International Race for Accreditation Stars in Cross-Border Education

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A scan of trends and issues related to program and provider mobility shows diverse new types of education providers, delivery modes, as well as innovative and complex forms of public/private and local/foreign partnerships. New courses and programs are being designed and delivered in response to local conditions and global trends, and new qualifications and awards are being offered. These developments are designed to meet the increased demand for continuing education and higher education to provide the human resource capacity for the growing knowledge society. But they also present new challenges for the world of higher education, especially with regard to accreditation and the recognition of qualifications.

RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATONS

Increased cross-border activity creates a need for mechanisms to recognize academic and professional qualifications gained through domestic or international delivery of education. The key questions include who awards the qualification (especially in collaborative provision arrangements and for private company providers); is the provider recognized, if so by what kind of accrediting/licensing body; and in what country is that body located if in fact it is nationally based?

Recognizing the qualifications offered by nondomestic institutions or providers involves a new level of complexity. Recognition is usually based on a national system that registers or licenses the education institution or provider and then requires a quality assurance assessment or accreditation for the academic program or for the institution or provider. In the past decade, many countries have established some type of governmental or nongovernmental evaluation and accreditation system, which represents a significant accomplishment. However, many of the new and existing systems are appropriately oriented toward traditional domestic institutions, and they lack the ability to register, license, or assess the quality of cross-border programs and qualifications offered by foreign institutions and providers. New mechanisms and frameworks at regional and international levels need to be considered to complement and strengthen the capacity of national-level governmental, nongovernmental, and professional bodies.

DIVERSITY OF PROVIDERS

Traditional higher education institutions are no longer the only deliverers of academic courses and programs at home or across borders. International conglomerates, media and IT companies, and new partnerships of private and public bodies are increasingly engaged in the provision of education both domestically and internationally.

The growing diversity of cross-border providers includes nontraditional or alternative types that are not part of any national education system and are in essence "stateless." Therefore, their status in their "home" country lacks relevance with these types of providers, which are unknown entities in terms of the quality of the education courses and programs and the acceptance or trustworthiness of awards. One common response to not being part of a national education system is for providers to obtain accreditation status from different types of accreditation bodies or agencies. This in turn leads to the question of whether the accreditation agency is bona fide and can be trusted.

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DIVERSITY OF ACCREDITORS

Awareness of the need for quality assurance and accreditation has led to several new developments in accreditation, of which some are aiding the domestic and international recognition of qualification and others are only serving to hinder and complicate matters.

Many countries have made efforts to establish criteria and procedures for quality assurance recognition systems and the approval of bona fide accrediting agencies. At the same time, the world has seen an increase in the number of self-appointed and rather self-serving accreditors as well as accreditation "mills" that simply sell "bogus" accreditation labels. The need and desire for accreditation status is bringing about commercialization of quality assurance and accreditation. Programs and providers strive to acquire as many "accreditation stars" as possible to enhance their competitiveness and perceived international legitimacy. The challenge pertains to distinguishing between bona fide and rogue accreditors, especially when neither the cross-border provider nor the accreditor is nationally based or recognized as part of a national higher education system.

The race for accreditation also entails growth in the internationalization and the global market for accreditation. It is important to acknowledge the upside of the internationalization of accreditation. New initiatives for mutual recognition of accreditation processes among countries, especially in the reg-

ulated professions, have given rise to some positive developments. Countries lacking fully developed quality assurance systems have benefited from the assistance of foreign bona fide accreditors. However, in some instances motives of commercial progress and competitiveness have fueled the desire for more accreditation stars, resulting in inappropriate and unreliable quality assurance procedures. While this downside can involve both cross-border and domestic provision, it is a particular concern for cross-border provision given that national policy objectives and cultural orientation are often neglected. Both forms of provision do not provide a way of understanding if the accreditor is bona fide and if the qualifications will be acceptable for academic or professional purposes.

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Market forces are enhancing the importance of an institution's or provider's profile, reputation, and courses. Major investments are being made in marketing and branding campaigns to get name recognition and to increase enrollments. Some type of accreditation is part of the campaign, assuring prospective students that the programs and awards are of high standing. This is introducing a commercial dimension to accreditation practices and the desire for institutions or providers to have as many accreditation labels or stars as possible. However, it is very important not to confuse fee-based bona fide accreditation agencies with accreditation mills.

Bona fide national and international accreditation agencies have increased in number and now operate in over 50 countries. For instance, U.S. national and regional accrediting bodies are providing and selling their services in over 65 countries. The same trend is discernible for accreditation bodies of the professions such as ABET (engineering) from the United States and EQUIS (business) from Europe.

At the same time, self-appointed networks of institutions and new organizations engage in accreditation of their members. These developments appear positive when viewed as an attempt to improve the quality of the academic offer. However, there is some concern that accreditors are not totally objective in their assessments and may be more interested in joining to the race for more accreditation stars through self-accreditation processes than in improving quality.

Another worrisome related development involves the growth in accreditation mills—organizations, neither recognized nor legitimate, that more or less "sell" accreditation status without any independent assessments. They are similar to degree mills that sell certificates and degrees with little or no course work. Different education stakeholders—students, employers, and the public—need to be aware of these accreditation (and degree) mills, which often constitute nothing more

than a web address and are therefore out of the jurisdiction of national regulatory systems.

The credibility of higher education programs and qualifications means a great deal to students, employers, the public at large, and the academic community itself. Additional efforts are needed at institutional, national, and international levels to inform the different stakeholders (and actors) of new opportunities for education and professional mobility while keeping them aware of the new risks of rogue providers and diploma and accreditation mills. One of the most critical issues constitutes assurance that the qualification awarded is legitimate and will be recognized for employment purposes or for further studies either at home or abroad. This issue now presents a major challenge facing the national and international higher education sector.   ■

Quality and an International Higher Education Space

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The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) held its fourth International Commission meeting in January 2005. Individuals from a dozen countries addressed several questions about the regional and international quality assurance and accreditation initiatives.

What Is Happening in Specific Geographic Regions with Quality Assurance and Accreditation?

Commission members examined two significant regional undertakings: European initiatives in accreditation and quality assurance and steps toward the establishment of a regional accreditation body in the Arab world.

Europe's current focus on quality assurance and accreditation is an outgrowth of the Bologna Declaration of 1999. The active "Bologna Process" (as it has come to be known) now involves strengthening the relevant policies at the national level and building a European-level structure for quality assurance and accreditation that serves the interests of universities, quality assurance bodies, and students. The issues dominating the dialogue include whether to create a European QA Register for quality assurance bodies and how to advance the role of peer review, enhance a quality culture within universities, and sustain the autonomy of higher education institutions.

In the Arab world, quality assurance and accreditation authorities, ministers, and higher education leaders are looking into creating new quality assurance bodies and strengthening existing national operations. They are considering the cre-