

The international intellectual commons based on nonproprietary and nonexclusive research allows the world to address a number of widely recognized challenges—such as, emergent diseases, invasive species, and climate fluctuations. It is not in the interest of any single nation to invest heavily in research that could address these problems, because then the other nations of the world would have a free ride. Knowledge about these global challenges is, then, an international public good. It is in the public interest of every nation that this knowledge be created; but it will not be created in the absence of a public investment. International networks of research universities and institutes are a mechanism to advance the required research agenda.

For a number of reasons, then, it is in the interest of each nation to enhance those features of its universities that are able to participate in globally significant research and development and international expert systems focused on global challenges. This works to the benefit of African universities in an environment in which they reposition themselves to advance national competitiveness in the international knowledge economy. Only by continuing to assert and reflect a public good responsibility can they function as a link between their national economies and nonproprietary knowledge.

Current pressures, however, are pulling African universities toward market-derived definitions of higher education and away from public-good definitions. Obviously, universities offer a mixture of private and public benefits. It is a misuse of public funds to pay for those elements that offer private benefits, because prospective beneficiaries will pay on their own. But the same logic underscores that it is a serious mistake to presume that private investment will secure the public benefits of universities. Such a presumption defies economic theory. Public returns depend on public investment. In the rush to adopt funding strategies that shift the cost burden from the public sector to the individual beneficiary, the ancient justification of advanced learning as a public obligation recedes from view.

The international donor community provides a corrective. Its funds are in the spirit of public support for public goods. In particular, these funds can support Africa's connection to the global economy by helping African universities to assert a new, internationally defined role constructed around the values of nonproprietary research, support for the most talented irrespective of ability to pay, free movement of intellectuals, and related features that anchor universities in a long and honored public-good tradition. ■

Academic Colonialism in Action: American Accreditation of Foreign Universities

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American accreditors are beginning to evaluate academic programs and institutions in other countries and giving them accreditation in the United States. American higher education is the world's gold standard, and thus there is interest in understanding the U.S. accrediting system and the beginnings of a demand to have American accreditation. The imprimatur of U.S. accreditors is perceived to give a significant advantage to foreign institutions. In principle, however, it is a bad idea for Americans to be certifying academic institutions and programs in other countries. Just as the world's military superpower needs to be careful about its overseas interventions, America as an academic superpower has a duty not to abuse its academic muscle around the world, even if this particular U.S. "academic invasion" is welcomed abroad and even invited by others. Foreign accreditation is an act of intellectual hubris with implications that go far beyond traditional institutional evaluation.

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Without pushing the Iraq analogy too far, does American higher education want to station semi-permanent accrediting troops in foreign countries? Do we want to take responsibility for shaping academic policy in U.S.-accredited universities in countries whose intellectual traditions and higher education context differ substantially? Do we really want to take responsibility for ensuring that academic and institutional standards in other countries match those in the United States? Do we believe that U.S. academic practices are appropriate for other countries?

Of course, no one is forcing foreign academic institutions to be accredited by Americans. Indeed, the opposite is the case. A number of foreign institutions are seeking to be accredited by Americans, and U.S. accreditors have been reluctant to get involved overseas.

Current demand is likely to be the tip of the iceberg, with interest growing as the word gets out that U.S. accreditation is available. Now, the demand is increasing, and Americans seem more willing to get involved. It is worth looking carefully at the implications of offshore accrediting.

I am not arguing against the involvement of American universities in other countries. Institutional linkages sponsored by Fulbright or other agencies, collaborative programs, student and faculty exchanges, and even the establishment of branch campuses or academic programs in other countries all constitute legitimate and mostly positive endeavors. Traditionally, American overseas programs have been designed to provide international experience for U.S. students and faculty or, in a minority of cases, to strengthen foreign institutions. Recently, overseas initiatives have been aimed at earning income at home—such as the University of Chicago’s business school campus in Spain. More than a half million international students study in the United States, the large majority self-funded, earning large sums for U.S. universities.

The Workings of the U.S. System

Accreditation is a voluntary activity—no foreign institution is coerced into accreditation by an American agency. There are no accreditation police. Yet, once they become involved, overseas institutions are subject to some extent to the strictures of the accreditation process and the regulations of U.S. accreditors, with modest room for negotiation or adaptation. Indeed, the main purpose of the U.S. accreditation system is to ensure that a base of standards of academic programs, facilities, and policies is in place for every academic institution accredited. While accreditation does not force each institution to have the same programs or philosophy, a common set of requirements is needed to obtain it.

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American accreditation is designed for the realities of American higher education. It reflects the history, norms, and values of the U.S. academic system. Accreditation in the United States assumes the recognition of certain ideas about teaching and learning, the facilities needed for an effective academic institution, academic governance and the involvement of professors,

and financial resources. While it is not necessarily the case that U.S. accreditors will require the same standards and programs in foreign countries that prevail in the United States, there is likely to be pressure for “Americanization.”

Accreditation is not a governmental responsibility in the United States. It is carried out by regional accrediting agencies that are consortia of academic institutions and by specialized agencies that accredit graduate professional programs in business, teacher education, medicine, law, and others. The system is self-financed by the academic institutions and programs. This system works well in the United States and has built up decades of legitimacy and widespread acceptance by the public, academics, and government.

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International Implications

International accrediting has implications for both the accreditors and for the institutions being accredited. In addition to traveling abroad to carry out their evaluations, accreditors need to understand different academic systems and traditions. So far, most of the small number of foreign universities and programs accredited by American agencies have been U.S.-style institutions operating mostly in English, such as the American University of Beirut and other schools that use the name “American” in their titles. These institutions are easier to evaluate than those operating in national languages and reflecting national academic traditions—and such universities are lining up to demand U.S. accreditation.

U.S. accreditation will place pressure on foreign institutions to conform to American patterns of curricular and academic organization so as to meet accreditation standards. Some will see this as simply externally enforced quality control, but it may also constrain innovation and place foreign standards on universities. In a way, it is similar to the “dollarization” adopted by a few countries to enforce fiscal discipline—Argentina, for example, pegged its currency to the U.S. dollar for a few years. This policy reduced inflation and helped stabilize the economy for a while, but the strategy ultimately failed in part because the discipline was external and did not take into account the realities of the Argentine

economy. The country is still trying to dig itself out of an economic crisis. External accreditation may have the same result—self-imposed external discipline unrelated to local conditions with potentially dangerous effects.

U.S. accreditation will also place pressure on other local institutions that are not part of the accreditation process. If U.S.-accredited schools are considered in the local market to be the “best” because of their American imprimatur and confer upon their standards a better chance of gaining access to American graduate schools, this outcome will have an impact on the rest of the academic system. It is also likely that U.S. accreditation will take place mainly in the private sector, thereby strengthening the private institutions at the expense of public universities.

American accreditation overseas will be expensive, and the cost will be borne by the foreign universities. The U.S. accrediting system is financed by the institutions being accredited—the members of the accreditation consortium. Foreign institutions will need to pay these fees, which are costly—and overseas costs are likely to be significantly higher due to travel and other expenses. It is also unclear if foreign institutions will be welcomed into full membership in the various accrediting groups.

What Should Be Done?

International accreditation is an important issue in part because it is related to the larger subject of quality assurance. The issues are complex and intertwined. There is an obvious need to measure academic quality and performance in increasingly diversified academic systems, to rank academic institutions and programs, and to define academic achievement. As universities increasingly seek to recruit students and place graduates internationally, international recognition becomes more important. U.S. accreditation seems like a quick fix. American accreditors may feel that they are performing a service to universities in other countries who ask for accreditation. But it is neither possible nor desirable simply to wave a “magic wand” of U.S. accreditation over foreign institutions to grant them instant respectability.

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The complex issues of quality assurance and accreditation must be thought through. International discussions can help to clarify issues. But solutions must take into account national and regional circumstances.

An international solution is unlikely to succeed, and simply adopting the norms and systems of the world’s most powerful academic system is definitely a flawed idea. It is possible that regional accreditation may be possible—for example, in regions like Central America or perhaps Arab countries. Once the “Bologna process” is implemented within the European Union, some kind of regional quality assurance or accreditation arrangement may be useful. The United States has a long and largely successful history of accrediting academic institutions and programs, although it should be kept in mind that U.S. accreditation provides a “floor” of minimum quality rather than a measurement of top achievement. The American experience can be studied as one model of accreditation, but it should not be exported—in the long run this is neither a service to those institutions currently clamoring for it nor a positive contribution of American accreditors.

A Case Study in Foreign Degree (Dis)approval

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During the past few months, several regulatory and advisory organizations in the United States have become aware of an interesting case involving the international validation of degrees. Certain Liberian officials have apparently authorized a privately owned entity called the “National Board of Education” (NBOE) to “accredit” distance-education colleges anywhere in the world. The NBOE also owns one such entity, a diploma mill called St. Regis University. The only known “address” of the “Liberian” National Board of Education is National Board of Education, Inc., Washington DC 20003, Phone/Fax: 1 202 478 1779.

Because Oregon law requires that foreign degrees be from schools having the foreign equivalent of U.S. accreditation, the ODA had reason to look into the precise nature of these entities. What we found was disturbing in its potential consequences for so-called “seamless” international portability of postsecondary credentials.

The NBOE offers accreditation for a fee, with no apparent evaluation process other than a nominal