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## Preserving the honor of the *Honoris Causa*: Revisiting the guidelines on the conferment of honorary degrees

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### Abstract

**Aim.** This study examined the ethical, academic, and policy foundations of the conferment of honorary degrees (*Honoris Causa*), with particular attention to the proliferation of unregulated and fee-based conferments by non-recognized organizations. Anchored on higher education ethics and Philippine regulatory frameworks—especially policies of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED)—the study sought to educate academic stakeholders and caution institutions and individuals against practices that undermine the dignity, credibility, and integrity of honorary academic distinctions.

**Methodology.** The study employed a qualitative policy–ethical analysis design. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with twelve purposively selected participants composed of higher education administrators, graduate school faculty members, research ethics experts, and accreditation practitioners. Documentary analysis of CHED memorandum orders, public advisories, institutional guidelines, and international academic standards supplemented the interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic coding, policy alignment mapping, and ethical synthesis.

**Results.** Findings revealed strong consensus that honorary degrees are morally and academically legitimate only when conferred as gratuitous recognitions of extraordinary merit, service, or contribution to society by CHED-recognized higher education institutions with prior regulatory approval. Participants uniformly rejected conferments involving payment, transactional arrangements, or misrepresentation as ethically defective and academically invalid. Recent CHED public advisories on unauthorized awarding of honorary doctorates were cited as critical regulatory clarifications reinforcing these conclusions. Circumstances such as commercialization, lack of institutional authority, and misleading public use of titles were found to gravely damage public trust in higher education.

**Conclusion.** Honorary degrees retain dignity and legitimacy only when aligned with CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 09, Series of 2021, academic ethics, and the foundational principle of honor without compensation. Safeguarding the *Honoris Causa* requires institutional discipline, regulatory vigilance, and sustained education of academic communities and the public.

**Keywords:** honorary degree, *Honoris Causa*, academic ethics, CHED policy, higher education integrity

### INTRODUCTION

Honorary degrees, traditionally designated as *Honoris Causa*, have long been regarded as among the highest symbolic recognitions conferred by academic institutions upon individuals who have rendered extraordinary and exemplary contributions to society, the nation, or a specific field of human endeavor (Mudzakkir et al., 2021). Rooted in medieval European university traditions, the *Honoris Causa* emerged as a mechanism through which universities publicly affirm values they uphold—intellectual excellence, moral leadership, public service, and transformative social impact—without requiring formal academic enrollment or completion of curricular requirements. Globally, reputable universities reserve this distinction for individuals whose lives and works embody the ideals of scholarship, integrity, and service, and whose achievements extend beyond personal success toward the common good (Leraczyk, 2022).



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In contemporary higher education systems, honorary degrees function not merely as ceremonial accolades but as moral and institutional statements. The conferment reflects an institution's identity, values, and credibility, signaling to the academic community and the public the standards of excellence it seeks to promote. Internationally recognized universities therefore observe strict internal policies, rigorous vetting processes, and collegial approval mechanisms to ensure that honorary degrees are conferred only upon individuals whose contributions withstand ethical, professional, and public scrutiny. Central to this tradition is the understanding that honorary degrees are gratuitous recognitions—bestowed without financial consideration, academic credit, or equivalence to earned degrees (Resane, 2024; Heffernan & Jöns, 2007).

Within the Philippine higher education context, the conferment of honorary degrees is explicitly governed by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), the constitutionally mandated agency tasked with regulating and safeguarding the quality and integrity of higher education institutions. CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 09, Series of 2021, entitled *Revised Policies and Guidelines on the Conferment of Honorary Doctorate Degrees by Higher Education Institutions in the Philippines*, clearly stipulates that only CHED-recognized higher education institutions (HEIs) meeting specific criteria may confer honorary doctorate degrees, and only after securing prior approval from the CHED Commission *en banc*. The policy further clarifies that honorary degrees are purely honorific distinctions and must not be treated as academic credentials earned through coursework, research, residency, or payment.

Despite the clarity of these regulatory safeguards, recent years have witnessed the emergence of organizations and entities—some unrecognized by CHED and others operating outside legitimate higher education authority—that confer honorary degrees in exchange for fees, donations, sponsorships, or mandatory participation costs. These conferments are often accompanied by academic regalia, ceremonial trappings, and public announcements that closely resemble legitimate university practices, thereby blurring the distinction between honor and transaction, recognition and commodification.

This concern was formally addressed by CHED in a public advisory dated 18 October 2024, wherein the Commission urged the public to exercise caution and to verify the recognition status of institutions before accepting honorary degrees. The advisory specifically warned against the unauthorized awarding of honorary doctorate degrees by entities not recognized as higher education institutions and emphasized that such conferments are not recognized by CHED. The advisory reiterated that only CHED-recognized HEIs are authorized to award honorary doctorates and that degrees issued by non-recognized entities have no academic or regulatory standing.

The CHED advisory further underscored the intent of CMO No. 09, Series of 2021, which establishes safeguards to protect the credibility and appropriate use of *honoris causa* degrees. These safeguards include minimum qualifications for nominees, restrictions on eligible nominees and nominators, limits on the number of honorary degrees that may be conferred annually, mandatory prior approval procedures, and explicit rules on the proper use of honorary titles, including the notation "(Hon.)" when affixed to a recipient's name. The issuance of such a public warning highlights the growing urgency of addressing unethical and misleading honorary degree practices that threaten public trust in higher education.

Scholarly literature on diploma mills, fraudulent credentials, and credential inflation has long documented how unregulated credentialing practices erode academic standards and mislead the public (Eaton & Carmichael, 2023; Freeman et al., 2020). However, comparatively limited scholarly attention has been devoted to honorary degrees as a distinct ethical and policy issue, particularly within the Philippine regulatory environment. The *Honoris Causa* occupies a unique and vulnerable space in higher education: it is neither an earned academic degree nor a purely symbolic award devoid of institutional authority. This liminal status renders it especially susceptible to misuse, misinterpretation, and exploitation.

The urgency of examining this issue is heightened by contemporary academic and professional realities. Graduate educators, accreditation practitioners, and research leaders increasingly encounter individuals who publicly use honorary titles as formal academic credentials in academic publishing, institutional leadership, consultancy, and professional representation. Such practices raise serious ethical concerns regarding academic honesty, institutional accountability, and respect for regulatory authority. For educators and research organizations committed to ethical



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scholarship and policy compliance, silence on this issue risks tacitly legitimizing practices that contradict both regulation and principle.

This study responds to this gap by revisiting the ethical, academic, and regulatory foundations of the *Honoris Causa*. Anchored on higher education ethics, CHED policies—including recent public advisories—and expert perspectives from academia and research governance, the study sought to clarify the essential conditions that preserve, or erode, the honor, dignity, and legitimacy of honorary degrees. Beyond critique, the study is intentionally educative and cautionary, aiming to reinforce respect for policies that safeguard the integrity of Philippine higher education.

## Statement of the Problem

The increasing incidence of fee-based, unauthorized, and unregulated conferment of honorary degrees has generated widespread confusion, misrepresentation, and ethical concern within Philippine higher education. Despite the existence of clear policies under Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Memorandum Order No. 09, Series of 2021, recent CHED public advisories reveal persistent non-compliance by certain organizations and limited public awareness regarding legitimate degree-conferring authority. These practices have contributed to the commodification of academic honor and the misuse of honorary titles in academic, professional, and public settings.

The absence of a sustained ethical and policy-based examination of honorary degree conferment has further enabled the normalization of practices that blur the distinction between earned academic credentials and purely honorific recognition. As a result, the symbolic and moral value of the *Honoris Causa* is increasingly undermined, posing risks to academic integrity, institutional credibility, and public trust in higher education.

This study therefore addressed the need to systematically examine the conferment of honorary degrees through an ethical, academic, and regulatory lens in order to determine the conditions under which such distinctions remain legitimate, morally defensible, and aligned with national higher education standards and CHED regulatory intent.

## Research Objectives

### General Objective

To examine the ethical, academic, and policy foundations of the conferment of honorary degrees (*Honoris Causa*) in the Philippine higher education context.

### Specific Objectives

1. To evaluate the ethical nature of honorary degrees with respect to their purpose and object as academic distinctions.
2. To examine the intentions underlying the conferment of honorary degrees by academic and non-academic entities.
3. To assess how circumstances and consequences—such as payment, institutional authority, and public representation—affect the legitimacy of honorary degree conferments.
4. To analyze CHED policies and public advisories governing the conferment and use of honorary degrees.
5. To propose measures to preserve the dignity, credibility, and honor of the *Honoris Causa* in contemporary higher education practice.

## Research Questions

1. What is the ethical and academic purpose of an honorary degree as an academic distinction?
2. What intentions underpin legitimate versus illegitimate conferments of honorary degrees?
3. How do circumstances such as payment, degree-conferring authority, and public representation affect the legitimacy of honorary degrees?
4. How do CHED policies and public advisories support or challenge current practices in honorary degree conferment?
5. How may the honor, dignity, and integrity of the *Honoris Causa* be preserved in contemporary higher education practice?



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## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative policy–ethical analysis design, appropriate for examining normative, regulatory, and ethical issues embedded in higher education governance and academic practice. The design enabled an in-depth exploration of meanings, values, intentions, and institutional responsibilities associated with the conferment of honorary degrees (*Honoris Causa*), particularly within the Philippine higher education context governed by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

Unlike quantitative approaches that focus on prevalence or statistical relationships, qualitative policy–ethical analysis emphasizes how policies are interpreted, implemented, and ethically evaluated by academic stakeholders (Mitchell, 2023). This approach is particularly suited to inquiries involving academic integrity, regulatory compliance, and ethical discernment, where contextual understanding, moral reasoning, and expert judgment are central to analysis.

The design integrated policy analysis and ethical inquiry to examine both (a) the formal regulatory frameworks governing honorary degree conferment—specifically CHED Memorandum Order No. 09, Series of 2021, and related public advisories—and (b) the moral reasoning that underpins legitimate and illegitimate conferment practices. By situating participant perspectives within national policies and international academic standards, the study achieved a holistic examination of the object, intention, and circumstances surrounding honorary degrees.

### Participants and Sampling

The study involved twelve purposively selected participants chosen based on their professional expertise and direct involvement in higher education governance, research ethics, and quality assurance. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed the specialized knowledge and experience necessary to provide informed, reflective, and policy-relevant insights on honorary degree conferment.

The participants consisted of:

- Four higher education administrators, with experience in institutional leadership, academic governance, and policy formulation;
- Four graduate school faculty members, actively engaged in teaching, research supervision, academic publishing, and credential evaluation;
- Two research ethics experts, with formal roles in ethics review boards, research integrity committees, or ethics education; and
- Two accreditation practitioners, involved in institutional assessment, regulatory compliance, and quality assurance processes.

Selection criteria included length of professional experience, familiarity with CHED regulations, involvement in academic or research leadership, and demonstrated engagement with issues of academic integrity and credential legitimacy. This composition ensured a multidisciplinary and triangulated perspective on the ethical, academic, and regulatory dimensions of honorary degree conferment.

### Research Instruments

Data were gathered using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide explicitly aligned with the study's research objectives and questions. The instrument consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' perspectives on:

- the ethical and academic purpose of honorary degrees;
- intentions underlying legitimate and illegitimate conferment practices;
- the role of payment, institutional authority, and public representation in determining legitimacy; and



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- the interpretation and effectiveness of CHED policies and public advisories governing honorary degrees.

The interview guide underwent content validation by two experts: a senior higher education administrator with extensive experience in academic policy implementation and a research ethics specialist with expertise in qualitative research design. Validation focused on clarity, relevance, alignment with research objectives, and ethical sensitivity. Revisions were incorporated based on expert feedback prior to data collection.

### Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and systematic document analysis. Interviews were carried out either face-to-face or through secure online platforms, depending on participant availability and logistical considerations. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure accuracy of data capture.

In addition to interview data, documentary sources were reviewed to contextualize and triangulate participant responses. These documents included CHED Memorandum Order No. 09, Series of 2021; CHED public advisories on unauthorized awarding of honorary doctorate degrees; institutional guidelines on honorary degree conferment; accreditation manuals; and selected international best practices from reputable higher education institutions. Document analysis enabled the study to examine formal policy provisions alongside institutional practices and expert interpretations.

### Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed a systematic process of familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, and thematic refinement. Codes were generated inductively from participant responses and organized into broader thematic categories reflecting ethical principles, institutional intentions, policy compliance, and the consequences of honorary degree practices.

A cross-case synthesis was conducted to identify convergent and divergent perspectives across participant groups. This was complemented by policy alignment analysis, wherein emergent themes were examined in relation to CHED regulations and international academic standards to determine consistency, gaps, and areas of ethical tension. Particular attention was given to aligning findings with the ethical dimensions of object, intention, and circumstance that underpin legitimate conferment.

Analytical rigor was enhanced through iterative review of codes and themes to ensure coherence between findings, research questions, and study objectives. The integration of interview and documentary data strengthened the credibility, depth, and trustworthiness of the analysis.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards in qualitative research were strictly observed throughout the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing participant identities and securely storing all data. Interview recordings and transcripts were accessed only by the researcher and were used solely for scholarly purposes. Care was taken to present findings in a manner that avoided institutional or personal identification, particularly when discussing ethically sensitive or potentially controversial practices.

By adhering to these ethical safeguards, the study upheld the principles of respect, integrity, and responsibility essential to research involving academic professionals and policy-related inquiry..



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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents an integrated analysis of the findings in relation to the research questions and objectives. Consistent with qualitative rigor, salient participant excerpts are presented to foreground lived ethical judgments, followed by systematic interpretation, policy integration, and scholarly contextualization. The discussion is organized according to the core moral dimensions governing honorary degree conferment: object, intention, circumstances, and consequences, with explicit reference to CHED regulatory standards and higher education ethics.

### Ethical and Academic Purpose of the Honorary Degree: Honor Without Compensation

Participants consistently articulated that the fundamental purpose of an honorary degree lies in symbolic recognition, not in academic credentialing, professional advancement, or financial exchange. Honorary degrees were repeatedly described as affirmations of values, service, or exemplary contribution, distinct from earned academic qualifications.

#### *Significant Participant Texts*

"An honorary degree is not a shortcut to a title. It is a recognition, not a credential. The moment money is involved, it stops being honorary."

*(Graduate Faculty Member 2)*

"If someone pays—whether they call it a donation or a processing fee—that is already a transaction. You cannot buy honor from a university."

*(Higher Education Administrator 1)*

"Honoris Causa literally means 'for the sake of honor.' Once funding becomes the motive, the meaning is reversed."

*(Research Ethics Expert 1)*

These narratives demonstrate a shared ethical consensus that the object of an honorary degree is gratuitous recognition. Within moral philosophy and higher education ethics, an act is considered ethically valid when its object aligns with its intrinsic purpose (Mason, 2001). In this case, the intrinsic purpose of the Honoris Causa is honor freely given, not a benefit exchanged. Honorary degrees serve as institutional moral statements, reflecting a university's identity and values rather than conferring academic competence. These distinctions lose legitimacy when subjected to market logic, as commodification undermines their symbolic capital.

When payment—regardless of semantic framing as "donation," "processing," or "support"—is introduced, the act's object shifts from recognition to transaction (Campos et al., 2025). This ethical disorder parallels the defining features of diploma mills, which separate academic symbols from merit and rigor (Ospanova et al., 2021). The findings therefore affirm that *ethical failure in honorary degree conferment begins at the level of the object itself, even before intentions or consequences are examined.*

For educators, administrators, and the general public, this finding establishes a clear evaluative criterion: any honorary degree requiring payment is inherently illegitimate. This clarity empowers stakeholders to resist deceptive practices and protects the moral language of academic recognition.

### Intentions Behind Conferment: Recognition Versus Commercialization

Participants sharply distinguished between legitimate intentions, which center on honoring excellence and inspiring communities, and illegitimate intentions, which focus on revenue generation, institutional branding, or borrowed prestige.

#### *Significant Participant Texts*

"In legitimate universities, honorary degrees are rare and carefully decided. In questionable groups, they are frequent and strategic."

*(Accreditation Practitioner 1)*



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"Some organizations give honorary degrees not to honor people, but to borrow credibility from them."

*(Graduate Faculty Member 4)*

"The intention matters. If the goal is income, publicity, or authority, then the conferment is already ethically compromised."

*(Higher Education Administrator 3)*

The findings demonstrate that frequency, selectivity, and deliberative processes serve as ethical indicators of institutional intention. Legitimate conferments were described as exceptional events grounded in collective discernment, while illegitimate practices were characterized by routine distribution and strategic targeting.

Ethical governance literature affirms that institutional actions must be assessed not only by formality or appearance but by underlying intention (Bowman & West, 2021). The misuse of credentials often arises from deliberate organizational strategies to accumulate symbolic authority rather than from misunderstanding or negligence.

Within the Philippine context, such intentions directly contradict CHED's regulatory purpose, which seeks to prevent the misrepresentation of honorary degrees as academic credentials. Even when ceremonies adopt academic regalia and language, unethical intentions render the conferment morally invalid.

For institutional leaders and research organizations, this finding underscores the necessity of ethical self-audit. Conferment practices must be evaluated by asking whether they primarily serve public honor or private institutional gain.

### **Circumstances and Consequences: Public Representation, Equity, and Academic Trust**

Participants emphasized that the misuse of honorary titles—particularly the public adoption of "Doctor" in academic and professional contexts—creates confusion, inequity, and long-term erosion of trust.

#### *Significant Participant Texts*

"When honorary degree holders introduce themselves as 'Doctor' in academic settings, the public assumes they earned it."

*(Research Ethics Expert 2)*

"We see honorary titles used in journal articles, conference programs, even dissertation panels. That creates confusion and unfair advantage."

*(Graduate Faculty Member 1)*

"The real damage is long-term. People stop trusting academic titles altogether."

*(Accreditation Practitioner 2)*

Although honorary degrees are symbolic, their misuse produces material consequences within academic systems. Academic titles function as social signals of expertise, rigor, and disciplinary training (Little & Green, 2022). When these signals are distorted, the credibility of legitimate scholars is diluted.

This phenomenon is credential inflation, wherein excessive or improper use of titles diminishes their value and reliability (Sanchez, 2020). CHED advisories explicitly warn against representing honorary degrees as earned credentials because such misrepresentation misleads stakeholders and violates academic ethics.

The findings confirm that harm extends beyond individual misconduct, affecting students, peer reviewers, employers, and institutions that rely on accurate credential signaling.

Institutions are ethically obliged to regulate not only the conferment but also the public representation of honorary distinctions. Ethical self-representation must be reinforced as a professional norm.

### **CHED Policies, Awareness, and Enforcement**



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Participants recognized that CHED policies are substantively adequate but insufficiently disseminated and inconsistently enforced.

*Significant Participant Texts*

"CHED is clear, but many people do not read the policies—or choose not to."

(Higher Education Administrator 2)

"The problem is not the absence of rules; it is the absence of awareness and enforcement."

(Accreditation Practitioner 1)

This observation aligns with OECD (2019) findings that regulatory effectiveness depends on policy visibility, stakeholder education, and enforcement capacity. Without sustained public education, unethical practices persist under claims of ignorance or alternative interpretations.

CHED's role must extend beyond regulation to proactive ethical literacy, ensuring that institutions, professionals, and the public understand the limits and meaning of honorary distinctions.

**Preserving the Honor and Integrity of the *Honoris Causa***

Participants emphasized that safeguarding academic honor requires moral leadership alongside policy compliance.

*Significant Participant Texts*

"Honorary degrees should come with clarity—clear language, clear limits, clear purpose."

(Graduate Faculty Member 3)

"If educators do not defend academic honor, no one else will."

(Research Ethics Expert 1)

Ethical scholarship affirms that integrity is sustained through shared norms and principled leadership, not regulation alone. Graduate educators and research leaders serve as custodians of academic culture and must resist the normalization of ethically compromised practices.

**Conclusion**

This study established that the legitimacy and moral defensibility of the *Honoris Causa* are anchored on three inseparable conditions: a proper ethical object (honor without compensation), a noble intention (recognition rather than commercialization), and responsible circumstances (authorized conferment and truthful public representation). Honorary degrees remain academically and ethically valid only when conferred gratuitously by CHED-recognized institutions and clearly distinguished from earned academic credentials.

Practices involving payment, misrepresentation, or lack of degree-conferring authority fundamentally undermine the symbolic value of the honorary degree and erode public trust in higher education. More critically, such practices contribute to the commodification of academic honor and weaken the moral foundations upon which scholarly communities depend.

As educators, administrators, and research leaders, academic stakeholders carry a professional and ethical responsibility to safeguard the integrity of academic distinctions. Upholding CHED policies is not merely a regulatory obligation but a moral commitment to truth, fairness, and institutional credibility.

**Recommendations**

1. For Higher Education Institutions. Institutions may strictly confine the conferment of honorary degrees to CHED-recognized authority and adopt transparent, publicly accessible internal policies detailing criteria, processes, and limits of honorary recognition.



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2. For CHED and Regulatory Bodies. CHED may strengthen monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, issue more explicit advisories addressing fee-based honorary practices, and intensify nationwide information campaigns on proper academic title usage.
3. For Research and Academic Organizations. Organizations may refrain from using degree-conferring language and instead adopt alternative forms of recognition that do not mimic earned or honorary academic degrees.
4. For Graduate Educators and Scholars. Graduate educators may integrate academic ethics, credential integrity, and distinctions between earned and honorary titles into instruction, mentoring, and research supervision.
5. For the General Public and Professionals. Public education initiatives may be undertaken to help individuals critically distinguish between earned degrees, honorary titles, and non-academic recognitions.
6. For Future Researchers. Future studies may employ quantitative or mixed-method approaches to examine the prevalence, perception, and professional impact of honorary degree misuse across sectors in the Philippines.

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