Leveraging Accreditation and Quality Assurance in International Higher Education

BY CHARLOTTE WEST

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About NAFSA
NAFSA is an association of individuals advancing international education and exchange. NAFSA serves international educators and their institutions and organizations by establishing principles of good practice, providing professional learning and development opportunities, providing networking opportunities, and advocating for international education.

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Introduction
In the United States and abroad, processes of accreditation and quality assurance are seen as important drivers of comprehensive internationalization for a number of reasons. Besides ensuring that institutions and programs meet established standards, they help facilitate the transfer of credits between institutions and make criteria for professional certification and licensure transparent, allowing degrees and certificates to become portable across national borders. They also create an occasion for institutions to further campus-wide goals. On one hand, accreditation and quality assurance are a strategy educational leaders can use to help push internationalization agendas. On the other, internationalization itself can be a driver for quality assurance and accreditation. At NAFSA's 2013 Symposium on Leadership, more than 100 international education leaders gathered to explore how senior administrators can use these processes to enact change on their campuses. Attendees of “Leveraging Accreditation and Quality Assurance to Advance Comprehensive Internationalization” represented institutions of all types and regional accreditation areas in the United States and 19 countries outside of the United States.

William Plater, the senior adviser for international affairs in the Senior College and University Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), presented both an accreditor’s perspective on internationalization and change and the institution’s perspective on accreditation and internationalization—particularly highlighting the importance of aligning accreditor and institutional goals around a global focus. Mark Hay, a higher education consultant specializing in the area of quality assurance and the former executive director for quality assurance at the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa, discussed the complexity of quality assurance abroad and how internationalization increasingly requires quality assurance processes to help articulate global strategies.

Accreditation in the United States
There is no single government agency that has oversight over all postsecondary institutions. While state governments exercise some degree of control over higher education institutions, U.S. colleges and universities in general operate with a large degree of independence and autonomy, resulting in an extremely diverse higher education sector. Accreditation in the United States has thus been done in the form of a non-governmental peer review process. National or regional private educational associations have adopted criteria reflecting the qualities of a sound educational program and have developed evaluation procedures to determine whether or not institutions and programs are operating at basic levels of quality. Plater noted at least eight U.S. regional accreditation agencies that evaluate higher education institutions. According to Plater, six regions are responsible for accrediting all institutions, and one for junior and community colleges. These are all nonprofit organizations that are recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. They accredit entire institutions, not specific programs or degrees. Plater noted that accreditation faces intense scrutiny from a skeptical public, with such common criticism as (a) it has led to a decline in higher education performance and effectiveness; and (b) it is an expensive process that contributes to rising higher education costs. Such concerns were voiced in June at a U.S. House of Representatives hearing on reauthorizing the Higher Education Act, which would overhaul the accreditation system in the United States, according to Inside Higher Ed.
While each regional agency is responsible for a specific geographic region in the United States, they are not bounded internationally. Some agencies accept applications from other countries, and the number of foreign institutions receiving accreditation in the United States is rising. For some universities outside the United States, seeking U.S. accreditation is a strategy to attract U.S. students and to seek partnerships and research collaboration with U.S. institutions. As one participant noted during the symposium, “The driver is national systems. Unless we begin to find ways to show that our [higher education] system is credible, who would want to partner with our institution?”

Plater also discussed the changes his organization, WASC, has undergone in the last six years in an attempt to “go international.” He says the organization is the only regional body that does not require instruction to be in English, and has currently accredited three universities in Armenia, Kenya, and Mexico. Plater said they made the decision with the intent to “learn from others” and to position its member institutions to be competitive in a global higher education sector. This reorientation toward the international was influenced by changes such as the Bologna Process, the development of degree qualification frameworks, the emergence of competency-based learning, increased mobility of faculty and students,

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<tr>
<th>U.S. Regional Accreditation Agencies: Recognizing Whole Institutions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Middle States Commission on Higher Education</td>
<td><a href="http://www.msche.org">www.msche.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>New England Association of Schools and Colleges</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cihe.neasc.org">www.cihe.neasc.org</a></td>
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<td>North Central Association Higher Learning Commission</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ncahlc.org">www.ncahlc.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nwccu.org">www.nwccu.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Association of Schools and Colleges</td>
<td><a href="http://www.sacscoc.org">www.sacscoc.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Association of Schools and Colleges Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities</td>
<td><a href="http://www.wascsenior.org">www.wascsenior.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Association of Schools and Colleges for Community and Junior Colleges</td>
<td><a href="http://www.accjcc.org">www.accjcc.org</a></td>
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Source: Plater, William and Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013.

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<th>Number of Foreign Institutions Receiving U.S. Accreditation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Middle States Commission on Higher Education</td>
<td>19 institutions in Canada, Chile, Egypt, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Switzerland, Taiwan, United Kingdom, Virgin Islands</td>
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<tr>
<td>New England Association of Schools and Colleges</td>
<td>8 institutions in Bermuda, Bulgaria, Greece, Lebanon, and Switzerland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities</td>
<td>2 universities in Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Association of Schools and Colleges</td>
<td>9 institutions in Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru, Qatar and UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Association of Schools and Colleges</td>
<td>3 universities in Armenia, Kenya and Mexico and 5 applying for eligibility</td>
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Source: Plater, William and Western Association of Schools and Colleges, 2013.
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and a growing demand for social and economic return on investment. Plater said WASC made a commitment not to impose an “American” model, but to seek members from around the world in order to learn from one another. For example, length of degree program does not affect accreditation. International partners have also had an impact on WASC’s priorities. “International members are bringing a new perspective to peer review, policy development, priority setting, and planning,” Plater said.

WASC also became the first accrediting body to have a center devoted to quality assurance in the international context. On July 1, the Center for Quality Assurance in International Education (CQAIE) was integrated into the organization. The center undertakes research and comparative analysis, benchmarking, capacity building, knowledge transfer of best practices, and helps promote mutual recognition through memoranda of understanding and consortia.

Linking accreditation to comprehensive internationalization

Quality assurance agencies are acutely aware of the implications of globalization and what it will require of twenty-first century graduates. One of the main rationales for internationalization is that student success now requires the development of global competence. In that way, accreditation and quality assurance have been increasingly linked to student outcomes—the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students possess as a result of their participation in a particular education program. In addition, the higher education landscape itself has become increasingly globalized. As higher education institutions increasingly compete for students and government funding on the basis on international rankings, Plater said that international accreditation could offer alternatives. However, he emphasized that the process needs to be deliberate.

“Accreditation can be a powerful driver for institutional change. But if you are going enter into accreditation, you need to know why you are doing it. There has to be intent behind it,” he said.

Plater’s suggestion for international education leaders is to make the international agenda a fundamental part of the accreditation process. “As a center director, I could play an influential role in the change process by talking about how our international activities impacted our city and state,” he said.

He said that accreditation provided the basis for strategic change at his previous institution, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). “I was able to use it to drive change in areas where faculty had been reluctant,” he said.

Accreditation offers a number of what Plater calls “external levers to effect internal change.” Preparation for accreditation takes two to three years, and institutions must undertake a self-study. This allows them to identify and address a specific, prioritized aspect of accreditation criteria—such as educating and graduating globally competent citizens. It also offers opportunities to join regional, national, or international study groups or projects. “Use the accreditor’s policies to drive your own agenda,” Plater said.

However, he argued that accreditation could only drive change if the accrediting body’s priorities match those of the institution. “Accreditation becomes a lever for institutional change—for internationalization of not only the curriculum but also the mission, the vision, and the operation of the institution—if, and only if, there is an alignment of internal goals for quality assurance and external imposed standards,” Plater said.

He emphasized, however, that accreditation should not be equated with harmonization. Institutional autonomy and differentiation by mission and vision is still the hallmark of the accreditation process in the United States.

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“Difference is to be celebrated, cherished, and encouraged. Alignment does not mean uniformity, nor does it require all institutions to achieve the same objectives—and certainly not in the same way at the same time,” he said.

**Global perspectives on quality assurance**

Whereas “accreditation” is the term most often used in the United States, the rest of the world talks about “quality assurance” to describe processes associated with quality control, accountability and guidance, and improvement of higher education. According to Hay, accreditation is one tool among many used by external quality assurance bodies. Other examples of quality assurance instruments include audit, assessment and evaluation, quality enhancement mechanisms, and a risk-based regulatory approach.

Many countries have national quality assurance agencies tasked with providing external review of the standards and performance of higher education institutions. There are also a number of regional quality assurance bodies. As of May 2013, there were 14 regional quality assurance networks and one international network, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

In Europe, for instance, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was created as part of the Bologna Process to disseminate and develop knowledge on quality assurance in higher education across Bologna signatory countries. The association in 2012 prioritized the enhancement of institutional quality assurance systems through an external review process that focused on: reducing red tape; benchmarking and the use of reference frameworks across the system (e.g. learning outcomes and more international aspects); identifying and sharing good practice (e.g. teaching innovation); and using data to monitor course and program quality (figures, data, indicators).

Hay said that at a minimum, the intent of quality assurance in higher education should be to protect students, stakeholders, and society from poor quality education facilities, research, and engagement. However, he emphasized that “there is no single system when we talk about international quality assurance.”
“Context is really important,” Hay said. “National, regional, and institutional factors are what determines how quality assurance is approached.” He added that culture, academic tradition, and religion can also influence quality assurance.

Hay said that motivations for external quality assurance have shifted over the last two decades. In the early 1990s, quality assurance was more closely linked to things such as accountability for the use of public funds, stimulating competition between institutions, and making institutional comparisons. More recently, quality assurance processes have been intended to facilitate mobility, promote regional integration and competitiveness, help manage risk, and improve quality. Like Plater, Hay argued that quality assurance in higher education has been impacted by globalization, with an increased priority being placed on accountability and regulation, institutional performance, and outcomes and standards. In that way, quality assurance is not so much a driver of internationalization as it is a requirement of internationalization as institutions now exist and compete in a global market.

Hay argued that the real question that should be asked is how we can move from quality control to quality enhancement. Rather than trying to meet a “lowest common denominator,” he believes that quality assurance should be leveraged to improve educational provision and research. “Is the goal of [quality assurance] to meet the minimum or to move beyond it to excellence?” he asked.

While quality assurance is an external process, Hay said that higher education institutions should drive the process. “Institutions should be the custodians, managers, and implementers of quality assurance,” he said. “It’s really up to them to ask, ‘What do we want out of this process?’... It’s a concern to me that too much power gets taken on by the external quality assurance agencies. The principle should be that quality is the priority of the institutions themselves, and therefore external quality assurance agencies should be trying to put themselves out of business.”

Quality assurance processes can furthermore help institutions articulate their goals related to internationalization. “Institutions are good at describing themselves and what they do, but a great weakness is being able to explain why,” Hay said.

Consequently, quality assurance requires administrators to consider and respond to questions such as:

- How do you conceptualize teaching and learning in terms of internationalization?
- How do you organize teaching and learning in terms of internationalization?
- How do you operationalize teaching and learning with the goals of internationalization in mind?

Hay argued that quality assurance helps make the links between planning, resource allocation, and quality management explicit. Accordingly, quality assurance processes can help conceptualize, organize, and operationalize institutional missions related to internationalization. Quality assurance helps build links between planning, resource allocation, and
quality management, and determines whether or not there is consistency across faculties and academic support. International leaders can thus use a quality assurance process to help ensure that their internationalization goals are being met institution-wide. “Internationalization is increasingly becoming a vehicle for achieving institutional change,” Hay said.

Both Hay and Plater advocate that internationalization through quality assurance and accreditation—and accreditation and quality assurance through internationalization—need to be linked to student outcomes with a focus on global learning and social responsibility.

“What are the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that we want our graduates to have?” Hay asked.

Plater said that institutions can start answering this question by defining and measuring what students need to be able to do in the global economy. “We need to figure out how they can develop a collective sense of responsibility for the world,” he said.

Endnotes:


