



Exporting US quality assurance models in professional programs

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Abstract

This paper describes the current efforts of higher education institutions in developing countries to seek accreditation from established quality assurance organizations in the United States. It contains two case studies of fields in which US accreditation organizations have responded effectively to such requests – engineering and teacher education. These two fields are of high importance in developing countries – engineering due to interest in economic development, and education due to the need for human development. The paper closes with a listing of issues and complexities involved in evaluating foreign institutions with US standards, and suggests appropriate actions.

Keywords: accreditation, quality assurance, international, different cultures, teacher education, engineering education

1. Introduction

American higher education is often seen from abroad as the best quality available in the world, and as such a model to be emulated. The US system of quality assurance – accreditation – is perceived to be a major reason for this quality, and higher education institutions in developing countries often seek some form of US accreditation as a way to have their own quality recognized. In many cases, these institutions, which are frequently pioneers in quality assurance in their region, need to be assisted in a developmental mode until they are prepared to pass the scrutiny of US accreditation standards.

Many well established US specialized/professional accreditation agencies have in recent years been offering international accreditation evaluations, and status, as appropriate: engineering, business, and teacher education. In each case, the move to offering full accreditation abroad has reflected an evolutionary process on the part of the accrediting agency often starting with Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), then some sort of "substantial equivalency", then full accreditation.

There are many issues involved in evaluating foreign institutions utilizing US standards. This paper draws upon the long experience of the authors in quality assurance and accreditation in the US and abroad to explore such issues by examining both engineering and teacher education accreditation. These two fields are particularly important to developing countries, due to needs for enhanced education to lead to human and economic development.

2. Engineering accreditation

Engineering programs in the United States are accredited by ABET (formerly known as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology). "ABET is a non-profit and non-governmental accrediting agency for academic programs in the disciplines of applied science, computing, engineering, and engineering technology. ABET is a recognized accreditor in the United States by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation" (1). Essentially all engineering and engineering technology programs in the United States are currently accredited by ABET. Any engineering program not accredited by ABET would have a very difficult time attracting students and having its graduates recognized as employable.

“ABET accreditation provides assurance that a college or university program meets the quality standards established by the profession for which the program prepares its students. ABET accredits postsecondary programs housed in degree-granting institutions which have been recognized by national or regional institutional accreditation agencies or national education authorities worldwide”. (1)

ABET undertakes specialized accreditation for programs at various levels in four areas:

- applied science programs
- computing programs
- engineering programs
- engineering technology programs

As engineering education institutions in developing countries evolved sufficiently to be considered for the type of accreditation evaluations that US schools underwent in the US, ABET developed and operated for several years a “substantial equivalency” program. Under this program the non-US programs were evaluated to determine whether they were comparable in program content and educational experience to US accredited programs and prepared their graduates to begin professional engineering practice at the entry level. These “substantial equivalency” evaluations were conducted by approved ABET evaluators from the US following similar policies and procedures used for US accreditation – but no formal accreditation action was taken at the end of the evaluation. By 2006 there were more than 140 substantially equivalent programs at 27 institutions in 14 countries (7). In 2006 ABET began phasing out substantial equivalency evaluations and instead proceeded with full international accreditation evaluations, using the regular ABET standards. In the fall of 2007 the first international accreditation visits were conducted.

“To date, ABET has accredited over 3,100 applied science, computing, engineering, and engineering technology programs at more than 660 colleges and universities in 23 countries worldwide.” (1)

The type of approach ABET has taken has been successful in encouraging engineering institutions in developing countries to move toward a recognizable world standard for engineering education. The pattern of starting with MOUs, moving to “substantial equivalency”, then full accreditation has proven to be effective for ABET. (6)

3. Teacher education

Teacher education in the United States has two national accrediting bodies.

- NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) was founded in 1954 by five organizations already working with the nation’s schools. Currently NCATE has about 656 members. (8)
- TEAC (Teacher Education Accreditation Council) was founded in 1997 and currently has about 220 members. (9)

Both NCATE and TEAC are recognized by the US Department of Education and CHEA (Council on Higher Education Accreditation). In 2010 NCATE and TEAC announced that in 2013, their two organizations would join to form CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation). (2)

Teacher education accreditation at the national level plays an integral role in state licensing of teachers, thus adding an additional dimension to their activities. The two national accreditors – while each having their own policies and procedures – are also closely linked to additional standards articulated by the many individual specialized professional associations (SPAs) such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Science Teachers Association, the International Society for Technology in Education, the American Council on the Teaching for Foreign Languages, etc. So accreditation decisions have broad implications on many levels.

When NCATE and TEAC announced their decision to create a single accreditation agency, they also announced that they would begin engaging in international accreditation. While both agencies had previously flirted with international activities, neither one had accredited a program or college of education outside of the US and its territories. So in addition to merging two accreditors and managing the implications of that merger at the federal, state and institutional levels, an entirely new agenda is being prepared for offering accreditation internationally. The double challenge is daunting. The law of unintended consequences, however, sometimes works in positive ways, as will be demonstrated in what follows.

Over the past two or three decades many international students came to the United States to earn doctorates in education. These graduates then frequently returned home to become university faculty themselves, as well as government leaders, bringing with them their exposure to the American system of teacher preparation and quality assurance. So it is not surprising that in the decades of the 1990s, when developing countries began to focus on the need to improve their own schools as a foundational move toward improving their economic, social and cultural advancement, their leaders started contacting NCATE, asking whether their teacher education colleges could be candidates for accreditation. The answer was no. But the volume of these inquiries was such that it spilled over to the Center for Quality Assurance in International Education (CQAIE), a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization founded in Washington D.C. (3) After discussions between the leadership of CQAIE and NCATE, and other leaders in teacher education, a program called International Recognition in Teacher Education was created in 2002. IRTE, as it was known, would, with NCATE's permission, use NCATE accreditation standards, NCATE-experienced team members, and a process very close to NCATE's. International Recognition would be available to institutions outside of the United States and its territories, and the Center would be the granting agency, with NCATE acknowledging its collaborative role only. (4)

From the beginning IRTE differed from many traditional U.S. accrediting bodies in that it was overtly developmental and supportive. Acknowledging that candidate institutions would likely be challenged by the need to write a conceptual framework for their program, to establish learning outcomes and design appropriate assessment tools, to organize the faculty so as to utilize assessment results to make continuous improvement in the curriculum and teaching methodologies, the structure of IRTE was deliberately firm but flexible. In addition, the small scale of IRTE permitted highly individualized interaction between candidate institutions, the CQAIE president, and the US teacher educators who frequently served as consultants to candidate institutions.

IRTE was not without its detractors. There were many who feared that the creation of a sort of mirror image of US accreditation for use abroad would represent a dilution of those standards or condescension toward non-US institutions. And there was concern about the potential misuse of the word “recognition” to deliberately imply “accreditation.” Supporters of IRTE noted that over a decade, IRTE incubated a cadre of about forty US teacher education faculty, all with extensive domestic NCATE experience, who in addition developed hands-on international experience in countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and acquired a deep understanding of how NCATE standards and processes resonate outside US borders.

By 2010 IRTE had seven active institutions in four countries, and NCATE and TEAC had announced their plan to become engaged in international accreditation. In 2011 the Center’s board of directors agreed that IRTE’s operations should be folded into NCATE as of July 2012, with each active IRTE member given a plan for leveraging its current status with IRTE into eventual candidacy for accreditation with NCATE, TEAC or CAEP.

4. Issues in foreign evaluations

While the authors of this paper are strong supporters of the international agendas of US accreditors of professional programs, these activities also raise operational challenges and suggest ethical dilemmas.

Agency capacity

Accreditation bodies in the US are non-profit and non-governmental, and as such rely heavily upon volunteers as evaluators and reviewers. It often takes years for a given volunteer to accumulate sufficient knowledge and experience in terms of standards and procedures to be fully effective in domestic accreditation processes, let alone complex international evaluations. ABET’s long history of international activities includes a record of careful selection of volunteer accreditors and deliberate training in preparation for international visits. A further step for all international accreditors might be to invite international peers from already-accredited institutions outside of the US to attend such training sessions, thus expanding international capacity in quality assurance practices.

Impact on local accreditation

When the top one or two higher education institutions in a country obtain accreditation from a US based or similar agency, the driving force for the development of a local, indigenous quality assurance system may be blunted. Such a result could thus have long-term negative impact on the overall achievement of appropriate quality assurance mechanisms in developing countries. This leads to a question of the wisdom of accreditation agencies in the US or other developed countries in aggressively promoting programs for international accreditation of institutions in developing countries. The issue has two dimensions: the activities of international accreditors in a country should not serve as an excuse for not developing national or regional quality assurance programs, and at the same time the international accreditors should avoid acting in competition with legitimate local efforts.

Brain drain potential

Graduates of schools in developing countries that have achieved international accreditation by US agencies obtain, with their degrees, credentialing that can allow them ready access to employment or graduate education in a developed country. This can lead to a brain drain that negatively impacts the skilled person base in the developing country. When weighed against the benefit of potential improvement of the education in the developing country, however, these fears should not prevent international accreditation being awarded to institutions that have succeeded in achieving exemplary high quality.

Cultural differences

Specialized or professional accreditation agencies in the US generally limit their activities to institutions that have U.S. regional accreditation. And US regional accreditation standards are strongly reflective of the history and culture of the country. For this reason, professional accreditors in the US take as a given that the programs they accredit domestically will, for example, support legal commitments to diversity based on race, gender, religion, etc. The strict application of US standards to accreditation of educational programs can run afoul of local cultural differences and practices in some countries. Knowing this in advance and determining the implications for accreditation activities is essential. Pre-conditions for candidacy become an important issue for the highest-level of the leadership when an international agenda is being set and implemented.

Progression from MOU onward

In the two case studies described above, engineering education and teacher education, the accrediting agencies both benefited from developing their international agendas over time and based on experience. It is interesting to note that the international recognition program in teacher education run by the Center for Quality Assurance in International Education is strikingly similar to ABET's "substantial equivalency" initiative, and is well on its way to be superseded, as was substantial equivalency, by full accreditation. It appears that assistance in the development of quality assurance mechanisms in a developing country should progress from MOUs to "substantial equivalence" to full accreditation in a measured way. Such an approach allows both the US accreditation agency and the institutions to gain experience in working with one another, and is more likely to lead to positive end results.

Developmental approach

Accreditation agencies in the US typically provide some assistance to candidates for initial accreditation as they approach a final, full-blown accreditation evaluation. Such support often comes in the form of suggesting consultants who have extensive experience with the accreditation process but are no longer directly involved in it. Such an approach is not only desirable, but also virtually mandatory in support of international accreditation -- especially where a culture of quality assurance is not yet fully developed at the institutional or national level.

Legal and Regulatory Environments

In the US, licensure requirements for engineering practice, teacher certification, or other professional practice areas, typically require graduation from an accredited post-secondary

institution. If educational programs in a developing country achieve accreditation from a US agency, that country may then see the advantage of seeking to build similar requirements into its national licensure regulations, and otherwise expand a culture of quality based on that accreditation.

US impact abroad

Prior to the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001, large numbers of students from developing countries traveled to the US for university level study. After completing their studies in the US, many of these international students returned to their home countries to make significant contributions to political, economic and social developments there. Since 911, however, the flow of such students to the US has diminished. US institutions, including universities with new branch campuses or international partnerships, have increased their activity in developing countries in an attempt to rebuild the kind of positive impact previously achieved by US higher education in interacting with developing countries. (5) One of the primary forms of such outreach is involvement in international accreditation activities. Peers in professional education programs working together to improve quality form strong networks that are important elements of soft diplomacy, and thus lend weight to international understanding.

5. Conclusions

Higher education in the United States enjoys an excellent reputation throughout the world for the quality of its programs and the quality of its graduates. In various ways over the years, US institutions of higher education and US accrediting agencies have assisted education endeavors in developing countries to improve their offerings by emulation of US practices, or by direct transfer of US programs or mechanisms. The current trend of US accrediting agencies, both regional and specialty agencies, to do direct evaluations of degree programs in developing countries can have many positive effects – but also must be cautiously and thoughtfully pursued in order to avoid unexpected negative consequences.

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