

Crosscutting. The Bologna reforms also often led to attempts to dissolve the vertical boundaries that cut through many continental European universities, resulting in incentives to foster interdisciplinary programs or research. Especially at the new master's level, such new interfaces were sought and institutionalized. Another trend involves support for new interdisciplinary centers or doctoral-level schools within and between institutions, especially in Germany, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries.

Stakeholders. Finally, stakeholder influence, which has been associated with the relevance agenda of the Bologna reforms, has been strengthened not only through widespread new governance structures—such as institutional boards (e.g., in Austria, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands) and institutionalized advisory boards at program levels. While the direct influence of external stakeholders still raises skepticism at most traditional (self-declared science- or scholarship-driven) institutions, consulting relevant outside partners on program orientation is more widely accepted among academics from all types of institutions now, as recent studies show.

CONCLUSION

It is too early to tell whether the vision of a Europe in which a substantial proportion of students and graduates would study or work abroad, with full recognition of their prior studies and qualifications that open them doors abroad, will become a reality within the next decade. However, beyond such hopes for the realization of the Bologna reforms' deeper vision and potential, one should perhaps begin to look more closely at the effects that were never envisioned but have already become reality. ■

Globalization, Universities, and Quality Assurance in Panama

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Higher education in the developing world has changed dramatically over the past two decades, mainly as a result of increasing globalization. It is the complex interplay of global and local forces, however, that determines subsequent effects on an individual country's university system. The most impacting of these forces come from two directions: economic and political. The economic aspect drives the business opportunity associated with higher education; the political aspect drives the vision for higher education a country develops through policy, legislation, and regulation. How the two factors interact and the kind of system they produce depend largely upon the quality-assurance mechanisms implemented.

The Republic of Panama is an illustrative case of a small, highly globalized country whose university system has grown exponentially since 1990—without a solid quality-assurance system. A recent study from the National Secretariat for Science, Technology and Innovation shows how this lack of quality assurance has allowed the business of university education to undermine the political vision. It further explains how this scenario impedes competitiveness. Studying this particular, but fairly representative, case may provide a glimpse of what developing countries in Latin America and elsewhere can expect given similar circumstances.

PANAMA'S UNIVERSITY SECTOR

Until the 1980s there were two universities in Panama. Today, the Ministry of Education recognizes 36, and the Public Registry lists over 95. These are large numbers for a country with a population of 3 million and potential university cohort of under 300,000. Simultaneous to this proliferation of institutions, global trends toward higher education convergence have pushed initiatives on program and standard harmonization that have, in turn, affected Panama's regulatory environment.

As most of university growth has occurred in the last 15 years, all but a few schools have been operating for a decade or less. Private universities account for the majority, with nearly all legally registered to operate for-profit. There are five public universities, representing almost 75 percent of enrollment. The oldest and largest is the University of Panama; the others have evolved recently, principally from former University of Panama departments or regional centers.

While the private sector represents just over a quarter of university enrollment, it is the fastest-growing segment. It accounts for all Public Registry institutions and 31 of the 36 ministry-recognized universities. Few are nonprofits. Many are products of transnational agreements with international providers, which create branch campuses, online distance-learning programs, "off-shore" degrees, franchising arrangements, or multinational corporations.

International higher education institutions represented in the Panamanian market include Florida State University, University of Louisville, Towson University, College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Florida International University, Universidad de San Martin of Colombia, McGill University (Canada), University of St. Louis, School of International Training, and ADEN Business School. Of these, only Florida State University can claim a full-branch campus, significant market presence, and thousands of graduates. Others generally franchise specific degrees or courses and several run study-abroad programs for outside students exclusively. So while international university presence is growing, with the exception of Florida State University, the overall impact on the sector is relatively weak.

Multinational for-profit university corporations represented in Panama include Laureate International Universities and the Whitney International University System. These companies

own multiple schools, have program offers that target lower-income populations, and attract larger enrollments.

Among the legally registered private universities, for dozens no contact data or basic information are available; many more could be considered “garage universities,” apartments or offices with signs in front that often disappear as quickly as they appear. Both phenomena raise concerns of diploma mills and fraudulent practice. Because Panama does not have an accreditation system in place, it is easy for fly-by-night schools to function and even thrive.

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BUSINESS VERSUS VISION

Panama, like many Latin American countries, has signed extensive legislation and agreements reflecting its higher education political globalization and vision for moving its universities toward international norms. The most significant initiatives are the 1998 law establishing Panama’s “city of knowledge,” which was designed to bring international business, technology, and academia together in a former US military facility; the 2003 accord founding the Central American University Accreditation Council; and the 2006 law creating Panama’s National Council for the Evaluation and Accreditation of University Education (CONEAUPA).

These visionary initiatives compete, however, with older, deeply rooted legal codes: the 1927 law facilitating creation of corporations, allowing nationals and internationals to establish businesses quickly, easily, and cheaply for any nonillegal enterprise, including higher education; and the 1972 constitutional article centralizing university-system control and private oversight in the University of Panama, an institution perceived to be dysfunctional at best and blatantly corrupt at worst. The former code fuels university proliferation since it is not difficult to obtain Ministry of Education recognition but is complicated for authorities to thwart those who fail to do so. The latter provides a business for the University of Panama and impedes the establishment of an autonomous quality assurance body; CONEAUPA, three years after inception, is still not operational.

Nonregulatory factors—a large pool of low-paid adjunct professors, a service-sector economy, and limited vocational options—further contribute to making higher education an attractive business. They also encourage universities to sell profitable modules for generic proficiencies like English, office protocol, and computer skills, alongside their degree courses.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPETITIVENESS

The general consensus in Panama is that the content and relevance of most university programs do not correspond to either international standards or market demand—a common problem for developing countries. But without a substantive, operational quality assurance body supported by both public and private sectors, economic globalization will dominate the political. Business will undermine vision. The upshot of this is that although higher education may become available to more of the population, the value of local degrees diminishes. This is already happening in Panama. A recent national study reports that 80 percent of mid- and high-level management holds degrees from universities outside the country.

Without credible quality assurance, developing countries’ university systems will not be positioned to contribute effectively to development or competitiveness. This will increase reliance on outside education and labor—particularly for countries like Panama where international services power the economy. Quality assurance is the first step to university capacity development. But to take this step, national mentality must shift from equating university development with business opportunity and toward equating it with strategic necessity. ■

Canadian Universities’ Strategies for Internationalization

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The press and academic literature have focused on universities that embraced globalization, attracting a large share of foreign students to their campuses or launching global research networks. Indeed, notice is also taken of failures—such as a university dismantling an overseas branch campus a few months after its launch. Less attention is paid to the “average” higher education institution—possibly limited by its location, the regional/local mission, a lack of prestige or status—but the strategy seeks to broaden its internationalization strategy in response to globalization. Another gap in the existing literature involves how institutional culture relates to internationalization strategy and activities. We have tried to meet this deficiency by studying four comparable Canadian universities