

Salvador, and a handful of other countries in Latin America that in the last decade have organized accreditation systems for public and private institutions—separate from the licensing requirements covering only new private institutions. This step is, in part, a regional response to universal trends: globally, quality assurance is on the rise. Driving these regional initiatives are worldwide trends, such as accountability, the pressures of greater competitiveness, the mounting need of institutions to differentiate themselves, and the increasing power of management in universities. Imitating fashionable reform is, of course, a factor as well.

In Latin America these initiatives seem to share the realization that licensing alone fails to maintain pressure on institutions to monitor and improve quality. First, because they are usually exempt from licensing strictures, public institutions are allowed to act irresponsibly if they so choose. Second, licensing regulations for private institutions often come with an expiration date, after which freedom is either absolute or substantial (whatever the market would bear).

Given that in most of Latin America licensing standards for new private institutions of higher education have been weak or absent, this surge in accreditation schemes follows the expansion of the unregulated private sector. In this sense, accreditation functions as a sort of delayed regulation, an *ex post facto* attempt to tighten control over the worst examples of proliferation.

Whether the new Chilean law will succeed in fostering quality in higher education is anybody's guess. The QAA builds upon successful pilot experiences carried out since the 1990s to test different approaches to accreditation, and this is reason to be optimistic. However, the new law may be just another station in an endless loop of unacceptable performance. The regulatory response eventually gives way to new forms of questionable practices and in turn to new controls, in a game driven by the marketplace. ■

The Dilemma of Higher Education in Burma

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Burma is a pariah state, shunned internationally because of its rejection of democratic institutions and its poor human

rights record. As a result, its higher education system remains limited and antiquated, with only a few Burmese young people getting the opportunity to study abroad or to be exposed to modern international scholarship. But despite the policies of the government and sanctions of the international community, some opportunities now exist for Western universities and nongovernmental organizations to engage with Burma and to have a positive influence on its next generation.

Burma has a population of over 50 million, of which 60 percent are under the age of 18 years. It suffers from border, ethnic minority, health, and education problems that the military junta refuses to address. This poses a sharp contrast to the country of promise, progress, and significant influence only 40 years ago.

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Today, there are increasing pressures for higher education reform to address the needs of Burmese students. The Ministry of Education, however, lacks credibility and like all ministries is headed by military personnel who have limited knowledge of their portfolios. Similar situations existed in countries such as Indonesia only 15 years ago, but aid was still being provided by the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and nongovernmental organizations.

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Western nations have focused on human rights issues, and overseas development assistance has trickled down to basic support from UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund) to the health sector. The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank do not provide any assistance. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has been pitiful in its approach, avoiding pressure that would encourage Burma to accept change.

The higher education sector has been deliberately neglected by the present government, whose priority is to retain political control, not only to safeguard its economic advantages but also to suppress ethnic minorities and democratic groups from action that might split the nation or cause civil disturbance. However, as in Cambodia, tourism offers opportunities for education and training assistance since this sector is seen as noncontroversial and one from which the country can benefit. E-education offers possibilities; however, access to the Internet is still limited and restricted.

The US government estimates that only 40 percent of the population has access to basic education. Few students continue on to secondary education and fewer to vocational education training or to higher education. Furthermore, reaching the end of secondary education in Burma prepares only a few to enter

higher education. For those who graduate from secondary schooling, there is a gap of at least one year for graduates who seek admission to tertiary education overseas, even when they have achieved sufficient language competence. Bridging or foundation studies courses are minimal and many who apply falsify their qualifications with the assistance of local teachers.

TERTIARY EDUCATION AND ENGLISH-LANGUAGE TRAINING

Burma has about 30 universities and another 35 institutions listed as colleges. Tertiary education is mostly under the control of the Ministry of Education, and access is free. Nominal salaries for tertiary teachers are pitifully low, with university lecturers being paid around US\$50 per month; it should be noted, however, that most of those working in these institutions receive considerable benefits such as heavily subsidized housing, food, preferred treatment of their families by the government, and other fringe benefits that account for why these positions are prized. This situation is similar for people who currently work in higher education or the public sector in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, where “position” and “status” within society are highly valued. However, moonlighting by academics is common, and there is a proliferation of private colleges offering marginally better quality than public institutions and offering some diversification of curriculum.

The most well known tertiary institution (Yangon University) now only offers courses in arts, sciences, and law, with an estimated enrollment of 14,500 students. Previously, only medicine, economics, education, and other fields were taught, but now new separate and single-disciplined universities have been established under separate ministries to teach in these areas. The campus has been split into one focusing on

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undergraduate studies and the other on postgraduate studies. This division has been undertaken to reduce the possibility of social unrest. (It should be noted that the university was closed during periods in the 1990s.) There is little concern for the quality of teaching or education outcomes. Staff are monitored to ensure that they do not encourage students to become politically active, and foreigners cannot gain access without formal government permission. Inadequate infrastructure, outdated teaching equipment, and poorly qualified teachers are major problems. According to a recent UNESCO report, higher education institutions in Burma are increasing in numbers but decreasing in quality. Graduates who earn qualifications over-

seas tend not to return, thus leaving the country even poorer.

English-language training to assist students wishing to study higher education abroad is offered generously by the British Council. Open access to offices of the British Council is available in Yangon and Mandalay, and many young Burmese seek information on overseas study. The American Center, which is separate physically from the US Embassy in Yangon, has a comprehensive library and provides good access to education materials and resources for students.

CONCLUSION

Clearly it is now time to reassess the situation for higher education in Burma. Small but significant opportunities exist for overseas universities or philanthropic organizations to engage in distance education, particularly tourism training, information technology training, and foundation courses for students who have completed their high school education. Linking with work of the British Council and possibly initiating discussions with small private colleges could provide other pathways for development and support. If this proves successful, then possibly the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank might be encouraged to reengage and provide limited technical assistance. Developments of these kinds will have to be done carefully, but it seems likely that the Burmese government would not oppose such gentle approaches to reform. ■

“Meddling” or “Steering”: The Politics of Academic Decision Making in Hong Kong

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The latest flap in Hong Kong's contentious world of higher education concerns the unwillingness of the government-appointed council of the Hong Kong Institute of Education to reappoint Paul Morris as president. The Hong Kong academic community sees this action as a severe violation of academic freedom—the latest in a number of high profile cases over the last decade where government authority has tried to limit academic freedom by putting pressure on the universities and their top leaders to silence or remove professors who were perceived as disconcerting or obstreperous. But is this case a mat-