

Comments for the session on “The Changing International Regulatory and Policy Environment” at the Symposium on International Labour and Academic Mobility: Emerging Trends and Implications for Public Policy organized by World Education Services, October 22nd, 2004.

Rules of the Game: A Response to Jan Sadlak

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I would like to begin by thanking Tim Owen and the wonderful staff of World Education Services for their leadership in organizing this important symposium. This symposium will make a substantive contribution to our understanding of a number of extraordinarily complex issues. I also feel quite privileged to be given the opportunity to respond to the very thoughtful paper prepared by Dr. Jan Sadlak. I first met Jan about fifteen years ago and we spent about a year sharing the same office as postdoctoral fellows in the Higher Education Group at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. We have both moved up in the world since that time. Jan has become an internationally recognized leader and scholar of higher education who has played a key role in many very important international discussions on the work of international organizations and the reforms of Central and Eastern Europe. I have also moved up in the world – from the 9th floor to the 12th floor of the same building.

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I would like to return the discussion to where Dr. Sadlak began, and that is to the term “globalization”. Globalization is an extremely complex concept, but the word is most frequently used in reference to global economic transformations and the increasingly international, competitive marketplace. This is what Peter Scott has referred to as the “familiar globalisation of the Right” (Scott, in press), and the most common metaphor employed to capture this policy

direction focuses on the creation of a “level playing field” that will allow for the continuing development of global markets. To extend the metaphor, critics frequently argue that the benefits of globalization advantage certain teams more than others, and note that the playing field is frequently measured in yards rather than metres.

However one regards globalization, it is important to recognize that there are at least two basic problems associated with any attempt to create something resembling a level playing field in higher education. The first, and perhaps most important, problem is that there are no universal definitions. There are tremendous differences in what universities are and the roles that they play by jurisdiction. There are huge variations in the assumptions underscoring what a higher education credential is, the length and content of a program of study, and even the basic goals and objectives of higher education systems. To further extend the metaphor, there are quite a few games that involve the movement of a ball from one position to another, but there are radical differences in the rules. Moving the ball 75 metres is a wonderful accomplishment in Canadian football, a rather mediocre play in golf, and nothing less than embarrassing in tennis.

While there is little doubt that the Bologna Process is in many respects a regional response to globalization, the assumptions that underscore this evolutionary process are profoundly different than the assumptions that have underscored some other regional economic agreements that include some provision related to higher education, or international discussions associated with the World Trade Organization or GATS. The Bologna Declaration defines higher education as a “public good,” and the Bologna process is essentially an incremental, cooperative approach designed to create common rules for a European Higher Education Area (Van Vught, Van Der Wende & Westerheijden, 2002). The process has been extraordinarily complex and challenging, but, as Dr. Sadlak has noted, it is difficult not to conclude that

enormous progress has made in a relatively short period of time. For Canadians in the audience, imagine, if you will, the Council of Ministers of Education Canada entering into a discussion that might potentially lead to mammoth transformations in the curriculum of universities, or necessitate major reforms in Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology or Quebec CEGEPs. Try not to smile as you think about the probable outcomes of those discussions¹.

The second core problem associated with international initiatives involving regulation and higher education policy is the issue of quality. This is the issue that, in my opinion, is the single greatest cause of hair loss and premature graying among those involved in these discussions. How can we facilitate academic mobility and the free flow of human capital without some common understanding or approach to the quality of the educational experience.

Like almost all issues of higher education, the first reference point for discussions of international quality assessment is the United States, where there is a long history of institutional and programmatic accreditation as the primary mechanism for quality assessment. A common starting point for international discussions of quality is to argue for an extrapolation of American-style accreditation approaches to other jurisdictions. Recent reforms within EU nations suggest some important differences in how quality assessment might be understood within the Bologna process.

In a very recent study, Stefanie Schwarz and Don Westerheijen (2004) compiled comprehensive, comparative data on the accreditation and evaluation processes in place in 20 nations within the European Higher Education Area and draw a number of important conclusions

¹ Canada is a federation with an extremely decentralized approach to higher education policy. There is no explicit national higher education policy, and there are tremendous differences between provinces in terms of how higher education is organized. The Council of Ministers of Education Canada includes all provincial ministers of education and is a forum for national discussions and information sharing, but, at least to date, there is little evidence to suggest that the CMEC functions as a body with the capacity to negotiate a national policy approach to higher education arrangements (see Jones, 1997).

that are directly relevant to this discussion. The first is the extremely important role played by the European Network of Quality Assessment Agencies, a voluntary body supported by the EU composed of quality assessment professionals from member states. The Network has provided an important forum for the exchange of information between national agencies. The second is the tremendous growth in the development of quality assessment and evaluation mechanisms within EU member states over the last decade, but especially since 1998. The third, closely related, observation is the growth of national accreditation mechanisms, but mechanisms that are subtly different from the American model in several important ways. Generally speaking, American accreditation arrangements are voluntary, and accrediting bodies are in the private domain, largely as not-for-profit entities supported by the membership and service fees of member institutions. Of course the voluntary nature of accreditation in the American system is somewhat mythical, since institutional accreditation is frequently tied to state and national funding arrangements, and professional program accreditation frequently has direct implications for the professional certification and licensure of graduates. In contrast, most of the accrediting mechanisms that have arisen in EU member states are mandatory for all relevant institutions, and closely related to government through the work of arms-length, specialized agencies. Another important difference is that, with a few important exceptions, accreditation in the EU has taken the form of inclusive program accreditation, rather than the emphasis on institutional accreditation within the American model. In the spirit of Bologna, this suggests that the regional quality assessment approach that emerges from this ostensibly cooperative process will look very different from the American approach to accreditation, and this simple fact has enormous implications for any discussion aimed at international conventions on issues of quality and academic mobility.

My final point is to suggest that we need to at least discuss accreditation and quality assessment in the Canadian context. Changes within Canadian higher education during the last decade have created circumstances where accreditation may fulfill an increasing domestic role that was simply unnecessary a decade ago when there was general agreement that our network of public universities were operating with roughly similar standards. There has been a tremendous expansion in the number and types of institutions that now offer degrees, including specialized institutions and private universities. These changes recently led Statistics Canada to experiment with an entirely new classification system for Canadian postsecondary education, and the new approach presents an entirely different picture of diversity in Canadian higher education than the more static image that we were used to (Orton, 2004; Jones, in press). The second reason relates to the international discussion of quality and academic mobility. Whatever you may think about quality assessment in higher education, the reality is that we will be (and are) involved in international discussions on a topic in which we have no national and very little provincial experience. I think that this situation presents an enormous challenge for Canadian higher education.

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