

# International Perspectives on Accreditation and Quality



**A PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION  
ANUIES  
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# Overview and agenda

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- I. Why is there so much interest in quality and accreditation in higher education?
- II. The US model for institutional accreditation.
- III. US accreditation for non-US institutions?
- IV. Moving toward institutional accreditation

# Key assumptions

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- Essential to make sure students leave higher education with capacity for successful lives and contributions
- Globalized world of constant change (even if one never leaves home)
- Globalized markets
- Education not simply for a job but for all one does over 50 years or more. Life in a world that is hard to imagine today.
- Electronic Arts story

# I. In the past...

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- Traditions of institutional autonomy
  - Centralized nations – guarantees of autonomy
  - Decentralized nations – limited roles of state & guarantees
- Smaller scale – fewer institutions, fewer students
- Higher education largely limited to elites
- Greater institutional homogeneity

# Today...

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- Growth of demand – massification
  - Scale (numbers) – US 1965=5.9million; 2015=18.5 million – same or more in % terms elsewhere
  - Diversity of students (access for non-elites)
- Rapid expansion of existing institutions
- Rise of new institutions and new models (including for-profit institutions)

# Drivers of diversity and change

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- Increasing global interconnectedness of all types
- Recognition of value of education by individuals and by societies (demand)
- Higher education as a key component of national development and competitiveness
- Increasing importance of mobility (student and labor)
- Multiple forms of competition (individual, institutional, national)
- Increased access to lessons from elsewhere – availability of information
- Constraints on public financing of higher education
  - Competing national priorities and needs
  - Public sector cannot afford to meet demand
  - US – shrinking financial support for public higher education

# Accreditation in the past...

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- Sleepy, somewhat arcane backwater
- Many nations – strictly an internal national matter, usually government regulated (central ministries or parastatals)
- Less of a need to compete externally
- US – grew out of institutions, not government
  - Decentralized, non-profit, non-governmental
  - Limited government interest

# Growing interest in accreditation

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- As the stakes have risen, so has the need for quality assurance and accreditation
- Consumer protection (role of the state) – especially re first generation students
- Assuring appropriate student learning outcomes
- Promoting mobility (student and labor)
- Accountability to stakeholders (including government & society)
- Assuring best use of public funds
- Competitiveness (reputation, enrollments, funding, faculty)
- Internal improvement for institutional goals, reputation
- External regulation and improvement
  - Peer review as a means of information sharing/best practice
  - Government controls and pressures for improvement

# Accreditation in a time of global change

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- Expansion of quality assurance/accreditation agencies and networks
- Debate about **processes** of quality assurance and accreditation
- Debate about desired learning objectives and learning outcomes of higher education
  - Employability? Individual growth? Citizenship? Broad knowledge? Outcomes over a lifetime or career? Mobility? Skills?
- Debate about measurement and assessment
- Debate about assuring quality across borders
- Debates about the definition of quality itself
  - Quality processes? Quality assurance? Quality improvement?
  - Can quality be defined? Measured? Demonstrated?

# Growth of specialized accreditors

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- Largely non-controversial
- Single discipline tied to professional preparation--  
COPAES
- Close ties to industry practitioners
- Alignment with state licensing requirements
- Consensus on definitions of quality in specialized context
  - One discipline, vocabulary, industry, professional practice
- In US, no linkage to governmental funding
- Majority of QA/accreditation globally is programmatic  
(in many countries there is no actual institutional accreditation)

# Accreditation of institutions

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- Specialized programs do not take place in a vacuum
  - Acknowledge importance of institutional base (ABET)
- Excellence in specialized programs desirable, but not sufficient
- The institution as the locus of much of higher education – the context
- Economies of scale (facilities, services, support, etc.)
- The integration of knowledge
- Expanding roles of academic institutions

# National efforts for institutional accreditation

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- **Institutional accreditation is difficult**
  - **Organizational diversity (missions, scale, capacity, etc.)**
  - **Organizational complexity**
  - **Traditions of autonomy vs interests of state**
  - Accreditation as neither completely technical nor political (Sklonik, 2010) Who benefits? Who decides? Winners and losers?

# Critiques of institutional QA/accreditation

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- Excessive generality to accommodate institutional diversity (INQAAHE, US regionals)
- Tension between state control and institutional autonomy
- Basic inefficacy (lack of evidence of impact– what good does it do?)
- Imposition of costs and burdens (money and time)
- The danger of isomorphism (distortion of rankings, UAE/CAA-SACS)
- Cultural imperialism (especially US) (Altbach)
- Imposition of neoliberal values and goals through globalization
- Best institutions do not need it (self regulation of excellence through competition)
- **Key:** inability to define and measure quality in diverse institutions

## II. The US institutional model

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- Accreditation as autonomous, non-governmental, non-profit.
  - Regionals, national career, national faith-based
- Core values (Eaton, 2016)
  - **Primary responsibility for academic quality based in the institutions**
  - **Centrality of mission**
  - **Institutional autonomy essential**
  - **Assume institutional diversity and decentralization**
  - **Academic freedom**
- Thus: “assure **threshold** quality for students and public” (Eaton, *emphasis added*) and quest for improvement

# Key US factors

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- **Process** model (no agreement on definition of quality) – can be useful for institution
- **Set standards (by commissions)**
  - Self-studies
  - Review by peers
  - Judgment by accrediting agency (mostly higher ed)
  - Periodic reviews
- **“Accreditation” provides primary access to Federal and state funding**
  - Title IV and state financial aid = \$171B (2015)
  - In addition, state government operating support = \$81B, Federal & state research support= \$44B
  - Philanthropic tax benefits
  - All but research distributed in market approach

# Money and diversity – the crux

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- Public funds (direct and indirect) lifeblood of most US institutions
- Accreditors as gatekeepers (certify meeting minimal requirements)
- Requirement of assessing all institutions in remit
- Negative decision likely a death sentence

# Threshold approach as the only way

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- Only way to assure funding and to accommodate diversity/institutional autonomy
- Two problems:
  - 1. Absurdity of least of institutions having same accreditation as the best
  - 2. Failure of institutional accreditors to oversee weakest institutions (no one wants to close a school – always seek improvement)

# Should not be surprising....

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- US accreditation under attack (all institutions)
  - Abuses, especially with regard to Federal and state financial aid and **for-profit institutions**
  - Accreditors not seen as effective in preventing abuse or providing adequate oversight
  - Concern about excessive student debt loads
  - Avoidance of discrimination (Title IX)
  - Little impact on graduation rates, retention, etc.
  - Challenges from new approaches and platforms
  - Lack of rigor in assessing bottom tier institutions
  - Processes too complex, time consuming and costly
  - Top institutions see little value added
  - Debate over purposes and goals
  - Political target -- nationally

# Results

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- Concerns about accreditor willingness/capacity to fulfill roles -- not able to be critical or tough
- Return on public investment?
- Enormous student debt burden
- Employability questions
- Questioning student learning outcomes generally
- Confidence in accreditation eroded – leading to disruption
- (Not Trump – bipartisan)

# Uncertainty in the US

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- 1. New and different oversight – US government overlays independent accreditors
- 2. A different definition of quality – government defines (metrics re employability, graduation rates)
- 3. Accountability – to different definition of quality and to different constituents outside higher education
- 4. Basics no longer the same – pillars of self reporting and peer review as inadequate

# Uncertainty

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- Major shift underway in US – from independent, collegial process by which HE decides quality for itself to a compliance driven process where external stakeholders decide.
- Accreditation being forced to shift from a process of quality review created and staffed by higher education to a process led by government with utilitarian goals and requiring government verification

# What if...

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- Accreditation decoupled from funding?
- Accreditation as consumer information/consumer protections (MIDE – Colombia)?
- Work on the quality question?
- Tiers instead of binary decisions?
- Better incentives for institutions to improve internally?
- What if there were significant closures?

# Greatest US higher education challenges

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- Regain credibility with public and politicians
- **(Importance of informal credibility)**
- Protecting key values of higher education
- Transparency and accessibility of information
- Engaging stakeholders (students, public)
- Finding ways to move past the threshold model
- Higher education as more than utilitarian
- How to avoid the dominance of money
- **Making sure students are prepared**

# The quality discussion

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- Addressing quality means a willingness to move past the threshold. Not every institution gets accredited.
- Model of the programmatic accreditors (ABET example)
- The tiered approach (FIMPES)
- Model of the “world-class” elite research universities
- Quality tied to mission (institutional diversity)

# III. US accreditation for non-US institutions?

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- Reasonable for non-US institutions to be interested in institutional accreditation
  - Quest for quality assurance and improvement
  - Recognition of importance of internationalization in education
  - Promoting mobility
  - Gaining recognition and validation
  - Increasing competitiveness
  - Access to best practice

# Limits to US international accreditation

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- Considerable international activity for some programmatic accreditors (ABET, AACSB,)
- Cross-border collaboration among Mexico-US programmatic accreditors
- Withdrawal from international **institutional** initiatives by regionals – domestic focus
  - SACS– some possibilities
  - Northwest – possible (Simon Fraser)
  - HLC – not possible (policy)
  - NEASC – American model only
  - Middle States (moratorium)
  - WSCUC – end international experiment

# Mutual recognition as a strategy?

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- Efforts to expand/enhance accreditation through networks of sharing (INQAAHE)
  - Woodhouse: “the recognition by two or more external quality agencies an affirmation by each that it accepts the entire or partial decisions and judgment of the other” (2008)
- Efforts to expand/enhance accreditation within regions (Europe, Asia-Pacific, etc.)
- Efforts to expand/enhance accreditation across regional borders through mutual recognition
- Bilateral accords (UK-Mexico example)
- Multinational mutual recognition within specializations
  - Washington Accord -- engineering

# Critiques of mutual recognition

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- Generalities (avoid criticism of others)
- Often only aspirational
- Lowest common denominator model
  - (similar processes do not necessarily equal similar quality)
- Lack of recognition/appreciation for national or regional diversity of approaches
- Convergence of practice as promoting isomorphism?
- Overemphasis on rankings – assumption of research university model as desirable for all
- National borders matter (even within EU)
- No possibilities with US

# Why mutual recognition is impossible in the US

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- No central mechanism for recognition of degrees and other qualifications.
- Completely up to individual academic institution or employer.
- State licensing boards for professional practice
- No formal mutual recognition among regional institutional accreditors
- Role of informal recognition (depending on institution)
- Fear of undercutting the regional model
- Lack of agreement on approaches and priorities
- No general belief in equivalence (with exceptions) – US parochialism

## IV. Elsewhere in the world...

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- Many nations/regions grappling with same challenges – recognizing the centrality of institutions, assuring quality above a threshold, promoting diversity and autonomy, how to fund, how to assure appropriate student outcomes?
- Institutional accreditation as external assessment of internal quality assurance system.
- Europe (ESG) “moving from process to content” difficult. (Spanish example)
- UAE/KSA (more prescriptive)

# Vital national endeavors

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- **Must make sure students get the education needed for success over lifetimes**
- **Must eliminate inadequate institutions**
- **Consumer protection**
- **Highest and best use of finite public funds (ROI)**
- **Transparency**
- **Protect diversity and autonomy – support academic institutions**
- **Struggle with quality definitions (which may mean that no all parties will meet higher definitions)**
- **Is threshold the best that can be expected?**
- **Churchill quote**

# Conclusions

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- Quality matters both within nations and in a competitive global context – no market for mediocrity
- Quality assurance and accreditation changing and becoming increasingly important
- **Institutional** quality is difficult to define or assess
- Nations must find ways to validate quality institutions and protect against low quality institutions
- **Institutions must take responsibility for assuring and improving their quality regardless of accreditation environment.**
- **This is difficult, but essential work**