

# A Comparison of Internal Tertiary Education Programs Offered by Private Colleges with University Affiliated External Tertiary Programs

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**Abstract.** There is a general consensus amongst educational researchers that internal programs in tertiary education offer lower quality than external tertiary programs which are affiliated to well-established universities. Many factors have influenced this view and thereby it has been reinforced and become widely accepted. This paper examines the practices of private colleges running their own internal Diploma and Advanced Diploma programs and compares them with similar practices of colleges that run external Diploma and Advanced Diploma programs under the auspices of reputable, highly rated UK universities.

**Keywords:** tertiary education, quality, external examiners, moderation.

## 1. Introduction

The tertiary education sector worldwide can offer students a wide range of disciplines, often as a result of the numerous programs provided by various reputed universities to private or affiliated colleges. Now that this form of higher education is ubiquitous, prospective employers are bound to question the quality of the degrees obtained by graduates from private colleges. There is a higher chance of being rejected for a job if you are a graduate who holds a degree from a private college which runs its own internal programs. This obstacle to employment exists despite the programs being recognized by national quality assessment boards. Even though there are private colleges that provide quality education, there are a few factors that have contributed strongly to the belief that programs devised and run internally by private colleges do not meet the same quality standards as the programs that are offered by reputed universities. These factors are examined in detail in this paper. There are a number of colleges in Singapore that are well known for the standard and quality of the courses they offer. The courses may be programs provided and monitored by foreign universities of acknowledged standard and frequently these courses are also known to be offered by several other colleges around the world. Often, these courses are offered by universities that are highly placed in recognised international university rankings, as commented on by Focus Singapore (Focus Singapore n.d). Alternative courses commonly offered by these colleges are their internal diplomas and advanced diplomas. These courses are usually self-designed and articulated by the colleges themselves. The group of academics responsible for the design and delivery of these programs sensibly base the syllabi on market and industry standard requirements allied to the expectations of academia that are enshrined in national quality standards. Many highly regarded colleges like the Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS), the PSB Academy, EASB, Auston Institute of Singapore, the TMC Academy, Kaplan and BMC offer a wide range of foreign university degrees in management, business and engineering disciplines. A few of these colleges also offer internal diploma and advanced diploma courses, which are in turn feeder programs for the individual foreign university degrees that the various institutes deliver.

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## **2. Factors that Contribute to the Perception of Programs Provided to Private or Affiliated Colleges**

The factors that are considered to most significantly sway society's perception of programs offered by private colleges are discussed here. Undoubtedly, these perceptions can have a marked influence on the success of the programs and can ultimately detrimentally affect financial viability.

### **2.1. Recruitment of students whose grades do not qualify for entry at tertiary education level**

In order to sustain their competitive advantage, private colleges operating today are inclined to set targets for profit as a priority over a requirement for the delivery of quality education. For instance, Singapore, which is a hub for education for many Asian countries, attracts a huge student population for the tertiary education sector. Often, students prefer to join a private college to complete their Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels before moving on to universities in the UK, Australia or the US. This provides a method of reducing the cost to them of the first two levels of a full Bachelor program. It is beyond dispute that admission to private colleges for students, many of them who have scored relatively badly in their high school examinations, is easily obtained. This occurs due to the obvious reason that Universities do not accept students with this level of attainment. This actually acts as a selling point for the private colleges, allowing them to recruit these students and thereby increasing revenue. The compromise on quality that is made at this point has repercussions for all aspects of the teaching programs, leading to a diminution in academic quality whilst forcing those responsible for curriculum development to bring down their standards and lower academic expectations. It must be questioned if this short-term strategy can safeguard an institutions future or is remotely justifiable in terms of the graduates produced or the consequences for the labour market. Toh, M.-H, in his paper entitled "*Internationalization of Tertiary Education Services in Singapore*", ( 2012) puts forward the view that the rapid growth of the private education sector has led to an uneven quality of education provision in Singapore. This uneven quality in turn negatively affects the quality of the delivery of education to the point that lower standards become accepted as the norm.

### **2.2. Graduating students achieving unrealistically high grades in almost all subjects**

It is common for students of many private colleges to easily obtain grades in the higher marks range. This can be attributed to two major causes: i) the assessments that are set are not of the requisite difficulty and ii) assignments and examinations are not subjected to a moderation process. Even when these two causes are absent, the overall standards accepted for these programs are considerably below those demanded in universities. This situation is perpetuated because of the necessity to maintain and increase pass rates. When it occurs, moderation of an assignment set by a lecturer is carried out by another lecturer who belongs to the same department and is subject to the same working pressures. No external moderator is involved. Hence, unless the lecturer and moderator comply with the need for a qualitative assessment for evaluation purposes, the grades are unlikely to be realistic and in fact will not be contained in the bell curve that is usually produced when work is pitched at the appropriate level for a student cohort.

All UK universities are audited by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) which is the independent agency in Britain for higher education institutes that ensures rigorous standards and quality are established and maintained in the delivery of tertiary programs. The Quality code sets out expectations that higher education institutes have to meet. External moderation processes are detailed to the extent, that moderators ensure that the assessment is of a standard, that high distinction grades will not be awarded to an unrealistic number of students. The assignments and examination scripts are moderated prior to them being given to students. Also, the work submitted by students for marking is moderated by external moderators after initial (and possibly second) marking. The purpose in moderating the assignments and questions that are set is to determine their validity and whether they are at the appropriate level relative to the standard which the student needs to attain. When the assessment questions are considered to be either too simple or too difficult, changes are requested from the lecturer who originally set the assignment or examination paper. To a large extent, this process ensures assessments that will test students fairly and at the appropriate standard. Following the setting of an assignment or examination, it is normally scrutinized by an internal moderator, before being sent to the external examiner for comments. Scripts completed and submitted by students are

blind marked by module lecturers and as stated, second or even third marked internally prior to them being moderated by an external examiner. This process is manifestly robust and tends to verify that an acceptable distribution of marks consistent with a bell curve outcome results. Consequently, the grades are distributed such that lesser numbers of High Distinctions and Distinctions, possibly fewer Credits and hopefully many Pass grades are in evidence. Also, there is an expectation that there will be fewer students obtaining Fail grades. This situation alleviates pressure on examination boards to arbitrarily adjust marks. Professor Miller S.A., advances a crucial and perceptive point, questioning whether educators give grades or assign them? In his article, he also demonstrates the normal distribution obtained for 422 students in an example of good practice (Miller, S.A. 2009) and this clarifies the concept of grading on the curve. Further grade inflation and its detrimental consequences are also discussed by Miller and a number of other academics (NUS Provost 2012).

Though the Private Education Institute's (PEIs) regulating body in Singapore, (the Council for Private Education (CPE)) oversees and ensures the quality of all colleges in Singapore, a process as robust and rigorous as this moderation process is not in place or considered mandatory for colleges to comply with. Points can be awarded in the CPE audits without these or similarly effective quality measures being in place.

### **2.3. The evaluation comprises only coursework assessments rather than also including examinations**

In keeping with most international universities, the assessment of student learning outcomes is usually comprised of at least two components – one may be an examination and another an assignment. However, it is not mandatory to have such an assessment pattern. This is convenient for many private colleges, who set their own modes of assessment ranging from one to three components of assessments, including examinations or class tests, or worryingly, all of the assessment in the form of 'take home' assignments.

When students are only required to do such assignments, it is unsurprisingly difficult to obtain results strictly falling within the bell curve. 'Take home' assignments give room for answers that are similar between students since collusion is inevitable. Also, reports may be plagiarized from answers taken from the internet where the information sources are numerous, varied and mostly available for free. Students who are not critical thinkers tend to resort to copying information from the internet and pasting or virtually pasting them into their scripts. In doing so, most of them will violate copyright. A number of private colleges that run internal programs still lack the software or any other system that can identify plagiarism. It is left to the ability of the marker to identify the authenticity of written reports.

For academic programs that employ the moderation processes that are used in the UK universities; where the external examiner moderates enough papers representing a range of scripts that have been chosen through a fair and justifiable process, the moderator is enabled to make sound judgments in regard of the marking. This provides the capability of checking if markers have been consistent in awarding marks. The external examiner can determine if there is a proper justification for the award of marks. In this situation, the tendency for the marks of the entire cohort to comply with a bell curve is high. The adherence to a bell curve is proven to offer a system that best governs the awarding of marks in a fair way, where it is usual for the cohort to have fewer distinctions and credits, many marks tending to the average and fewer that are categorized as poor.

Figure 1 depicts the outcome of an Advanced Diploma module that was evaluated from assessments only (100% coursework). The module was a quantitative paper and two of the assessments set were 'take-home' assignments. Being a quantitative paper, it is likely that the lecturer was particularly proactive with the students while setting the coursework. However, in terms of the credibility of the module, the damage had largely been done. The results for a cohort of 33 students identified fifteen High Distinction grades. This situation was not tenable and the pre examination board appointed a moderator to scale down the marks through second marking where stringent marking was applied. Figure 2 shows the outcome of second marking of all of the scripts and represents an attempt to be fair to the entire cohort. Obviously, the prospect of obtaining fairness for all the students (and students on similar courses) was already lost and even after adjustment, marks were far too high. In this specific case, the lecturer had clearly shown an irresponsible

attitude and it was inevitably identified at a later stage. If the assessment questions were initially moderated in detail the final outcome would not have been a considerable improvement.

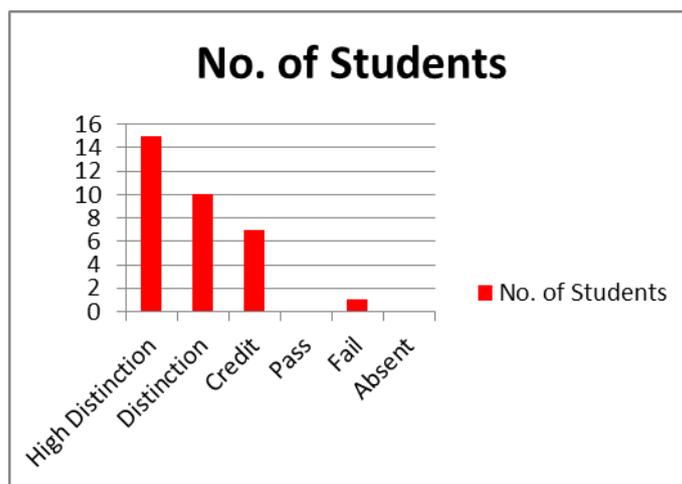


Fig. 1: Distribution of grades skewed towards the right as a result of using only assessments for evaluation. (This is an outcome that occurred in an Advanced Diploma level module in a private tertiary college, but the anonymity of the college has been respected.)

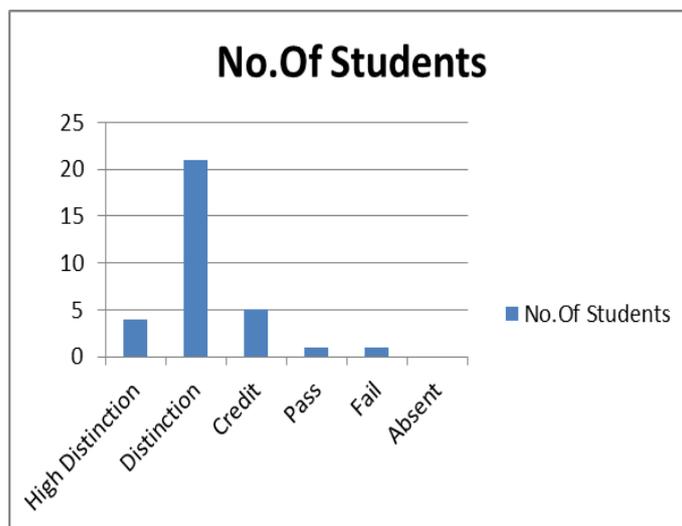


Fig. 2: Distribution of grades, after moderation of scripts to obtain grades consistent with a bell curve. (This is an outcome that occurred in an Advanced Diploma level module in a private tertiary college, but the anonymity of the college has been respected.)

In the process of external moderation, as practiced by all the universities under the guidelines of the QAA, the external examiners also verify whether the assessment questions are pitched at the right level as per Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, B.1946). This process of verification helps to differentiate students who are critical thinkers (and hence are capable of critical arguments) from those whose answers are seen to be superficial and lack in-depth analysis. Regrettably, it is not normal for external examiners to be appointed by private colleges for cost reasons.

#### **2.4. Curriculum Design is not evaluated or validated by external universities or any other external body**

In many private colleges, the internal program's modules and the discipline contents are decided and prepared by the academic departments that offer the program. To a great extent, the content of the modules are designed to meet industry's current trends and requirements. However, there is a major weakness here. The completed design is not validated by any external body or university. The CPE in Singapore gives approval to run a course, for which it requires information from the provider. However, the CPE only

requires the name of the validator of the course, *if applicable*, as is stated on the CPE website, under the section ‘*Seeking permission to Offer Courses (CPE)*’ (2013). For instance, the Advanced Diploma of Management in a well-known private college in Singapore offers the Australian training framework units of competency as they are offered on the training.gov.au website (Australian Government Training). Though the module content has been developed based on the descriptor of the module, the responsibility for teaching the units of competency in line with the learning objectives are in the hands of the module lecturer. Hence, there is no guarantee that the standards required in the Australian training framework is complied with. Similarly, the assessment methods for the module are also developed by the lecturer and thereafter they are internally moderated. However, the assessment plan is not seen by any Australian university or college, so no external moderation takes place. Again, the likelihood of delivering the course at the required standard is greatly compromised.

### 3. Conclusion

The need for establishing and upholding quality in tertiary level education is paramount no matter where it is being offered. However, the difference in education systems that originate from different countries has given rise to differences in priorities and standards. For provision of quality education, focus must be on a national policy with a rigid and robust quality procedure. When such policies are applied by private colleges, ultimately the quality of the course and the reputation that is engendered will become a selling point. Lecturers must be responsible for ensuring that students acquire measurable learning outcomes in the disciplines they are studying, rather than them merely assembling marks for students through evaluations that are not credible. A solid criteria based assessment is the key to qualitative programs and reliable outcomes for students and prospective employers. QAA must be in place, second marking of student’s scripts and if necessary even third marking must be universally introduced. These measures are major requirements to establish and deliver quality education. As stated by Toh, M.-H., Singapore is considered to be the Global Schoolhouse (Toh, M.-H. 2012, p.8). However, to sustain this brand and position, a pivotal role has to be played by private education providers at the tertiary level, where it must be ensured that delivering quality remains the central objective of the provider.

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