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## Voluntary Accreditation and Quality Education

JAMES A. O'DONNELL, S.J.

Voluntary accreditation in the Philippines has received a good deal of publicity in the past five years. This article will attempt to point out why it should receive increasing attention from educators because of its proven performance as an excellent means to promote quality education. But first a bit of recent history.

Five years ago the phrase "voluntary accreditation" raised a few eyebrows when the Philippine Education Act of 1982 said:

. . . The Ministry (of Education, Culture & Sports) shall encourage programs of *voluntary accreditation* for institutions which desire to meet standards of quality over and above the minimum required for State recognition.<sup>1</sup>

Three years ago, Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECS) Order 36 entitled: "Utilizing Voluntary Accreditation for Deregulation Purposes" indicated that the Ministry of Education would utilize voluntary accreditation ". . . in aid of the exercise of its regulatory function."<sup>2</sup> MECS apparently recognized that the process of accreditation was a fair and equitable means to deregulate curricula and to decide which schools were deserving of government aid when divided according to certain levels of development.

Most recently, voluntary accreditation appeared in the first draft of the article on Education in the new *Constitution*. Al-

1. Batas Pambansa Blg. 232, 1982. "An Act Providing for the Establishment and Maintenance of an Integrated System of Education". III, 3, Sec. 29; see also *Rules and Regulations for the Implementation of Batas Pambansa Blg. 232* MECS, Sept. 1983 p. 24 and following.

2. Ministri ng Edukasyon, Kultura at Isports, Maynila: MECS Order No. 36, s. 1984.

though the section was later rewritten and the word "accreditation" deleted by Dr. Villacorta's drafting committee, this was not due to any disfavor on the part of the Con-Com commissioners but only because the first draft said "the *legislature* shall provide the . . . criteria for accreditation." The commissioners were afraid that the important work of voluntary accreditation might become politicized.<sup>3</sup> In any case, at the suggestion of Fr. Bernas, the notion of "quality education"—which is at the heart of voluntary accreditation—was incorporated into the very first section on Education in the *Constitution*.<sup>4</sup>

An additional reason and occasion for educators to attend to voluntary accreditation is the fact that the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities or PAASCU, which is the oldest and has the largest membership of the accrediting agencies, celebrates its thirtieth anniversary in 1987. In a way the history of PAASCU and the history of voluntary accreditation in the Philippines are one.

#### PHILIPPINE ACCREDITING ASSOCIATION AND PAASCU

When educators are asked to unravel the acronym PAASCU, it is not unusual for them to say *Private* Accrediting Association instead of Philippine Accrediting Association. This slip of the tongue is not far off the mark since most of the present members of PAASCU are in the private sector. But in the 1950s when the voluntary accreditation movement was in its infancy, representatives from both the private and the public sectors were discussing the need for better accreditation.

Why "better" accreditation? Because accreditation in the sense of certification or government recognition had been practised by the Bureaus of Public and Private Education (now united in the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports) for years.<sup>5</sup> Back in

3. Wilfrido V. Villacorta's remarks at the Ateneo de Manila University's "Symposium on the new Philippine Constitution" 6 November 1986.

4. *Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines*, 1986. Article XIV (Education, Science & Technology, Language, Culture, and Sports), Sec. 1 "The State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels. . ." Cf. also the Journal of the Constitutional Commission No. 72 Tuesday 2 Sept. 1986 p. 25," Mr. (sic) Bernas argued for the retention of the word quality to emphasize that the state should take an active part in improving substandard schools."

5. Daniel M. Salcedo, "The Needs of Accreditation" in *U.E. Landmark* (Manila: U.E. Press, 1951) pp. 81-82.

1951 Dr. Daniel Salcedo, then Assistant Director of the Bureau of Private Schools, said that the government could not afford "better" accreditation. To maintain an adequate force of competent supervisors was too expensive. He added that "the stupendous task of maintaining desirable standards in private schools cannot be and SHOULD NOT BE the job of the government alone."<sup>6</sup> What was the solution? The private schools would accredit themselves through a system of *voluntary accreditation*.

In a series of meetings held during the year 1951, the idea of voluntary accreditation was given fuller shape and substance in the guise of an organization called the *Philippine Accrediting Association* (PAA). The *ad interim* Executive Board of the PAA was composed of Dr. Prudencio Langcauon (University of the East), President, Fr. James J. Meany, S.J. (Ateneo de Manila), Vice-President; and Dr. Antonio Isidro (University of the Philippines), Secretary. The PAA was already well on the way to the accreditation of pilot schools, when a series of misunderstandings, too numerous to catalog here, derailed the whole movement.<sup>7</sup>

Although Dr. Salcedo had originally suggested that the schools should take the lead and assist the Bureau in the work of regulation and supervision—lest there be "a police state type of supervision,"<sup>8</sup> other Bureau officials felt that the initiative for accreditation should emanate from the government rather than the schools themselves. As a result the *ad interim* Board of the Philippine Accrediting Association became moribund.

It was the Catholic Education Association of the Philippines (CEAP) that revived the voluntary accreditation movement when in 1953-54 it secured permission from the Philippine Accrediting Association Board to use the criteria already developed by the PAA. After field-testing these criteria in certain Manila Catholic colleges, the CEAP drew up a *Manual of Accrediting* with self-survey forms in eight areas : 1) Purposes and Objectives; 2) Faculty; 3) Instruction; 4) Library; 5) Laboratories; 6) Physical Plant; 7) Student Services, and 8) Administration.<sup>9</sup> By November 1957 ele-

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88

7. James J. Meany, S.J. "Accreditation of Private Schools" *Philippine Studies* 3: 237-258 (Sept. 1955): 237-58.

8. Daniel M. Salcedo, "The Needs of Accreditation," p. 88.

9. In 1979 a ninth area called "School and Community Involvement" was added to the original eight areas. Otherwise, the survey areas and many of the questions remain unchanged.

ven CEAP colleges had undergone institutional self-survey and been visited by an accreditation team. These became the charter members of a permanent accrediting association.

But lest voluntary accreditation be perceived as restricted to Catholic and/or private schools or be, in any way, accountable to the CEAP organization, these charter members wisely decided to establish a separately incorporated organization called the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities. PAASCU was born.

#### PAASCU AND VOLUNTARY ACCREDITATION

Although the charter institutions of 1957 were all colleges, PAASCU began the accreditation of Secondary Schools in 1965 and the accreditation of Elementary Schools in 1971.

It is impossible to sum up in a few sentences the work of PAASCU during the past three decades. But the ideal of voluntary accreditation has not grown any dimmer nor any less worthy of attainment. For PAASCU voluntary accreditation means the process whereby a school which desires to go beyond the minimum standards required by MECS, assesses its goals and organization, its strengths and weaknesses by means of a *self-survey*. It then voluntarily submits itself to evaluation by the accreditation agency. After passing through successive stages of Preliminary Survey, Formal Survey and Re-Accreditation Survey—which correspond to Levels I, II and III in MECS Order 36,<sup>10</sup>—the school can say that it has achieved the level of excellence and standard of quality that voluntary accreditation intends to foster.

PAASCU '86	Elementary	Secondary	Collegiate	TOTAL
ACCREDITED	53	59	54	166
Applicant	19	31	29	79
Candidate	16	16	20	52

As PAASCU enters its thirtieth year of service, the total membership on all levels is 166 schools. There are fifty-three Elementary schools accredited, fifty-nine Secondary schools accredited, and some fifty-four Colleges accredited (representing 148 different

10. MECS Order No. 36 s.1984, pp. 2-4.

programs) in the Liberal Arts, Education, Commerce, Engineering, Nursing, Agriculture, Social Work, and/or Legal Education. Most recently, a survey form for accreditation of Graduate Schools was devised. And one should note that in addition to the accredited schools, there are seventy-nine Applicant and fifty-two Candidate schools in various stages of the preaccreditation process. From amongst these schools will come PAASCU's new members over the next few years.

Who does the actual accrediting? While there is a small but dedicated office staff working under an Executive Secretary, the actual work of visiting and accrediting is done by more than 700 trained accreditors drawn from all three levels. Their transportation, board and lodging are paid by the accrediting agency but otherwise they serve *gratis et amore*. Many would say that this spirit of generosity is the greatest asset of PAASCU and the ultimate reason for its success.<sup>11</sup>

Nor is PAASCU simply caught up in a numbers game. While the perception of some in non-accredited schools is that the work of PAASCU is an exercise in "elitism," the past thirty years of self-surveys, team visits and reports indicate that the voluntary accreditation movement has been successful in stimulating the efforts of institutions to improve the standards of education at the elementary, the secondary and the collegiate level, in all sectors of the country both urban and rural from Laoag to Jolo.

#### OTHER ACCREDITING AGENCIES

If imitation be the sincerest form of flattery, PAASCU should feel flattered. In 1972 the Association of Christian Schools and Colleges formed its own accrediting association (ACSC-AA) even though some members began as and continue to be members of PAASCU. Like PAASCU, ACSC-AA accredits programs at the collegiate, secondary and elementary levels. A third agency is the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities—Commission on Accreditation (PACU-COA). Founded in 1973, PACU-COA presently accredits only collegiate programs. Recently, there have

11. James J. Meany, S.J. "Learning from PAASCU's First Twenty Five Years" unpublished speech delivered 30, Jan. 1982.

been efforts made to standardize accreditation in technical and medical education, too.

### FEDERATION OF ACCREDITING AGENCIES

The growth in numbers of voluntary accreditation agencies encouraged the Fund for Assistance to Private Education (FAPE) to suggest that PAASCU together with ACSC-AA and PACU-COA form one federation to discuss accreditation matters. This led to the formation in 1977 of the Federation of Accrediting Agencies of the Philippines (FAAP).

Two years ago MECS Order 36 sought to take FAAP one step further and make it the one "single national (super) accrediting body." Since this move would have destroyed the autonomy of the three constituent agencies, it was vigorously opposed and the proposal was eventually scrapped. Instead, FAAP does not itself accredit institutions. Rather it acts as an umbrella organization that certifies to the Ministry those schools recommended by the three national accrediting agencies: PAASCU, ACSC-AA and PACU-COA. It also presents to the agencies for discussion various government proposals, policies, programs, standards and procedures affecting accreditation. The Board of FAAP is composed of two representatives from each of the three accrediting agencies plus one from FAPE. The President of the FAAP Board is elected from one of the three agencies on a rotation basis.<sup>1 2</sup>

### WHY SHOULD SCHOOLS SEEK ACCREDITATION?

School administrations frequently ask: "Why should my school be accredited?" And the best answer — lofty though it may sound — is that "quality education is its own reward."

It is the common experience of schools that have undergone a self-survey and made preparations for a visit by an accreditation team that much more than prestige is boosted. To get a significant number of the faculty working together on a common academic enterprise begins by making individuals articulate the goals of the school and ends by having the faculty as a group share a sense of

12. Fund for Assistance to Private Education, "A Six-Year Retrospective Report" Nov. 1986, pp. 12-13.

direction based on a clearer self-image. Often the faculty takes a more active ownership of the mission of the school and is prepared to plan for the future based upon a common understanding of academic, rather than utilitarian, imperatives. That is no small achievement.

Moreover, because the 200 or more schools accredited by PAASCU, ACSC-AA and PACU-COA have, by means of voluntary accreditation, improved in quality, they have tended like "leaven in the loaf" (Luke 13:21) to improve the quality of education in the entire region or province where they are located. One example of this "leavening" effect is the Cagayan de Oro-Misamis Oriental area of Region X in Northern Mindanao.

Xavier University, a Jesuit school and the first institution to achieve university status in Mindanao, had its colleges of Liberal Arts and Education formally accredited by PAASCU in 1968. The XU High School Department was accredited in 1977; Xavier's College of Commerce was accredited in 1980. Meanwhile, Lourdes College, also located in Cagayan de Oro but under the direction of the Religious of the Virgin Mary (RVM) Sisters, had its Liberal Arts and Education accredited by PAASCU in 1979. Later the same year the Lourdes College High School and Elementary School were accredited. In the year 1982 Our Lady of Lourdes High School (Del Monte, Bukidnon), which is run by the Sisters of Mercy and offers evening extension classes for Xavier University, had its secondary department accredited by PAASCU. The next year, 1983, Christ the King High School (Gingoog City)—another RVM institution in Misamis Oriental—was accredited by PAASCU. Other schools in Region X which have ties with Xavier University and are accredited by or on candidate status with PAASCU are St. Nicholas College of Surigao, Urios College of Butuan City and St. Michael's College of Iligan City. This is one concrete example of how the accreditation of one "flagship" institution in Region X has led to the accreditation of and improved the quality of several schools in the area.

Over the years, the MECS has recognized this "leavening" influence of voluntary accreditation and has granted certain privileges based on accreditation. Thus, accredited schools may waive special orders and may graduate students without prior approval. They need not apply for permission to operate summer sessions. They enjoy autonomy from local supervision by the MECS. The



exchange of students and faculty is facilitated and parents are guided in the choice of worthy schools for their children. Finally, as intimated by MECS Order 36 (1984), accredited schools are in line to receive financial assistance from the government and other agencies with which FAAP is affiliated.

What is the future of the voluntary accreditation movement? It looks extremely bright. For one thing, Dr. Lourdes R. Quisumbing, the present Minister of Education, was President of PAASCU at the time of her appointment to MECS and has been associated with accreditation for many years. She has encouraged not only private schools but also the public, government-supported tertiary level institutions to approach FAAP and actively pursue accreditation.<sup>13</sup> It may well be that the Philippine Association of State Universities and Colleges (PASUC) will endeavor to form its own accrediting body.

If PASUC can mount a campaign for accreditation in the public sector and unite within the federation (FAAP) with the three agencies representing the private sector, then the MECS will have taken a significant step toward the new Constitution's goal "to establish, maintain and support. . . (an) integrated system of (quality) education."<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, if the entire "integrated system" is caught up in the voluntary accreditation movement, with more and more schools weighing and eventually deciding to opt for accreditation, then not only the quality of individual regions (e.g., the Northern Mindanao example above) but the quality of education in the entire nation will improve. Further, as individual schools are freed from MECS supervision they may become more innovative in the use of institutional arrangements, of educational technology and of curricular content.<sup>15</sup> Why? To prove to themselves and to their constituents that they are offering students quality education and are thus contributing to national development in a meaningful way.

13. Lourdes R. Quisumbing in "Proceedings of the Sixth Conference on Voluntary Accreditation" (Manila: FAAP, 4 April 1986) pp. 114-20.

14. *Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines*, 1986. Article XIV, SEC. 2., 1.

15. James A. O'Donnell, S.J. "Innovative Practices in Private Secondary Schools," *Curriculum Journal* VI:1 (June, 1975).