Reflection in Online Education
Evolving accreditation requirements: A literature review

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The educational environment has changed dramatically in the last twenty years. Theoretically, the focus of education remains as it has always been, the imparting of various pieces information to those who undertake to learn it. However, societal and technological changes have permanently changed how this focus is understood, and more importantly, the role of stakeholders, including governmental and accrediting bodies, in how that focus is quantified, and the criteria by which quality is judged (Manimala et al., 2020). The development of standards and quality currently used must undergo a stringent analysis to meet the evolving requirements placed on them by government and other outside stakeholders.

Development of Standards

Voluntary, peer-reviewed accreditation has played a critical role in identifying quality institutions of higher education since the early 20th century. Accreditation organizations organized to ensure quality educational standards in member organizations. Developed along regional lines, these peer-to-peer organizations reviewed their colleagues and gave feedback over the programs offered. After World War II, accreditation evolved into a more involved oversight relationship as the United States government relied on established accrediting organizations to ensure any governmental monies were appropriately spent after the passage of the GI bill in the 1950s. At that time, the government passed legislation guaranteeing academic autonomy and freedom. This relationship remained largely unchanged for decades.

However, education has changed tremendously in the last thirty years, particularly with the advent of the internet and the development of online education. Thus, the role of accrediting organizations is evolving accordingly to respond to the growth of technology in both the industrial and the educational sector. Instead of regional considerations dominating accreditation as was the case one hundred years ago, agencies must now calculate the impact of the global workplace and the development of internet-based, online education. This raises serious questions for the future of accrediting bodies and the role of government in the future of higher education as policies, standards, and norms must be developed to meet these changing conditions (Manimala et al., 2020). To remain eligible for federal funding and maintain the required accreditation standards, American institutions must anticipate the ramifications of current calls for transparency, benchmarks, and programmatic quality these evolving conditions are projecting on the higher educational framework in general, and the accrediting bodies which govern them in particular.

While original federal legislation guaranteed schools academic freedom and ensured free administration of educational bodies with no governmental interference, more recent legislation has blurred that line, giving the Department of Education (DOE) more control of educational policies and the ability to enforce said policies by withholding critical access to federal student funding. The implications of this on accrediting organizations are immense, as accrediting bodies have been tasked with ensuring the quality of education provided by their affiliated institutions. Thus, their role in this process is evolving from one of a peer-reviewed endorsement to that of auditor and quality assurance for the governmental third party (Eaton, 2010). As politicians and taxpayers demand more accountability and transparency in how educational dollars are spent, scrutiny falls on the accrediting bodies to ensure they are properly functioning in the role they have assumed: as the arbiter of educational quality.

With the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, the federal government, under the authority of the DOE, assumed an expanded role and accreditors became more intermediaries between the government and the educational institutions they accredit. The government expanded their reach and authority over both the institutions and the accrediting body, including setting requirements for standards as diverse as credit hour calculations, faculty credentials, and the appeals process colleges may undertake during adverse accrediting actions. These represent a major change from the freedoms enjoyed by both accreditors and educational institutions, previous to this legislation (Blanco Ramírez, 2015). Rather than a voluntary, peer-reviewed system of educational accreditation, the policy is becoming more complex and more mandatory if the institution wishes to offer federally-backed student aid.

International Influences

To obtain a fuller picture of accreditation, it is helpful to compare standards in the United States with those of other countries. While some aspects are similar to the United States-accreditation is voluntary, fee-based, and has varying schedules of review, there are some significant differences. Internationally, accreditation is not the peer-review process it is in the United States, but is instead undertaken by trained auditors or other professionals certified to ensure standards and quality benchmarks are met (Ewell, 2015). Another critical difference is the transparency of these findings; in the U.S., reporting is not typically public. Internationally, the findings are public record through the various agencies. These two pieces have the beneficial effect of ensuring objective quality standards and providing transparency to students, parents,

alumni, governmental organizations, and other stakeholders, a component which is missing from the U.S. system.

As the DOE assumes more policy authority over accreditation and educational institutions, these missing pieces will develop in the United States—particularly as the global environment requires more interaction with international educational institutions (Blanco Ramírez, 2015), and global accrediting standards are developed. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the international presence it maintains are a step in that general direction (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2002). Given the trends in higher education accreditation towards more transparency and more accountability to outside stakeholders, it is only logical to assume these policy norms will be adopted in the United States in the coming years, particularly as higher education becomes more and more dependent on federal student aid to fund tuition and fees. Accordingly, any voluntary accreditation would logically be discontinued, as only general, required certification will satisfy the transparency requirements needed by governmental authorities. Another consequence would be the end of the peer-review process, as authorities attempt to bring more objective, benchmark-based quality assurance to the accreditation process, reassuring both governmental and private stakeholders of the quality of any educational product being offered. This transparency would include mandating that accreditation records of institutions becoming part of the public record, forcing institution and accrediting bodies to publicly prove the quality of their programs.

Institutional Implications

On an institutional level, this raises several questions. First, generally, what is the appropriate response to these projections? How might an institution anticipate what their accreditation requirements would be in the future? These two questions must be considered in light of the global developments in education and educational technology, and their effect on the industry as a whole. Thus, institutions must specifically ask, how is quality in education defined, and is this definition global or regional in nature? Which definition should this organization embrace? Which definition ensures the institution's continued viability in the future? What standards currently in use might become obsolete, and what standards will develop as the industry moves forward? How can quality and transparency develop through this process, and what reporting best ensures these criteria are met? Is it possible to internally develop standards

that meet current standards, while anticipating and developing new processes to meet any future standards that might develop over the next 15-20 years?

Online schools face a different set of challenges, revolving around the need to quantify how that education takes place in a technological setting. This creates a new set of hurdles difficult for both the accreditor and the institution to address (Kelderman, 2011). For instance, what constitutes an online credit hour? How is this delivered, either through "live" online instruction, or through asynchronous means, and how does one evaluate the learning and time involved? What is effective learning in an online setting, and how are effective outcomes defined? How do these differences in process affect student outcomes, and what tools are most beneficial to the process? As online education becomes more prevalent and appealing to non-traditional students, these questions will become even more critical in the future.

The implications of these changes on individual organizations are immense. The process of meeting governmental, accrediting, and private stakeholder's needs grows more complex with each decade. As the educational industry continues to evolve, individual institutions must pivot to meet the growing need for transparency and quality. As stakeholders demand more, the focus of individual institutions must consider the impact of their demands on programmatic quality and focus as well as student populations, regional and national trends and need, and how their accrediting requirements will evolve to meet the global educational environment as it develops.

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