

# Is this an accredited university or not?

by Richard Kearney

For the last century, accreditation has provided U.S. education with a framework to deal with recurring questions about standards and accountability.

Through its institutions and practices, U.S. accreditation preserves a tradition of academic self-regulation and resists government attempts to assume a strong role in such matters.

Today accreditation struggles with an ever-growing and diverse postsecondary sector that threatens to overwhelm its capacity to mediate tensions among and between the colleges, the government and the public.

Yet at the same time, U.S.-style accreditation models are beginning to emerge in countries seeking alternatives to state-centralized quality assurance.

This essay reviews the background and current state of U.S. accreditation as a point of departure for describing ways postsecondary institutions are recognized in other countries.

These countries employ a variety of means to provide recognition to academic institutions. And many are comparable to accreditation in scope and intent.

The significance of the differences remains a matter of judgment, however.

## Accreditation in the U.S.

Accreditation's key principle is institutional self-regulation.

Educators who supported the earliest accreditation movements in the late 19th century urged it as a solution to the dual menace of government regulation and educational chaos. This occurred as schools and colleges grew rapidly throughout the country.

No constitutional basis existed

for a national governmental role in setting educational standards. And with no generally accepted definition of a "college," nor any agreed standards for admission or level of study to be taught, one could hardly talk about a "system" of higher education.

Questions arose at every point:

- Did a given high school diploma indicate adequate preparation for college-level study? If not, were colleges admitting students with substandard secondary educations just glorified high schools?

- How could colleges admit students in transfer if the level of study offered by sending institutions was below that expected of first-year students at the receiving institution?

- How could graduate schools determine whether a college conferring bachelor's degrees offered students the type of program necessary to prepare them for graduate research?

- How many institutions were simply diploma mills?

The land-grant colleges were founded to support agriculture and industry by emphasizing the applied sciences and technical disciplines.

The normal schools were set up to meet the demand for trained teachers

Junior colleges offered both career education and general academic programs to prepare students for further study, and other specialized and proprietary colleges educated students for the professions.

In the early 1900s, no national body was equipped to forge this disparate collection of schools into a coherent whole.

Not surprisingly then, some of the most important developments in accreditation took place at the state and regional levels.

The regional accrediting asso-

ciations were established to build ties between colleges and secondary schools — a task which entailed defining admission standards and academic standards of member colleges and high schools.

In moving these institutions toward more cooperative relationships, the regionals played a vital role in elaborating the categories schools and colleges could use to organize themselves in a systematic way.

Early criteria the regionals used to determine whether colleges should be accredited were formal and mechanistic. Yet they were in keeping with the spirit of what scientific objectivity meant at the time.

Candidates had to satisfy their regional association by providing data regarding: faculty size and training; enrollment; curriculum structure and requirements for graduation in credit hours; library size; financial health and endowment size; and other standards with an emphasis on information that could be quantified and measured against minimum values

Institutions meeting the requirements would appear on lists published at regular intervals. And although accreditation was voluntary, its benefits were considerable enough to exert a steady force on colleges to conform or face operating outside a supportive community.

A growing number of colleges questioned this first model of accreditation as placing too much emphasis on form over content and paying too little attention to legitimate differences between institutional types and purposes.

At worst, accreditation failed to address standards in any substantive way and threatened the freedom of colleges to determine their own objectives.

In 1934 the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools published a review of accreditation standards.

It called for a new model whereby accrediting would be understood as a means of helping institutions judge whether they were succeeding in meeting their own missions and goals.

This concept of accreditation has remained largely intact to the present day.

### Professional accreditation

The accreditation discussed thus far deals with higher education in units no smaller than colleges themselves.

Yet at the same time this accreditation was developing, a concurrent movement was taking place among organized and licensed professions.

Initiated by practitioners' associations and spurred on by state licensing boards, professional accreditation arose to set and increase the standards of education in fields like medicine, law, dentistry, engineering, nursing, optometry and teacher education.

Because their concern is limited to their own disciplines, professional accreditors usually review programs within institutions rather than the institutions themselves.

In professions where state licensing boards grant de-facto regulatory authority to accreditors by declaring only graduates of professionally accredited programs eligible for licensing, the professional accreditors exercise considerable power over academic institutions.

As the profession raises its educational standards, universities must revise their programs or face the threat of an unfavorable review.

Over the century, this has led to tension between the professions and higher education.

In general, however, professional accreditation has tended to raise academic standards over time.

### Accreditation and the state

No development since mid-century has had more serious implications for accreditation than the emergence of the federal government as a force in postsecondary education.

Beginning with the post-World War II GI bills, the government has committed substantial resources to the expansion of higher educational opportunities.

In the process, it has turned to the major accrediting bodies to certify the eligibility of institutions to participate in its funding programs.

Initially government used accrediting bodies as a means of protection against fraud.

The Veterans' Readjustment Assisting Act of 1952 empowered the U.S. Commissioner of Education to maintain a list of "recognized" accrediting bodies that could serve as reliable vouchers for the quality of teaching institutions.

Institutions accredited by one of the recognized agencies would, in turn, be eligible to participate in government-funded student aid programs.

Over the next decades, additional government initiatives to promote science and research and the expansion of educational opportunity in academic and vocational-technical programs fueled an expansion in the system as a whole and in the number of institutions seeking accreditation.

Because the regionals could not easily deal with some newer institutions, especially in occupational and trade education, new accrediting agencies were founded to represent them and obtain a place on the Education Department's list.

In 1975, two organizations established to "accredit" the accreditors merged to form the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA).

For almost 20 years, COPA worked to ensure cooperative relationships among the accrediting

bodies and act as a liaison with government.

The latter function became increasingly important as the government grew dissatisfied with what it believed was accreditation's role in consumer protection.

Numerous cases of fraud and institutions with excessive student loan default rates prompted more interventionist attitudes in Congress.

In 1992 the Higher Education Act reauthorization included amendments demanding that states and accrediting agencies assume responsibility in enforcing federal higher-education funding guidelines.

The threat of government control spurred an internal crisis in COPA. Serious divisions among its member organizations led to COPA's dissolution in 1993.

Following a two-year period under an interim organization, almost 3,000 colleges and universities participated in a referendum.

This led to the founding of a new organization, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

CHEA's plan is to make a stronger case for self-regulation as fundamental to accreditation while developing new means of satisfying the accountability demands of the state and the general public.

How successful CHEA will be has yet to be seen.

### Accreditation outside U.S.

The foregoing review offers a context international educators can use to consider the standing of institutions in other countries.

Because accreditation grew out of a distinctive history, it finds no exact analogue in most countries.

Mechanisms for ensuring the comparability of admission criteria, academic standards, transferability, eligibility for student aid and professional licensing, and other characteristics of "recognition" can reside in many different

places. It is possible, however, to describe several models of institutional recognition:

**Education ministry control/recognition:** The "pure" case of state-controlled higher education entails legal regulation of college and university operation, including enabling legislation, funding, power to teach and award degrees, curricular oversight and appointment of chief administrators.

Although private teaching institutions may operate in such systems, existing restrictions may be such that they cannot use the name "university" or award credentials with degree titles, and their graduates may be barred from certain types of employment.

While the former Soviet Union and China once typified systems of this kind, both have moved from extreme state-centralization.

**Recognition by other institutions:** In many systems, the postsecondary sector is less integrated than in the United States, with less opportunity for student mobility within the system. Students who stream into one or another part of the system usually follow an educational path to the end.

"Transfer" from one kind of institution to another is uncommon because there is no articulation

between institutions.

The fact that students may not receive credit for study completed outside a university, however, does not necessarily mean their home institution does not have the same standing as an accredited college in the United States.

Recently some countries have introduced national credit systems to ease transfer from one type of institution to another.

**New accrediting bodies:** Systems moving from state-centralized models face the same problems U.S. institutions confronted in the early years of accreditation: How can colleges and universities ensure themselves of standards while moving toward greater cooperation and quality improvement?

In some cases, new forms of accreditation have been the answer. One example can be found in the Caribbean, where a University Council of Jamaica was founded by statute in 1987 to relate all postsecondary institutions to each other by means of accreditation.

At roughly the same time, a regional Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutions was founded to pursue similar goals outside of government authority.

In other countries, professional

associations have been among the most vigorous proponents of accreditation, often approving programs offered by a variety of public and private institutions outside the academic sector. It remains to be seen how such accreditation will develop in relation to both universities and the state, especially where funding issues are at stake.

**Market recognition:** In countries with a substantial private postsecondary sector, advocates of market solutions to the issue of accountability claim the success of private vocational colleges in meeting national demands for education and training entitle them to a share of state education funds.

Representatives of this position have been active in current debates over educational reform in South Africa. They believe that market validation of educational quality is a superior alternative to both state and private accreditation bureaucracies.

Although market advocates are not likely to dismantle a state role in higher education where it already exists, they will continue to challenge the state as a guarantor of standards and accountability for many years.

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