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.

> *Market forces are enhancing the importance of an institution's or provider's profile, reputation, and courses.*

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

Judith S. Eaton

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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-

ation of a regional quality assurance and accreditation body. At the core of these discussions lies assembling the key actors—universities, ministries of higher education, nongovernmental bodies, and businesses—to create a robust quality assurance and accreditation environment.

What Is Happening Internationally?

Commission members examined three very different international responses: a trade response through the World Trade Organization (WTO) and negotiations related to the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), a multinational response through the Joint Guidelines Project of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and a higher education association response through a statement on quality provision developed by the American Council on Education, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), and the International Association of Universities.

> *The multinational organizational response through the OECD/UNESCO project is conceived, at least in part, as a reaction to WTO/GATS and may ultimately emerge as a defining feature of the international higher education space.*

The WTO/GATS negotiations continue, perhaps at a slower pace than in prior years and without higher education, at present, as a major focus. The negotiations influence the international space for higher education with questions such as what quality has to do with nationality. Even though many opine that the role of trade is not to determine quality, WTO/GATS is a powerful presence in the international space, forcing higher education and quality assurance leaders to address the impact of trade on the role and function of institutions and providers. It is likely that negotiations will continue into 2006, and perhaps into 2007.

The multinational organizational response through the OECD/UNESCO project is conceived, at least in part, as a reaction to WTO/GATS and may ultimately emerge as a defining feature of the international higher education space. This effort is focused on quality provision in cross-border higher education and is intended to support and enhance student mobility and protect students from dubious providers of higher education. The guidelines are to be nonbinding and offer suggestions for practice to six stakeholders: higher education providers, national governments, quality assurance and accreditation bodies, student associations, professional bodies, and academic recognition bodies. UNESCO has a rich capacity-building agenda planned for individual countries, to aid them in meeting the expectations of the guidelines. OECD and

UNESCO also intend to establish an "international information tool," buttressing the guidelines with valuable information that students can use to identify legitimate providers of higher education.

The commission's joint statement, "Sharing Quality Higher Education Across Borders: A Statement on Behalf of Higher Education Institutions Worldwide," provides a set of principles to anchor various initiatives in cross-border higher education. It addresses the importance of the voice of higher education providers and their associations in the international space—looking to this leadership to make the case vigorously for core academic values such as higher education's commitment to the public good and serving the public interest. Higher education is, in most countries, a public good as well as a private benefit. The statement seeks to ensure that the social compact between higher education and society at the national level is vital and effective internationally.

What Do These Initiatives Tell Us about the Emerging Characteristics of an International Higher Education Space?

Three characteristics of the international higher education space became clear from conversations at the CHEA International Commission meeting: (a) movement not only toward international structures for quality assurance and accreditation but toward developing regional structures as well; (b) a preference to retain—rather than eliminate—national structures for quality assurance and accreditation even while developing regional and international structures; and (c) continued dialogue and debate on a number of difficult questions, the answers to which will involve the ultimate nature of an international higher education space.

The questions that will need to be addressed include:

• Should the emerging expectations and agreements about quality in the international space be collegial understandings or regulatory obligations?

• What is the nature of the ownership of international quality? Does it derive from institutions, governments, multinational organizations, and students? Or, is it shared among various stakeholders?

• Are either or both a single set of international quality standards and "meta-accreditation" (external review of the quality of quality assurance and accreditation bodies) essential—or optional—to a viable international higher education space?

The configuration of the international higher education space will take a considerable period of time. The 2005 CHEA International Commission meeting was a modest yet valuable moment along the time continuum, hopefully offering useful ideas and encouraging a vibrant debate. ■