

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?

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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

dependent on the establishment of a regulatory environment such as the new legislative framework would have provided.

There was a long delay before the government responded, during which an unprecedented number of institutions gained official recognition. Until recently, official recognition of private institutions has not followed a clearly defined process. In July 2002, parts of the new draft higher education law were excerpted and passed as a subdecree, on the “Criteria for Establishing Higher Education Institutions.” But unfortunately, the new law proved to be an impotent policy instrument since some institutions that the MoEYS reviewed and failed to recommend—due to lack of adequate curricula, facilities, or academic faculty—were, nevertheless, subsequently “established.” Since the first private postsecondary institution was recognized in 1997 there have been only one or two new institutions recognized per year. But in 2002 there were 12. Like many Asian countries, Cambodia has a long history of autocratic leadership and decisionmaking that sometimes goes against official stated policy.

More recently, key features of the draft law were amended by the Council of Ministers; their removal effectively eliminated the independence and broad stakeholder participation of the proposed Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) and its nomination committee, resulting in a greater concentration of central control in spite of the government’s stated policy direction toward decentralization. The MoEYS rejected the proposed amendments, but the law was subsequently passed by the Council of Ministers, as amended, on March 31, 2003.

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The new accreditation body and its secretariat are now centered in the Council of Ministers and staffed by civil servants. The participation of other stakeholders, like donors, was reduced to a possibility of invitation only and, in the case of committee members with previous experience in accreditation in other countries, reduced to advisers. The final form of the law is a model of central government control, which is similar to the system of Cambodia’s immediate neighbors, Vietnam and Thailand—neither of which could be said to have independent accreditation bodies. Members of the ACC have already been appointed by the government without apparent reference to the nomination procedure outlined in the new law.

These events might be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, the World Bank loan might not have represented an incentive to the Cambodian government, which may have been unwilling to increase the national debt to finance developments in a sector that serves the wealthiest two quintiles of the population. On the other hand, the notion of an independent ACC challenged some well-established traditions of hierarchy and power.

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Are these events unexpected? Perhaps in light of the extensive consultations and the assurances from “the top” that there were no serious difficulties with the draft version, the last-minute amendments are surprising. Are these events unprecedented? It is an unfortunate consequence of the last 30 years of civil disorder and Cambodia’s lack of the human resources that laws are being written by foreign experts with assumptions of meritocracy and independence that challenge cultural traditions of hierarchy and power. A similar pattern of events has occurred in the forestry sector, demobilization of the military, anticorruption legislation, and international adoptions legislation. In all of these cases, new laws that have challenged powerful, politically connected vested interests have been obstructed, or if legislation was passed then actual enforcement has been weak.

The immediate effect of the amendments to the new law is the loss of the World Bank loan that would have financed most of the reforms necessary to strengthen higher education and, in particular, the public part of the sector. These include most importantly an independent and professional ACC, as well as upgrading staff, improving management, and strengthening libraries and IT networks.

It remains to be seen how the new ACC will function. Due to chronic shortages of human resources, people with the necessary expertise are not available locally and without external funding, it seems unlikely that they will be easily recruited. Most of the original draft law remains unchanged. The requirements for accreditation are still in place—

including definitions of institutions, minimum standards, the necessity for a foundation year, credit transfer, and transparent financial procedures. If they are applied fairly, then the new law may still achieve its intended purpose of providing a regulatory framework for the sector. But if the ACC simply becomes a paper tiger—or worse, a tollgate—then official accreditation may have little effect on improving the quality of the higher education sector.

A weak higher education sector does not bode well for Cambodia's future. There is increasing recognition of the importance of higher education in national development. Cambodia is tipped to be the first "least developed country" to join the WTO in September of this year, and its participation regionally is increasing. Graduating 7 to 10,000 students every year from narrow, weak programs almost certainly means that however bright the students, they will be ill-equipped to satisfy the development needs of the country or compete internationally.

American Accreditation of Foreign Universities: Proceed— with Caution

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In the summer 2003 issue of *International Higher Education*, Philip Altbach argues against American accreditation of colleges and universities in other countries. He writes that as an academic superpower, the United States should not practice this kind of "academic invasion" and that granting American accreditation abroad is an act of "academic colonialism." While I agree with many of his observations, I wish to support a somewhat different conclusion.

Regional accrediting agencies are approached regularly by institutions abroad. The motivations vary, in part because American regional accreditation is both the gold standard and not well understood. Sometimes the reasons relate to marketing or "branding," as when institutions ask what form they have to fill out for accreditation so they can get an .edu Internet address. Another inappropriate reason for seeking regional accreditation occurs when an institution mistakes it for an ISO 9000-like international stamp of quality. Indeed,

interest and sincerity and even eagerness on the part of the applying institution should not be sufficient reason for American accreditors to become involved. Nor should the siren call of international travel for staff or team members motivate us into accrediting institutions abroad.

What, then, are the appropriate reasons? The clearest case for accrediting abroad involves places that identify themselves as American-style institutions of higher education. Attaining American regional accreditation validates their claims and is of great worth locally, given the paucity of consumer information and secondary school help for students choosing a higher education institution. In an article in the January/February 2003 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, "Hate Your Policies, Love Your Institutions," John Waterbury, president of the American University of Beirut, argues eloquently for this validation in places where institutions claiming to offer American-style education are otherwise essentially unregulated. Indeed, this consumer protection role is one of the functions American accreditation serves at home.

Also, just as in the United States, the standards of regional accreditation, when appropriate to the founders' goals, can provide a useful framework for new institutions abroad, as they develop, from ideas to degree programs to institutions of higher education with the probability to endure and improve. Because regional accrediting standards are the articulated expectations of the community of (American) higher education—and not a set of bureaucratic regulations—those wishing to begin new universities find that the standards provide a useful roadmap and that the process of peer review offers collegial support and feedback.

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The challenge here concerned defining American-style higher education or the limits to which American accreditation should appropriately be applied. The widespread adoption of taught courses, credit systems, and even forms of (something like) general education means that these curricular structures, at least by themselves, do not define American-style higher education. Increasing variation in regionally accredited institutions at home also makes defining what's American about American higher education more challenging. How do Americans define American-style