

## Accreditation of eLearning Degree

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### Abstract

*For classroom-based education, a degree program accredited in a country is accepted in another country. For example, an eLearning degree program accredited in either the US, Canada, UK, Australia, or New Zealand is accepted by all the countries in that group of five countries. However, in ASEAN, an eLearning degree program accredited in a country may or may not be accepted in another country. For example, a degree from UNITAR, the first eLearning university in Malaysia, is not accepted in Thailand. A Thai who earned a degree from UNITAR cannot use that degree for employment in any Thai government agency. The problem of eLearning cross-accreditation among ASEAN countries needs to be solved for the benefits of all concerned. This paper presents the concept of university accreditation with examples from the United States, and proposals for ASEAN to solve the eLearning cross-accreditation problem.*

### INTRODUCTION

It has been stated that “eLearning will be eventually the mainstream and the classroom-based learning the supporting part.” Whether or not that statement is true, only time will tell. However, eLearning is new growing every year. For example, in the United States, the number of eLearning students is increasing at the rate of over 30% per term. It can be said that eLearning is here to stay, see Table 1.

Most educational institutions prefer that their faculty members graduated from different universities in many countries. No one would like to have too many cases of “in-breeding”, i.e. faculty members in a university graduated from that university.

**Table 1. Searching Google.com for eLearning and eLearning in Various Countries.**

Search for	Results
eLearning	3,970,000
eLearning USA	301,000
eLearning UK	947,000
eLearning Brunei	25,000
eLearning Cambodia	23,500
eLearning Indonesia	66,900
eLearning Laos	16,400
eLearning Malaysia	74,700
eLearning Myanmar	19,100
eLearning Philippines	47,300
eLearning Singapore	114,000
eLearning Thailand	59,100
eLearning Vietnam	46,900
eLearning China	157,000
eLearning Japan	157,000
eLearning Korea	88,800
eLearning India	142,000

In order to ensure compatible standards, the concept of “accreditation” is needed. "Educational accreditation" is giving "credit" or certification or recognition to an educational institution that has been reviewed, evaluated, and met all the specified measures of quality.

For many countries like the United States, accreditation of educational institution is carried out by independent accreditation agencies. For some other countries like Thailand and Malaysia, accreditation of degree-granting institutions is done by the Government Ministry of Education.

For classroom-based degree programs, it has been generally agreed that a person who earns a degree accredited by a country is recognized to have the same rights and privileges as if he has earned an accredited degree in his own country.

Unfortunately, for eLearning, the accreditation concept has not been universally accepted. For example, an eLearning degree from accredited university in the US or the UK is not recognized in Thailand. There was news that the Malaysian government refused to recognize eLearning Ph.D. from a certain university in the US. However, at a closer look, it turned out that the university has not been accredited.

The accreditation of eLearning degrees in ASEAN seems to be a big problem. For example, a degree from UNITAR, the first virtual university in Malaysia, is not recognized in Thailand, even though the degree is recognized in the US.

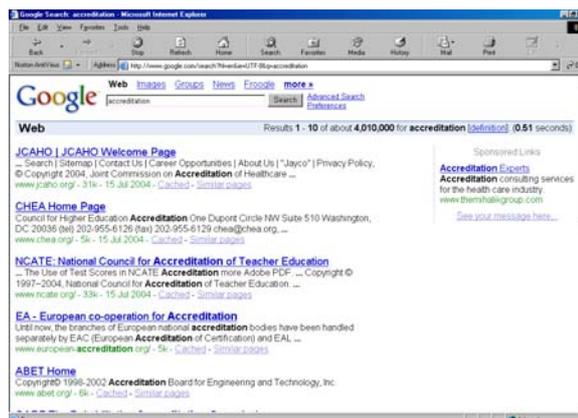
This paper presents the concept of accreditation of educational institutions, examples from the US which is probably the most advanced and experienced in terms of eLearning, and offers a proposal for ASEAN to solve the accreditation problem.

## DEFINITIONS OF ACCREDITATION

Searching for “Accreditation” in “www.google.com” yields 4,010,000 entries as shown in Figure 1.

Some examples of the definitions are given below.

- 1) From [www.thefreedictionary.com/accreditation](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/accreditation), [15], “accreditation is the act of granting credit or recognition, especially with respect to educational institution that maintain suitable standards”.
- 2) From [www.worldstudent.com/uk/mag/features/accreditation.shtml](http://www.worldstudent.com/uk/mag/features/accreditation.shtml), [32], “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,



**Figure 1. Searching Google.com for “Accreditation” yields 4,010,000 entries.**

and accreditation is the school’s mark of legitimacy.”

- 3) From [www.worldwidelearn.com/elearning/elearning-glossary.htm](http://www.worldwidelearn.com/elearning/elearning-glossary.htm), [19], “accreditation is the recognition or certification of an institution that has been reviewed and meets specific measures of quality.”
- 4) From the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the Commission on Higher Education, and Institutional Accreditation, [24], “accreditation is the means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by the educational community. The accrediting process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence and minimizing the scope of external control. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in the process is a measure of its concern for freedom and quality in higher education and its commitment to striving for and achieving excellence in its endeavors. Middle States accreditation is an expression of confidence in an institution's mission and goals, its performance, and its resources. Based upon the results of an institutional self-study and an evaluation by a team of peers and colleagues assigned by the

Commission, accreditation attests the judgment of the Commission on Higher Education that an institution has met the following criteria:

- that it is guided by well-defined and appropriate goals;
  - that it has established conditions and procedures under which its goals can be realized;
  - that it is accomplishing its goals substantially;
  - that it is so organized, staffed, and supported that it can be expected to continue to accomplish its goals; and
  - that it meets the standards of the Middle States Association's Commission on Higher Education.”
- 5) From [www.elearners.com/resources/accreditation.asp](http://www.elearners.com/resources/accreditation.asp), [23], “accreditation is simply a validation process by which institutions of higher education are evaluated against established standards to ensure a high level of educational quality. It is typically accomplished through a peer-review process in which faculty from accredited institutions help to conduct evaluations of either new non-accredited institutions or accredited institutions seeking renewal. The standards used to conduct these evaluations vary but in general they assess: the institution's mission, goals and objectives, resources and resource allocation, student admission requirements, student support services and the quality of the faculty and educational offerings. Unlike the practices of most other countries, in the United States accreditation of institutions of higher education is not conducted by the government. Instead, it is a voluntary process that is implemented by private nongovernmental accrediting agencies. At present, there are both regional as well as national agencies involved in the accreditation process. The only role that the government plays is to evaluate these accrediting agencies using well developed criteria in order to identify those considered to be "reliable authorities" on the quality of institutions of higher education.”
- 6) From [www.time.org/glossary.html](http://www.time.org/glossary.html), [15], “accreditation is a self-regulatory process by which governmental, non-governmental, voluntary associations or other statutory bodies grant formal recognition to educational programs or institutions that meet stated criteria of educational quality. Educational programs or institutions are measured against certain standards by a review of written information, self-studies, site visits to the educational program, and thoughtful consideration of the findings by a review committee.”
- 7) From [www.arts-accredit.org/nasm/def.htm](http://www.arts-accredit.org/nasm/def.htm), [13], “accreditation is a process by which an institution or disciplinary unit within an institution periodically evaluates its work and seeks an independent judgment by peers that it achieves substantially its own educational objectives and meets the established standards of the body from which it seeks accreditation. Typically, the accreditation process includes 1) a self-evaluative description (self-study) of the institution or unit, 2) an on-site review by a team of evaluators, and 3) judgment by an accreditation decision-making body, normally called a Commission. Accreditation reviews focus on educational quality, institutional integrity, and educational improvements.”
- 8) From [www.unm.edu/~univsec/draftfhh/glossary.html](http://www.unm.edu/~univsec/draftfhh/glossary.html), [31], “accreditation is the type of recognition held by an educational institution. There are a number of nationally recognized accrediting agencies and associations

which are reliable authorities on the quality of training offered by educational institutions. By voluntarily conforming to the standards of excellence set by an agency or association, an institution becomes eligible for inclusion in its accredited or approved list. Regional accrediting associations such as the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools accredit the institution as a whole; professional agencies such as the Engineering Council of Professional Development are concerned in particular with the standards of the professional schools or programs in their respective fields.”

- 9) From [www.academyhealth.org/publications/glossary-healthcare.htm](http://www.academyhealth.org/publications/glossary-healthcare.htm), [2], “accreditation is a process whereby a program of study or an institution is recognized by an external body as meeting certain predetermined standards. For facilities, accreditation standards are usually defined in terms of physical plant, governing body, administration, and medical and other staff. Accreditation is often carried out by organizations created for the purpose of assuring the public of the quality of the accredited institution or program. The State or Federal governments can recognize accreditation in lieu of, or as the basis for licensure or other mandatory approvals.”

### **MISLEADING WORDS WHICH DO NOT MEAN “ACCREDITED”.**

Some unaccredited educational institutions use one of the seven common phrases in their catalogs or advertising that do not mean “accredited”:

- 1) Approved. For example, “approved by the US government” may mean that the Internal Revenue Service has approved their nonprofit status for tax purposes. Some UK schools used “Government

approved” which was given only to the school-lunch program.

- 2) Authorized. This word may or may not mean very much. For example, a school used “Authorized to grant degree” to mean that the owner authorized his wife to give degrees to students.
- 3) Chartered. This word may mean that in the charter of the registration of company, it is said that the company business is to grant degree. In practice the degree may not be worth much if the company does not run an accredited school.
- 4) Licensed. This may only mean that the company gets a business license from the city the school is located.
- 5) Recognized. This may or may not mean much. A school may be recognized by an educational organization or some other organizations, not related to education.
- 6) Registered. A school may be registered to do business of providing education but the degree may or may not be accredited.
- 7) Pursuing Accreditation. A school may state that it is pursuing accreditation but it may or may not be accredited later.

### **US ACCREDITING AGENCIES.**

From [distancelearn.about.com/cs/checkingoutschool/a/aa082503.html](http://distancelearn.about.com/cs/checkingoutschool/a/aa082503.html) [1], The Bear's Guide to eLearning Degree by Distance Learning, 15th edition, 2003, described 327 accredited online schools, 864 unaccredited schools and 160 unrecognized accrediting agencies. For example, Jones International University is the first eLearning university in the US to be fully accredited.

For information on recognized accrediting agencies in the US, there are many lists. For example, from [www.degree.net/guides/gaap\\_listings.html](http://www.degree.net/guides/gaap_listings.html) [21], the two main agencies in the US that accredit the accreditors are:

- 1) The US Department of Education, Division of Eligibility and Agency Evaluation, Bureau of Postsecondary Education.

- 2) The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

Accreditation in the US is carried out by six regional associations and about 80 professional associations. The six regional accrediting associations provide accreditation for entire university. For the professional associations, each accredit any specific department or program offering degree in the field of that professional association.

The six regional accrediting agencies in the US are:

- 1) Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, [www.cssmsa.org].
- 2) New England Association of Schools and Colleges, [www.neasc.org].
- 3) North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, [www.ncacihe.org].
- 4) Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, [www2.boisestate.edu/nasc].
- 5) Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, [www.sacs.org].
- 6) Western Association of Schools and Colleges, [wasc.mills.edu].

Sample professional accrediting agencies are:

- 1) American Society of Landscape Architects, [www.asla.org/asla].
- 2) Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training, [www.accet.org].
- 3) Distance Education and Training Council, [www.detc.org].
- 4) National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, [www.ncate.org].
- 5) American Dietetic Association, [www.eatright.com].
- 6) American Medical Association, [www.ama-assn.org].
- 7) Association of American Medical Colleges, [www.aamc.org]
- 8) American Assoc. for Marriage and Family Therapy, [www.aamft.org].

- 9) American Psychological Association, [www.apa.org/ed/accred.html].
- 10) Council on Social Work Education, [www.cswe.org].
- 11) American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, [www.asha.org].
- 12) Foundation for Interior Design Education Research, [www.fider.org].
- 13) Accrediting Council on Education, [www.ukans.edu/~acejmc]
- 14) American Library Association, [www.ala.org].

There are some misinformation about accreditation. Some examples are given below:

- 1) Harvard is not accredited. The fact is that Harvard University is accredited by the US regional accrediting agency but some of its departments are not accredited by the relevant professional associations. However, accreditation by regional association covers the whole university.
- 2) Oxford and Cambridge Universities are not accredited. The fact is that the two universities have no Royal Charter of their own, but their colleges do. In the UK, the universities are accredited through the granting of a Royal Charter or by a special act of Parliament. In that sense, Oxford and Cambridge may each be considered as a collection of colleges which are accredited.

#### **WHAT ARE EVALUATED IN ACCREDITATION.**

In May 1994, the US Department of Education [3] issued guidelines for accrediting agencies to evaluate 12 matters:

- 1) Curricula
- 2) Faculty
- 3) Facilities, equipment, and supplies
- 4) Fiscal and administrative capacity
- 5) Student support services

- 6) Program length, tuition, and fees in relation to academic objectives
- 7) Program length, tuition, and fees in relation to credit received
- 8) Student achievement (job placement, state licensing exams, etc.)
- 9) Student loan repayments
- 10) Student complaints received by or available to the accreditor
- 11) Compliance with student aid rules and regulations
- 12) Everything else, including recruiting, admissions practices, calendars, catalogues and other publications, grading practices, advertising and publicity, and so on.

### **PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO ASEAN ELEARNING ACCREDITATION**

It is generally agreed that it would be beneficial to all concerned for ASEAN to adapt some form of cross-accreditation for eLearning.

The first option is very simple, i.e. for all ASEAN governments to recognize eLearning degree programs accredited by any ASEAN government.

The second option is for ASEAN to set up an eASEAN Commission for Accreditation (eACA) of eLearning programs. The commission may have 3 representatives from each government and rotating chairmanship. The commission should start by examining the US guidelines and best practices to come up with its own standards.

The Generally Accepted Accrediting Principles (GAAP) used in the US may be adapted, and perhaps, called “ASEAN GAAP”. Negotiation should be made with the publications listing accredited schools to include ASEAN GAAP accredited schools in these publications such as:

- 1) International Handbook of Universities (UNESCO Publication).
- 2) Commonwealth Universities Year book

The steps for accreditation may be:

- 1) A university in ASEAN offering eLearning programs may apply to eACA.
- 2) EACA makes preliminary investigation, taking a few months. If satisfied that the university is operating legally and legitimately, eACA may grant it “correspondent status” meaning that the application is accepted for further processing.
- 3) A team is set up by eACA, composing of faculty of already accredited universities and visit the university to investigate.
  - Legal and academic structure
  - Educational philosophy
  - Curriculum
  - Financial statement
  - Planning
  - Any other related matters
- 4) If the university has been operating for a period of time and meets the standards, eACA may grant it the status of “Candidate for accreditation”.
- 5) The candidate is observed for a period, say a few month to a few years. If satisfactory, it is “accredited” or “fully accredited” which are the same.
- 6) Once a university is accredited, it is visited by inspection teams from eACA every 5 or 10 years to see if it is still worthy of accreditation.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Cross-accreditation of eLearning degree programs in ASEAN is a problem and should be solved for the benefits of all concerned. This paper presented the background of accreditation, the examples from the US, and propose two methods to solve the problem. The first method is by agreeing that any eLearning program accredited by any ASEAN government is automatically accredited by all other ASEAN governments.

The second method is to set up eASEAN Commission for Accreditation (eACA) to serve as the accrediting agency. EACA may have 3 members from each ASEAN country and examine the US guideline to come up with its own standards for accreditation.

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