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Accreditation, Certification, and Internationalization of Higher Education: A Global Perspective for Latin America

By Dr. Gil Fonthal

Globalization has brought to the education arena new issues not considered a few decades ago, which are the import and export of higher education as well as their connections with quality assurance. Accreditation and certification, on the one hand, are the usual way universities assure quality and acquire recognition in their communities and sometimes overseas. Additionally, accreditation and certification are a manner in which universities stand off from the local crowd of "diploma mills" that are proliferating recently when higher education has become another commodity of the market economy. Accreditation and certification operate in a slightly different way as described ahead in this document. Internationalization, on the other hand, is the process of establishing relationships with foreign countries. It includes import and export of higher education in modalities such as transnational corporate universities, campus franchising, and online learning, as well as mobility of programs, faculty, and students.

There are some important implications, especially for Latin American educational institutions, as a consequence of the transformation of higher education now underway across the world. Those repercussions occur in the intersection of accreditation and internationalization of higher education, and are analyzed in this document under the framework of the global knowledge economy, the new economy where human capital and knowledge are the crucial factors of production.

Most of the changes in higher education are driven by the phenomenon of globalization, where technological developments like the Internet, cheaper telecommunications, and the market forces are playing an instrumental role. The terms import and export of knowledge are also used to characterize the internationalization of higher education and research. Higher education has been largely isolated from the developments of the global economy in the past. However, transfer of knowledge, which has not been traditionally considered as

being in the same standing as trading goods in an open market economy, has recently changed when the World Trade Organization (WTO) included education as a service sector. The education sector is currently incorporated in the negotiations of the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) under the auspices of the WTO. This trade liberalization of higher education service along should be enough to raise awareness in educators and policy makers around the world and especially in developing countries; without mentioning the increasing incapacity of local governments to continue providing economical support to education in an era when the demand for higher education is greater than ever. The rapid grow of the knowledge economy brings risks and opportunities to higher education systems in Latin America. Educational leaders and policy makers, then, need to fully engage in all underpinnings of the internationalization of educational services by taking the necessary provisions to maximize the benefits and to minimize the unwanted consequences.

Established universities in developing countries are facing ruthless competition by foreign higher education institutions trying to make themselves attractive to overseas students. Some students in Latin America believe that foreign “world-class”

universities, especially from the United States, offer grater professional prestige and better working opportunities in the global labor market than any local institution. The possibility of enrollment in any of these prestigious universities is highly appreciated by Latin American students. This is an option already available in many developing countries where students can enroll in prestigious transnational universities, local campus franchising, or get a college degree through distance and online learning.

Many local public and private universities in Latin America, especially in the capitals of their countries, are well recognized in the region and overseas. However, there are some that need additional efforts to assure quality and recognition. The adoption of quality international standards by local institutions, as well as the commitment to internationalize their campuses, are necessary steps to counterbalance the competition of foreign universities.

There are some recommendations that experts suggest need to be taken in order to minimize the negative impact of the transfer of knowledge in developing countries. First, Latin American universities should endorse initiatives tending to fully participate in the process of internationalization. Second, besides these internationalization initiatives, efforts need to be accentuated in the promotion of accreditation and certification

of their institutions and programs using quality international standards. Certification, as the mutual recognition and equivalence of careers and programs, not only across the region but also with developed countries, is an important step in the internationalization process. Although some scholars are suggesting the use of ISO9001-styled certifications for higher education, this approach is more adapted to administrative management, and it could compromise the academic sector of the university if it is applied to instruction and research. Third, giving the fact that English is the lingua franca in the international scientific (and business) community, it is imperative that administrators, faculty, and students acquire proficiency in this language. Its importance has been manifested recently in academe, when the European Community decided to launch significant efforts to attract foreign students from around the world by implementing educational programs in English language in almost all areas of knowledge.

Latin American universities seeking international accreditation regularly approach foreign accrediting organizations from developed countries, such as the American's Consortium of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), in their attempts to adopt gold standards or to acquire a stamp of quality for their

institutions. Some educational leaders in Latin America believe that this approach is counterproductive because it could be a way to institutionalize some form of academic dominance or academic colonialism by the academic superpowers. International experts can be hired as external evaluators to help in the self-evaluation processes as part of the local accrediting efforts of Latin American institutions. The external evaluators will provide their expertise and will make recommendations according to the specific characteristics of the local educational community.

The accreditation of higher education institutions in Latin America should be performed by local or regional accreditation boards or committees, or by governmental entities such as the Ministry of Education, or by national consortia of universities. These accrediting agencies need to embrace high quality academic standards. Nevertheless, international recognition is important, but it should be performed in a peer-to-peer basis among regional and foreign academic institutions. The recommended approach in this case is, thus, through certification or equivalence of programs and degrees not only across universities of the region, but as mentioned before, with offshore institutions. The process of certification is less invasive and more respectful of the cultural diversity of the region. Through certification,

academic institutions in the continent should be considered equal partners provide that they adopt quality international standards.

This process can be carry out by credentials evaluation services. For example, Latin American universities can get an equivalence certificate indicating that their programs and degrees are equivalent to third level institutions in the United States. This credential can be obtained through the National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES), the only recognizing body for credential evaluation services in the United States. This certification allows traveling students, graduated from Latin American participant universities, to be admitted in academic programs at any college or university across the United States as if their undergraduate or

graduate degrees were obtained from an accredited American institution. Additionally, an internationally recognized degree allows their recipients to enter into the global labor force. Furthermore, the issuance of diplomas and transcripts in English language for traveling students from Latin American universities is an important step in the internationalization of the respective universities, and also a central step in the globalization of academic credentials.

Consequently, accreditation, certification, and internationalization are overlapping processes that Latin American universities should embrace in order to fully participate, and survive, in the current global knowledge economy.

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