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The Council for Higher Education Accreditation will serve students and their families, colleges and universities, sponsoring bodies, governments and employers by promoting academic quality through formal recognition of higher education accrediting bodies and will coordinate and work to advance self-regulation through accreditation.

CHEA Mission Statement, 1996

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What Presidents Need To Know About International Accreditation and Quality Assurance

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This Guideline provides a brief overview on accreditation and quality assurance in the international arena. As more and more U.S. colleges and universities respond to the call to be internationally competitive, presidents and chancellors find themselves making important decisions about, e.g., establishing programs abroad, faculty exchange, research partnerships and even establishing new campuses in other countries. These judgments require that chief executives sustain a working knowledge of quality assurance and accreditation outside the United States. Absent this understanding, the integrity and reputation of their home institutions may be at risk.

Accreditation and Quality Assurance Outside the United States: What Countries Do

Outside the United States, accreditation or quality assurance (both terms are used) is typically a government-based activity, ordinarily carried out through a ministry of education. There is usually a single national quality assurance body, e.g., the Quality Assurance Agency in the U.K., the Danish Evaluation Institute in Denmark, the Council for Higher Education in South Africa. This contrasts with the United States, where accreditation is a nongovernmental activity carried out by private organizations.

The work of quality assurance agencies outside the United States is often centralized and coordinated with other government activities related to higher education, e.g., funding and economic development. U.S. accreditation, on the other hand, is characterized by its decentralization, with 81 recognized institutional and programmatic accreditors operating simultaneously.

While almost all countries have some quality assurance capacity, only about one-third sustain fully developed systems. For a number of these countries, this capacity has been developed only during the past 20 years or so. Remaining countries are in various stages of development, from enacting enabling legislation for quality review to implementing new structures for quality assurance. In contrast, the U.S. system is quite mature, with some accrediting operations dating back 100 years.

There are additional differences between quality assurance systems outside the United States and U.S. accreditation. Some countries undertake review of programs and not institutions. Some review practices are really a general evaluation, not involving specific standards and without a formal requirement of achieving accredited status.

Finally, government-based quality assurance bodies in other countries are only slowly coming to grips with the need to address private as well as public institutions. Most higher education in other countries is public or church-related and quality review practices are geared to these institutions. These countries do not sustain the large, successful, private nonprofit sector of higher education common in the United States, although this is changing. Private for-profit higher education is also beginning to establish itself in some countries.

An Emerging International Quality Assurance Context

Three factors are driving the overall direction of international quality assurance. First, quality assurance is becoming more competitive and robust. The capacity development described above will continue in a number of countries. Second, quality assurance is becoming regionalized. A number of regionally-based quality assurance initiatives are being established. The most prominent is in Europe through the quality efforts that are part of the Bologna Process. Other efforts are underway in South America and in the Gulf States. Third, there is an ongoing international dialogue about the need for an international quality assurance framework or mutual recognition and reciprocity across countries, led by multi-national organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Issues and Questions

The differences between accreditation and quality assurance in the United States and other countries are worthy of attention from chief executives. The government-based approach to quality assurance in most countries, significant gaps in capacity and experience among the quality assurance efforts in a number of countries, an emphasis on the public sector

and limited attention to the private sector, and experience confined to only one type of accreditation (either institutional or programmatic) all mean that U.S. presidents and chancellors will need to be well-informed about the scope and depth of quality review practices in other countries. CEOs also need to be aware of rules and regulations and sometimes cultural issues such as exchange of funds that may be involved in obtaining approval from authorities to operate a foreign-based program.

When engaging in international activity for their institutions, presidents and chancellors benefit from asking and answering such questions as:

- What is the quality assurance experience and capacity in the country in which my institution is operating? Is it peer-based? Are standards used? Whatever the similarities or differences to U.S. accreditation, what needs to be done to ascertain the reliability of the quality assurance body?
- Given that the quality assurance body in another country is government-based, what relationship, if any, will my institution need to sustain with that government? What impact, if any, will this have on our institutional autonomy and our academic freedom?
- What responsibilities do I have to my U.S. institutional and programmatic accreditors if my institution begins to operate internationally? How does this activity affect my current accredited status? Do I need to contact these accreditors?
- As chief executive officer of a U.S. higher education institution, what role might I play in the ongoing international dialogue about quality?

Expansion of U.S. higher education into the international arena is an extraordinary opportunity, but one that carries risk—as well as gain—for U.S. colleges and universities. Accreditation and quality assurance play a significant confidence-building role for presidents and chancellors as they make vital decisions in this arena.