

Accredited versus Unaccredited: How Does One Decide?

LORD BROUGHAM: *Pray, Mr. Bickersteth, what is to prevent London University from awarding degrees now?*

MR. BICKERSTETH: *The universal scorn and contempt of mankind.*

1834 CONVERSATION, REPORTED IN THE GRENVILLE DIARIES

There are hundreds of colleges and universities in the world that do not have recognized accreditation. They range from totally fraudulent degree mills run by ex-convicts who sell worthless degrees to anyone willing to pay to major new academic endeavors, well-funded and run by experienced educators of good reputation, and extremely likely to become properly accredited before too long.

In almost every instance, the unaccredited schools cost less, and offer a faster path to a degree, often with more flexibility. It is a tempting consideration, and a common dilemma for many people in search of a school. As a result, it is probably the most common question we get: “*Should I pursue an unaccredited degree?*” Since we cannot know each questioner’s situation and needs, we typically reply by saying, “*If you are absolutely confident that an unaccredited degree will meet your current and your predictable future needs, then it might well be appropriate to pursue such a degree.*”

Note: for the purpose of the following discussion, we include schools with accreditation claimed from an unrecognized accreditor as equivalent to unaccredited, for that is how such schools are almost certain to be treated by evaluators and decision makers.

There is no simple answer

There truly is no simple answer to the accredited vs. unaccredited issue, other than to say that one can rarely go wrong with a properly accredited degree. We hear from a moderate number of people who have made good use of an unaccredited (but totally legitimate) degree, but we hear from many more who have had significant problems with such degrees. In terms of acceptance by employers, admission to other schools, or simply bad publicity.

Acceptance of unaccredited degrees

Acceptance is very low in the academic world and the government world, somewhat higher in the business world.

One large and decent unaccredited school, in operation for a quarter century can only point to a dozen instances in which their degrees were accepted by other schools, most of those on a case by case basis. Some companies have no clear policy with regard to accreditation, and indeed may not even understand the concept, as was the case with the head of human resources for one of the ten largest companies on the planet, who got a copy of this book and then told us of her astonishment at learning that there were unaccredited schools and fake accrediting agencies.

Who can benefit from unaccredited degrees

The largest group are those people who really don’t need a degree, but they want one, either for self satisfaction (“validating my life’s work” is a phrase we hear often), or to give themselves a marketing edge. One large subset of satisfied unaccredited degree-users, for instance, are therapists, who typically need only a Master’s degree for their state license. But they feel that if they have a Ph.D., and use that title in their advertising, yellow pages, etc., they will have an edge over competitors without the doctorate. The same is the case with owners or executives of small businesses. A real estate agent with an MBA or a business planner with a doctorate in finance, may get more clients because of the higher degree, and indeed may have additional useful knowledge.