accreditation is so short that the institution keeps working for the accreditation rather than doing the work for which it was established. After the first task of self-evaluation is completed and the school is accredited, it is necessary to allow enough time, longer than three years, between one self-evaluation and the next. Correspondence will definitely continue, but not continual self-study. Accreditation should not be the main burden of the school. Instead, it should seek to relieve the school of the burden. Self-study is time consuming and care must be taken not to over burden the school doing the same thing each year. Time should be allowed for the agreed upon policies to be applied and examined, in order to determine their effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the weaknesses discussed earlier, accreditation associations are rendering great services to the church in the Third World. They have called Third World theological schools to begin looking into their programs with a more critical eye. This look is resulting in significant things as these schools become known to the rest of the world. Graduates find it easy to transfer their credits without difficulties. Accreditation is going to enable some theological schools, which are not allowed by their governments to grant degrees, to link up with overseas schools to award degrees for them, while training is done within the ministry context. Another possible result of accreditation is that accredited schools in a given area can amalgamate to sponsor a graduate program within the continent or country. This will help keep the nationals within their area of ministry so that the church does not suffer "brain drain".

I am not opposed to overseas training. I do not believe it is right to stop it, and I do not think we could stop it even if we wanted to. We have no right to stop it because to do so is to contradict the doctrine of the universal church. Servants of the Lord need to be exposed to the world beyond their local areas. One way of doing it is through education. Having schools in one's home land up to the graduate level can be a sound filtration system to determine those who want to serve the Lord and those who want to serve mammon. Accreditation associations can help Third World accredited theological colleges and the sponsoring churches to arrive at the state of uniting their effort to sponsor graduate schools. But overseas training cannot be discontinued. Instead I would encourage periodic sabbaticals for those nationals who are already in the ministry to go overseas for more training and to be able to interact with other cultures in a formal setting. These people should be those who have demonstrated faithfulness to their call and service to the Lord of lords.

The accreditation agency should remain as an adviser to the institution. But the church must articulate its own purposes in theological training. Corrections must be made where such purposes fail to represent biblical absolutes.