

## How Reliable Is National Approval of College Degrees?

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As governments, degree providers, and interested parties clash over issues involving the international portability of supposedly “equal” degrees, it has become clear that statements of legitimacy by a national government will not work as the sole means of determining whether degrees are comparable or whether the schools issuing them even exist. Government assurances that an institution and its degrees are valid form a helpful baseline but cannot be relied on as the final authority.

As recent cases show, the “false approval” problem has become widespread and now occurs in an astonishing diversity of venues. My earlier article (*IHE*, summer 2001) pointed out problems with regulatory schemes and bogus colleges supposedly based in Australia, Canada, Malawi, Mexico, and St. Kitts. Of course, the United States is also full of diploma mills. We are now in a period of universal domestic and international portability of bad standards, poor enforcement, and worthless degrees.

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My office's website contains a warning about the validity of degrees issued in Israel by Burlington College (see <<http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/unaccredited.html>>). This case concerns a legitimate U.S. college opening a branch campus in Israel that turned out to be part diploma mill. Many Israelis obtained degrees (some of which apparently resulted from actual work, while others involved no work), a number of Israeli officials became richer and more popular (for a while), and Burlington College suffered a blow to its reputation. The Burlington case was very hard to oversee because the U.S. provider was *not* a diploma mill *inside* the United States but just exercised poor oversight over its foreign cash cow. This is true of most cash cows: as long as the cash is flowing, the curious lack of mooing in the barn is ignored.

How should these offshore Burlington degrees be treated in the international market? Oregon has chosen to accept at face value only those degrees issued in the United States by Burlington's main campus, and will continue to reject *all* the college's degrees issued in Israel unless the holder consents to a detailed review of the degree. At present, no other mechanism exists that would enable us to ensure that degrees used as credentials in Oregon are based on actual work. The U.S. Department of Education also has no evaluation system in place. Assurances offered by Burlington College would be as worthless as is its oversight mechanism over the integrity of its foreign operations. At least the Israelis eventually caught on to the scam.

Another recent example comes from Singapore and, sadly, concerns a putative Oregon school. We were contacted by a Singaporean who had “earned” a degree from an Oregon school. Unfortunately, no such school exists. The entity was just an incorporated business (now shut down) with a college-like name. The incorporator sold degrees mainly in Asia and used the state-issued business license as proof that the “school” was government approved. Since this diploma mill made no attempt to sell degrees within Oregon, we did not even know it existed.

The true core of this problem is illustrated by the Singaporean's main concern. The degree holder was troubled not because he had been scammed or because we had not done our job in catching the perp, but because we insisted that the degree was worthless. Under Singapore law, it seems, this was a “U.S.-approved degree” and thus legal for use, and he wanted to use it. So the United States is not only the victim of international falsity in academic credentials, but also the perpetrator, since (unlike Oregon) some states do not prohibit the operation of diploma mills.

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The problem facing those of us in the United States who are trying to keep bad foreign credentials out is that we can no longer simply rely on a government's imprimatur as an indicator of legitimacy. When the government of Malawi is willing to “accredit” a notorious U.S. diploma mill, or Senegal signs off on a medical school that consists of a clinic built next to a doctor's office, or some Caribbean governments allow

**Special Focus: Trends in Private Higher Education**

all sorts of “schools” to operate on their islands—where do we turn for a thumb large enough to jam into this hole in the academic dike?

Determining the acceptability of degrees issued in other countries must remain firmly out of the hands of local, national, and foreign politicians and under the jurisdiction of people for whom the validity of degrees is a genuine issue, especially in the case of colleges. No college or indeed any other employer should ever be told by its national or state government, let alone the United Nations or the World Trade Organization, that a degree from Big Al’s Offshore College (whether “offshore” is St. Kitts or St. Louis) must be accepted at face value. Even my office, enforcing one of the nation’s strictest degree use laws, can only screen bad degrees *out*, we cannot force them on an unwilling employer.

Only in a legal environment that permits dubious degrees to be promptly investigated and if necessary invalidated, can colleges and other employers make informed decisions as to whether a foreign degree is truly usable as a credential. That is why degrees can never be treated as a commodity as long as no international or even national screening mechanism is available. That is also why each state in the United States should have laws on the books disallowing the use of unaccredited degrees as credentials in the absence of a genuine screening process.

It is irrational, dangerous, and bad public policy to assume that all degrees issued in foreign countries are valid merely because some official in that country says they are. The evidence is quite clear that such assertions are often meaningless except as an indicator of the relative probity of officials in the country in question. Only careful on-the-ground, case-by-case evaluation of foreign degrees can be accurate and successful in the current political and legal environment. ■

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## The Private Sector in Asian Higher Education

**Philip G. Altbach**

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**P**rivatization is one of the main trends in higher education worldwide. New private institutions are rapidly expanding, especially in developing countries and in nations of the former Soviet bloc. When the state is unable or unwilling to provide the necessary support for an expanding postsecondary sector, privatization fills the gap. A central reality of massification is increased reliance on private higher education institutions. Private

higher education is the fastest-growing segment of postsecondary education worldwide. While many look to America’s impressive private higher education sector, it is more useful to draw on the Asian experience. Only 20 percent of U.S. enrollments are at private colleges and universities, whereas in several Asian countries 80 percent study at private institutions. Asia’s private institutions face problems that are typical of the regions in which private higher education is most rapidly expanding.

In Asia, private institutions have long been a central part of higher education provision. In Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia, private universities enroll the majority of students—in some cases upwards of 80 percent. The large majority of Indian students attend private colleges, although these institutions are heavily subsidized by government funds. The private sector is also a growing force in parts of Asia where it has thus far not been active—such as China, Vietnam, and the central Asian republics.

In general, private universities are found at the lower end of the prestige hierarchy in Asia. There are a few examples of high-quality, private universities—such as Waseda and Keio (among others) in Japan, De La Salle and the Ateneo de Manila in the Philippines, Yonsei in Korea, and Santa Dharma in Indonesia. Generally, private institutions rely on tuition payments, receive little funding from public sources (although in Japan and several other countries limited government funding is available to the private sector), and have no tradition of private philanthropy, and as a result are unable to compete for the best students. However, the private sector plays a central role by providing access to students who would otherwise be unable to obtain academic degrees.

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It is useful to disaggregate the Asian private higher education sector because of the significant differences among institutions and the divergent roles they play in society. As noted, there are a few very prestigious private universities in the countries in which a private sector operates. In some cases, these institutions are sponsored or founded by religious groups—largely, but not exclusively, Christian. Sophia and Doshisha in Japan, Yonsei and Sogang in South Korea, Santa Dharma in Indonesia, and De La Salle and Ateneo de Manila in the Philippines are examples. These universities are typically among the oldest in their countries and have a long