

*Special Focus: Accreditation—The Debate Continues**The Importance of a Local Core*

In East Asia, as in other regions, universities are part of the national intellectual capital. While there is growing acceptance that foreign ideas and talent are necessary, it is also important to nurture a core of local faculty to give stability, local character, and cultural and intellectual rootedness to publicly supported universities.

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Evaluating faculty for promotion primarily on the basis of research publications in “top international (disciplinary) journals” may discourage place-specific applied research and publication. Such an approach deprives the nation of local knowledge and policy-relevant research. It also impoverishes the intellectual climate and cultural life, and stunts the development of local capabilities.

Foreign scholars hired mainly for their orientation toward publication in international refereed journals are unlikely to have the knowledge, interest, or incentive to advance locally relevant research. Some may use their positions to enhance their own global mobility. The best outcome may then be an institution no different from that of a local branch campus of a foreign research university. The country would be subsidizing research by foreigners for the world market. While it may add luster to the scholarly reputation of the foreigners, the research that is published may be quite irrelevant to the needs of the country that finances it.

In many Asian countries, a large number of local and foreign private educational institutions already exist to satisfy private demand for manpower training. National state institutions must play other roles that for-profit, especially foreign, institutions cannot—that is, research (especially place-specific research), and engagement with the community and with policymakers. This social and public role is vital to the development of civil society and the quality of life.

Balancing Global Standards and Local Needs

The challenge for small and developing countries aspiring to create world-class institutions of higher learning is to balance international academic standards with

national needs and local identity and culture. For example, Singapore, which has three universities, can become the place in the world to learn about Southeast Asia in particular disciplines, by developing local channels for research publication by local and foreign scholars that become global standards in their particular scholarly niches.

As in Europe, Australia, and Japan, local institutions and scholars must play an active role in defining truly global—as distinct from derivative American—standards. At the same time, scholars who choose to conduct the kind of research favored by international refereed journals should continue to do so. Flexibility, sensitive adaptation, and time to adjust and mature are key to getting the best out of the U.S. research university model.

Fortunately, some of the best features of the model are neither costly nor time consuming to implement. They include: more nuanced admissions, student and faculty evaluation criteria—away from narrow reliance on grades, journal article counts, and numerical rankings and point scores; a shift from state direction to faculty control of academic life and institutions; and the vigorous contention of different ideas, perspectives, and people, in the context of “safe spaces” for all intellectual discourse. Countries that want world-class universities should also be prepared to make appropriate social and political adjustments. ■

U.S. Higher Education: Long Reach Abroad with Tight Borders at Home

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In the article, “Academic Colonialism in Action: American Accreditation of Foreign Universities” (*IHE*, no. 32, summer 2003), Philip Altbach doesn’t see problems in establishing U.S. institutions abroad, but he does see U.S. accreditation of institutions in other countries as a means of international colonialism and standardization. In response, this article argues, first, that it is unreasonable to disconnect the spread of U.S. higher education abroad from accreditation and, second, that the U.S. accreditation process also needs to be seen as a way of limiting foreign institutions from operating in this country.

The Demand for U.S. Accreditation

It seems clear that through collaboration, exchange, and technical assistance, U.S. institutions have influenced the practice of higher education abroad for more than 50 years. This includes the offering of degrees, certificates, and diplomas through branch campuses and on-line courses. It also includes the recent largescale extension of for-profit institutions abroad aimed at purchasing and partnering with host country universities that sometimes provide the facade for U.S.-based operations. Combined with institutions from other countries also offering courses of study beyond their borders, there is often considerable competition to meet high demand for postsecondary study. With so many institutions active, it shouldn't be surprising that some desire U.S. accreditation for both self-protection from competition and to adopt what are perceived to be more-advanced U.S. practices. Demand for U.S. accreditation by foreign universities is also sought for at least two other reasons: so foreign students can more easily transfer to U.S. institutions and, more rarely it seems, so that they can operate a branch campus or offer programs at a distance in the United States.

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Foreign Institutions Seeking a U.S. Presence

With U.S. institutions so active abroad, one might think it would be logical for foreign universities to be similarly active here. In reality, however, there seem to be relatively few international institutions operating in the United States. Take Mexico, as an example. Given the long border uniting the two countries physically, and the large Hispanic population in the United States, one might expect Mexican universities to offer programs here. There are some Mexican institutions (Universidad de Monterrey, Universidad de las Americas, the Fundacion de las Americas-Puebla, and the Instituto Tecnologico de Monterrey) accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the agency in this country that claims to have sole authority for accred-

iting institutions south of the border. Nevertheless, only one, the University of Mexico appears to have a branch or offer programs in the United States. That institution, however, in existence in San Antonio since 1944, is not accredited.

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While other foreign institutions have a presence in the United States, their number and visibility are minimal. In effect, the same accreditation that legitimizes institutions abroad is used as a screen in the United States to prevent foreign institutions from operating here. Beyond the U.S. value system, which acts as a constraint against such operations, the process required to operate in the United States is expensive and time consuming, and there is no assurance that the investment will result in a business success. If an unaccredited institution from another country wishes to open a branch campus in the state of California, the following steps must be taken: secure a business license from the secretary of state; meet the laws of the state for issuing degrees and diplomas; become accredited as an institution; and, depending on what programs are offered, be accredited by a particular professional accrediting organization (e.g., nurses, school teachers, and physical therapists).

Let's assume that this fictional institution has its business license and wants to open a branch in California and is not accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Its opening is governed by California's Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education Reform Act of 1998, along with the state's Code of Regulations. The application that needs to be filed looks like it came from an accrediting organization. It requires, for example, a statement of mission, organizational structure, governing board, degree programs, faculty, and methods of instruction. The issues that must be addressed include ensuring academic freedom, means for guaranteeing student rights and confidentiality, class size, policies on governance, tuition and fees, physical facilities, library resources, student services, a business plan, providing appropriate access to information, curricula, policies regarding financial aid, student loans, graduation requirements, general education requirements, transfer policies, and so on.

U.S. Accreditation as a Barrier

Beyond filing the application, which reeks of U.S. assumptions about educational structure and organization, the institution needs to begin the process of becoming accredited by WASC. The phases to the WASC process include establishing a viable track record of several years as a functioning institution, followed by a two-year eligibility phase, and then a four-year candidacy period. While these processes are underway, the institution must be in operation and hence financed, including the implementation of the elements mentioned above.

A niche in the higher education marketplace must be found to enable the institution to support itself financially during this period. Competition with California's public higher education system, along with the extensive number of private institutions in existence there, requires a study of potential student demand, up-front funding, solid planning, and considerable luck. Success depends, among other things, on the programs and their quality, the institution's credibility and legitimacy, tuition and fees (and financial aid), geographic access; and comparative advantage to the student. For example, will the international institution bring name recognition to legitimate its offerings? Will the institution have unique expertise or provide internships or a career connection in either the United States or in the institution's home country?

U.S. accreditation provides protection for the dominance of U.S. higher education.

Conclusion

U.S. accreditation provides protection for the dominance of U.S. higher education both abroad and at home. It helps to standardize practice (e.g., Carnegie unit, letter grading, and academic calendar) elsewhere based upon U.S. institutional traditions. It enables foreign institutions to stand out from their local counterparts and foreign competition based on U.S. values and legitimacy. And, such accreditation enables foreign institutions to transfer students to U.S. institutions as well as, potentially, to offer courses at a distance or through branch campuses in the United States. Finally, holding U.S. accreditation at arm's length for those institutions seeking to operate in the United States further legitimates and protects U.S. dominance at home. As suggested at the beginning, it's the long-term interaction between and among U.S. institutions and others, along with U.S. accreditation, that has fed the demand for accreditation abroad. In effect, U.S. accreditation is only one aspect of the ongoing globalization process, one that has interactive and reinforcing twists and turns. ■

Cambodian Accreditation: An Uncertain Beginning

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Much-needed, long-recommended legislation for accreditation of higher education institutions in Cambodia has recently been passed, which it is hoped will provide a framework for the orderly development and expansion of the higher education sector. However, some last minute amendments made to the law by the executive level of the government may mean that it does not achieve its intended purpose.

Cambodian higher education is on the periphery of the international scene—barely able to access it, let alone participate or contribute to it. The system is so small and poor that it is of little interest to the international market in higher education. Few international providers have entered, perhaps also discouraged by “unofficial costs,” estimated at 30 to 40 percent. The postsecondary sector is small by international standards at about 51,000 students, or about one-twentieth and one-thirtieth the size of the higher education sectors of Vietnam and Thailand, respectively. But a demographic bulge of babies born since the conflict will soon create a huge need for higher education places. Public institutions are handicapped by low civil service salaries and the historical legacies from Cambodia's extraordinarily turbulent recent past. Almost all of the recent growth has been in the private sector. But in the absence of a legal framework or clear recognition and accreditation procedures most of these institutions, with only a few notable exceptions, are offering a narrow range of similar business-related courses with quality that varies from good to appalling.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) requested and obtained a major grant from the World Bank to develop a new legal framework for higher education that would define institutions, establish a mechanism of national accreditation, allow public higher education institutions to become more autonomous, establish a credit transfer system, and rationalize the scholarship program. At the request of the MoEYS, experts from Australia, the United States, and France consulted extensively with stakeholders and presented a draft law to the Council of Ministers in March 2002. The promise of a World Bank loan and reform project that would have addressed many of the systemic weaknesses was given as an incentive. But the loan was