Money is an issue as well; higher education is consistently underfunded throughout the region. But governments are reluctant to increase public investment when institutions are unwilling (or unable) to guarantee that funds are spent transparently and effectively. Thus, it is no surprise that much of the growth has taken place in the private sector. As private institutions become eligible to stake claims on public funding throughout the region, a private vs. public tension has emerged, along with a debate about who pays for what, which public goods are worth subsidizing, what funds should be allocated competitively, what the quality thresholds should be for public money, and other issues.

At the political level, there is a general lack of understanding about the fundamental role higher education systems play in sustainable development. The lack of comprehensive and strategic long-term policies that look beyond the term in office of a government hinders system-level planning and coordination.

Changing the Higher Education Landscape

In truth, higher education systems in Latin America need a complete transformation—a reform that is not a short-term reaction to circumstance, but the result of purposeful deliberation and rational design to guide expansion, provide consistent quality assurance, foster student persistence, support smart diversification, and provide societies with the knowledge-based resources they need.

Some of this is already happening. There are incipient movements toward a diversification of systems in some countries, along with increasing concern for social inclusion and affirmative actions. The region provides some important examples of college-readiness programs, support for retention of students, value-added assessment exams, and more robust information on employability. While the generally poorly regulated expansion of the private sector in the region has raised concerns about quality, the most consolidated new private institutions have contributed some innovation and dynamism to their national systems.

Interestingly, most of this change is taking place outside flagship universities. Institutions that do not find a way to participate, using their intellectual capacity to contribute to, and implement, creative responses to the foreseeable demands of the future, will be left behind by systems that will evolve without them.

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Disruption in the US Accreditation Space

Judith S. Eaton

Judith S. Eaton is president, Council for Higher Education Accreditation, Washington, DC, US. E-mail: eaton@chea.org.

It is a time of disruption, in politics and government, in many national economies and cultures. In the United States, disruption has also penetrated the accreditation space, with debates and differences about student achievement, access and affordability, and transparency, topics also challenging quality assurance around the world. Higher education, accreditation, and quality assurance are not immune from the current swirl of competing ideas and views.

Today, US accreditation is undergoing a seismic shift. What has been the primary form of quality assurance and quality improvement in the United States for more than 100 years is being repositioned. It is shifting from an independent, collegial process by which higher education decides and evaluates academic quality on its own, to a compliance-driven process by which external stakeholders decide and apply requirements for quality that accreditors are to use. This shift involves four major changes. The first change is in who provides oversight and takes the lead in accreditation. The second change is in how quality is defined. The third change is about accountability: for what and to whom accreditation is answerable. The fourth is in how accreditation itself is to operate.

Until recently, the complex array of 85 private, nongovernmental institutional and programmatic US accrediting organizations have been operating independently, managing and directing their own work. This continued even as, in the 1950s, accreditors became engaged with the US federal government to serve as a reliable authority about quality in higher education. Accreditors, working with their institutions and programs, defined quality. They were accountable to these institutions and programs and developed their key accreditation practices with the institutions and programs.

New and Different Oversight of Accreditation

The first major change is that the US federal government has now taken on primary oversight of accreditation, overlaying the longstanding independent operation of these organizations. Government is expanding and deepening its examination of how accrediting organizations operate. It is now probing the performance of accrediting organizations based on its—not accreditors'—expectations of the effectiveness of accredited institutions and programs. This presence of government in accreditation or quality assurance is

not unusual in many countries. It is unusual for the United States, given that accreditation emerged from higher education, not government, and that accrediting organizations remain nongovernmental.

A Different Definition of Quality

Government taking the lead in accreditation also means that government, not accreditation, is taking the lead in how quality is defined, the second major change. This is in contrast to relying on the definitions of quality that accreditors have been using for many years, reflected in standards that are required to achieve accredited status. The standards constitute a broad array of expectations about an institution or program, including mission, financial resources, academic standards, curricula, support services for students, and facilities. For accreditation, quality has been about having resources and processes essential to achieving institutional or program mission at a high level of performance.

With government defining quality, this concept is narrowed and is now about whether students graduate, obtain employment, and have manageable debt from their student loans. This is a shift from the broad, inclusive concept of quality of accreditation to a utilitarian, or pragmatic, definition that ignores the vital role of higher education in intellectual development, in encouraging civic engagement and societal commitment.

For much of its history, accreditation has relied on two stout pillars for its review: institutions and programs self-reporting on their quality and effectiveness, accompanied by peer review or academics validating the reporting.

For What and to Whom is Accreditation Accountable?

This leads us to the third major change in the accreditation space: the response to "For what, and to whom, is accreditation accountable?" "Accountable for what" is about accreditation now answerable for this different definition of quality as graduation, jobs, and limitations on debt. Accountability is now focused, above all, on protecting and serving students for economic well-being and mobility. If a school is accredited, students should graduate in a timely way, should be able to get jobs, and should have debt that is manageable. Accreditors are to be accountable for timely identification and action against poorly performing schools. They are to be accountable for identifying, and taking action with schools that are engaged in questionable recruiting and marketing activities.

"Accountable for whom" is about accreditation now expected to be answerable, first and foremost, to constituents outside higher education—students, government, and the public. It is now no longer enough for accreditors to be accountable to the institutions and programs they review and the higher education community generally, as in the past. Accountability to the broad public arena is emerging as the primary lens through which accreditation is judged. If, for example, an accrediting organization claims to be doing a good job, but if the institutions it accredits graduates few students or has other difficulties, the accrediting organization itself is judged as lacking. What institutions and programs judge as effective accreditation is being superseded by the judgment of the public.

Accreditation Operation No Longer the Same

For much of its history, accreditation has relied on two stout pillars for its review: institutions and programs self-reporting on their quality and effectiveness, accompanied by peer review or academics validating the reporting. The fourth major change is that these pillars of accreditation are no longer viewed as providing adequate information and a sound basis for accreditation to judge academic quality. Especially in the case of institutional accreditation, self-report and peer review are now considered less reliable. These practices are continuing, but, increasingly, there are calls for self-report and peer review to be augmented by external verification of data and information. In addition, government and the public are calling for documentation of specific levels of performance of institutions and programs, going beyond the typical accreditation review that has focused primarily on resources and process.

Conclusion

This, then, is the disruption in the US accreditation space. Accreditation is no longer fully in charge of its own operation; it is using a definition of quality that it did not establish and may not support; it is accountable for this quality first to the public and not itself; some of its basic features of operation are no longer considered adequate and are being augmented. Accreditation is being repositioned from a process of quality review created and directed by higher education as means of examining its quality, to a process now led and directed by government, to examine how well higher education provides for graduation, jobs, and minimal debt.

From the perspective of those who welcome and even encourage the disruption, accreditation will be seen as doing a better job, more focused on what students and the public need. For those whose emphasis is on the strength and value of accreditation as it has been: an independent

enterprise of peer review and quality improvement, accreditation will have been seriously impaired. However, this disruption is perceived, accreditation will continue to be central to quality review, but in a significantly different way. ■

The Importance of Polytechnics for Africa's Development

Goolam Mohamedbhai

Goolam Mohamedbhai is former general secretary of the Association of African Universities. E-mail: g_t_mobhai@yahoo.co.uk.

In the United Kingdom, polytechnics had been in existence since the nineteenth century, but they gained prominence in the 1960s. Their main objective was to provide skilled technical and engineering manpower to promote industrialization. They differed from universities in several ways: they required somewhat lower entry qualifications; they offered mainly subdegree programs that were less rigorous academically and more practically and vocationally oriented; they had close links with industry; and the limited research they undertook was very applied in nature. This division between the polytechnics and universities came to be known as the "binary divide" in higher education. Later, UK polytechnics started running degree programs but their degrees were awarded by a separate, independent body, since they had no degree-granting power.

In 1992, the United Kingdom decided to convert all its polytechnics to degree-awarding universities. One reason for this move was to provide greater opportunities to socially disadvantaged students to access universities; another was that the United Kingdom was moving toward a service-oriented economy and needed more graduates. Thus ended the binary divide, although many have argued that the divide between the pre– and post–1992 universities never really disappeared.

Replication in Africa

In Africa, most of the former British colonies, as they achieved independence in the 1950s and 1960s, adopted a binary higher education system similar to what then prevailed in United Kingdom, and both polytechnics and universities were created.

In South Africa, which developed the most advanced higher education system in Africa with generous funding under the apartheid regime, the polytechnics were known originally as colleges of advanced technical education, until 1979 when they were renamed technikons. In 1993, perhaps following what was happening in the United Kingdom, South Africa decided to allow all its technikons to provide degree programs and confer degrees, but they retained their practical orientation and demarked themselves from the universities. They became known, regionally and internationally, as exemplary institutions for quality technical training.

A major change occurred in 2004 when South Africa decided to convert all its technikons into universities, the first country in Africa to do so. Some became universities of technology; others were merged with existing universities. Many academics and higher education policy analysts, in South Africa and elsewhere, regarded that move to be erroneous, believing that the technikons were playing an important role in the industrial development of the country.

Other African countries followed suit. In 2007, Ghana proposed a law to convert its ten polytechnics into technical universities by September 2016, a law that was hotly debated in the country, with several leading Ghanaian academics voicing their concern at the proposal. But in August 2016, the government went ahead and six of the ten polytechnics were converted into universities. Kenya also decided to upgrade several of its polytechnics and technical institutes to university colleges. Nigeria, which has the largest tertiary education sector in Africa, is moving along the same polytechnic conversion path. Even the Commonwealth Association of Polytechnics in Africa (CAPA) has now changed its name to the Commonwealth Association of Technical Universities and Polytechnics in Africa. What is of concern is that, in most countries, no new institutions have been, or are being created, to replace the upgraded polytechnics, leading to a serious skills gap in human resources.

Importance of Polytechnics

The importance of the polytechnics can be gauged by considering the engineering profession. It is usually accepted that for the effective operation of the engineering industry, there is need for a far greater number of technicians than professional engineers, the desirable ratio engineers:technicians being of the order of 1:5.

Precise data on the employment situation in engineering in African countries are not available, but estimates seem to indicate that, in a wide range of engineering disciplines, that ratio in Africa is of the order of 1:1 or 1:1.5. There is even a risk that the ratio will worsen, as the countries upgrade their polytechnics to university status. This indicates the acute shortage of engineering technicians and it has led,