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## **Joint ILO–UNESCO Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendations concerning Teaching Personnel (CEART)**

**Quality of teaching in the context of increasing non-public providers of higher  
education**

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## **Abstract**

The private sector includes a diverse set of providers: elite institutions with world-class status, religious universities with long histories, newer campuses opened or managed by foreign entities, and a small but growing subset of online institutions. Most prominent, however, is the rapid emergence of non-elite and demand-absorbing institutions. These are often small and under-resourced institutions that typically rely on student tuition fees as a primary source of funding, alongside a range of government subsidies. The quality of teaching that occurs in these institutions has been an area of concern, along with questions about the quality assurance mechanisms that provide oversight to the sector. Online models and involvement of foreign providers in the private sector represent additional concerns, as the jurisdiction for regulating these entities is often unclear. Limited information exists on the teaching staff in the private sector, but mostly they are part-time employees with weak academic credentials. Several policy recommendations are suggested, including focusing on regulating organizational behaviors and how excess revenue can be used, recognizing international developments and their private sector implications, developing robust quality assurance mechanisms, and understanding the impact of public sector policies on the private sector business model.

## **Introduction**

This paper provides a descriptive assessment and analysis on the role and function of private higher education in the world today. It draws on comparative research and analysis to document the variety of private sector providers and their funding mechanisms. It discusses issues of quality assurance related to questions about the capacity or willingness of private providers to deliver programs with academic integrity rather than just for the pursuit of profit. And it presents data on the faculty who teach at these institutions, both in the form of generalizations about their working conditions and qualifications, as well as in comparison to the public sector.

Some caveats about this analysis are necessary at the beginning. The definition of “private” is not explored here. In general the literature and research cited here assumes that private is simply the opposite of public. It is clear, however, that the public plays a fundamental role in sponsoring and funding much of the non-public sector. The definition gets very murky very fast when one tries to parse out all of the relationships (Kinser, et al. 2010). Similarly, higher education is the primary terminology used in this paper, even though one could also refer to post-secondary, tertiary, or non-compulsory education as more distinctive or precise categories. The intent is not to limit the review to only university-level education or degree-granting institutions, but simply to provide a shorthand distinction from “lower” education at the secondary level.

Finally, the review is focused on existing research that has a comparative focus. Innumerable case studies exist that document the policies and practices of a country’s higher education system and its relationship to private sector provision. A full accounting and vetting of all of this information would require a level of analysis and synthesis that is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the current work draws on work that is explicitly comparative, in that it seeks to draw on examples from multiple countries to validate its conclusions. As much as possible, too, this review looked to empirical research

from scholars of private higher education, rather than opinions and impressions from those who may only have a narrow perspective on the field. This approach necessarily constrains the information presented here to a relatively small set of scholars and research products, but with the benefit of not mistaking innuendo for fact.

The paper begins with an overview of the diversity of private providers, including its variety of functions within systems, its profit-making status, and the emerging role of cross-border higher education. Next it turns to funding mechanisms for the sector, delving into the ways that the private sector is financed. Regulatory issues are then covered, using the unanticipated development of the private sector (Levy, 2006) as a frame for understanding the challenges inherent in policy discussion today. Quality assurance models and frameworks for the private sector are discussed in the following sections, including how various standards for quality assurance agencies impact private higher education. Online quality assurance is also considered as a subset of the private sector dimension. Finally, private sector academic staff are discussed, alongside the limited data that exists on their employment models and working conditions.

### **Descriptive Typology of Private Providers**

The private sector globally has been classically divided into a three part typology (Levy, 1986). There are elite institutions, which are often indicated by the highly selective student body, but may also have high level research programs or otherwise focus on advanced academic work. This is largely a phenomenon of the United States, with its virtual lock on private higher education with world class status (Praphamontripong and Levy, 2004). In other words, it is rare globally to see a private sector institution focus on top-tier students and academic programs, or make significant inroads in basic research. A second category is represented by religious institutions. Historically - at least in Africa, Europe, and Latin America - these were dominated by Catholic institutions. Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the early United States, on the other hand, Protestant denominations were the sponsors of most new institutions, with religious diversity suggesting each faith should have its own college. With the rise of public higher education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the overall secularization of society in much of the world, the founding of religious-based institutions diminished. More recently, however, evangelical and Islamic institutions have developed in many regions. This is a notable phenomenon in Asia and in parts of Africa, such that now countries may have a mix of religious representation within their higher education systems.

Most private higher education, however, is part of the third category of non-elite or demand-absorbing higher education in Levy's (1986) typology. These are institutions that emerged in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in countries where government-funded education did not provide sufficient access to meet a growing demand for education. Low-cost, and often low-quality, private higher education filled the gap. This is a global phenomenon, with versions seen on every continent and across a range of economies. Even in the United States, where a long tradition of private higher education exists, the private for-profit sector developed rapidly during the 1990s and 2000s following an arc similar to the global trends. The developing world is particularly amenable to the demand-absorbing type, where it often hosts more students than state-sponsored higher education. The transition economies of Eastern

Europe moved quickly into private provision of education (Slantcheva and Levy, 2007), and in many African countries, private higher education is the fastest growing sector of higher education (Varghese, 2006).

There is much variety within the demand-absorbing category. The stereotype across much of the world is that these are nearly all illegitimate diploma mills that have no real cause to be labeled as higher education institutions at all. They emerge to take advantage of government regulatory action or inaction that creates a paying market for higher education. Some are actually fraudulent fly-by-night institutions that open quickly to gather tuition fees and then shut down just as quickly when it becomes clear they are providing nothing of value. But pejorative generalizations about demand-absorbing institutions often are unfair characterizations of large swaths of the sector. Serious demand-absorbing institutions provide education relevant to labor market demands, albeit with weak standards for faculty and facilities that lack typical academic accoutrements. Some may even aspire to more elite status, though at best they might be called semi-elite (Levy, 2011). Nevertheless, the majority of the demand-absorbing institutions are quite clearly non-elite both in terms of the students they serve and the standards they set.

The emergence of private higher education has also been described as attempt to provide something better, something different, or something more (Geiger, 1986). The better institutions historically would include only the small number of elite private universities, but one could argue that new technologies and pedagogies employed by some non-elite private entities could also be seen as better than existing options. Alternatively, these new entities could be neither better nor worse, but simply different. In classic descriptions of the private sector, Catholic or other religious/cultural institutions are considered to be different options. Today, a range of private sector institutions, such as online higher education or international “American” universities in many countries, would also be classified as different entities under this rubric. The last role of private higher education is to provide something more - in other words, provide extra capacity for a particular country or system of higher education. The demand-absorbing model reflects this private sector interest in offering more education, without attempting necessarily to be better or different from what currently exists.

Another distinction within private higher education is with respect to its profit-making status. Although most private higher education is still legally nonprofit, for-profit higher education has expanded greatly both in terms of the number of countries where it is allowed as well as the scale of provision within those countries (Kinser, 2010). At its 2010 peak in the United States, for-profit institutions enrolled 13 percent of all students in postsecondary education. Topping that is Brazil where the for-profit higher education sector is booming. Ten large for-profit chains now educate one-third of the country’s students, nearly doubling their reach in the last five years (Khan, 2015). Australia and England have both encouraged the development of for-profit higher education in recent years. China, since 2011, has accepted for-profit higher education as an option for private provision of higher education (Li, 2015).

For-profit institutions are almost always considered demand-absorbing in the Levy (1986) typology, and in many instances are very low quality. But this should not be taken to mean that for-profit requires low quality. There are many routes to profitability that do not involve compromises to quality (Kinser,

2013a). Program delivery can be inherently low-cost, yet the market will pay a premium for some special aspect of the delivery. This is the model for many international branch campuses or private institutions that rely on partnerships with overseas institutions: they can charge more for the program because the foreign or English aspect of it is perceived to have greater intrinsic value. Alternatively, the low-cost program can be priced according to what other, higher cost programs charge. Because of the lack of transparency, it is not clear to the consumer that excess revenue is being generated. This explains some of the ways in which for-profit institutions in the United States generate profit. Reducing or eliminating cross-subsidies is another strategy to profitability. In education this would mean focusing on a single subject that can be delivered profitably, and not expand offerings to other areas. Cross-subsidies are so common in higher education, that it can be a savvy strategy to remove them, as many market-focused institutions have done. Finally, efficiency is a third route to profitability. In education, this means delivering the same program to the same number of students at a lower cost, or to more students at the same cost. Cost reductions can come from eliminating auxiliary services that are not directly connected to the education. Or reductions could come from reducing the labor costs to deliver the education. In this model, the institution leans heavily on contingent instructors, or faculty that moonlight from other positions. This last case is what many see as the primary - and problematic - strategy for profitability in the private sector globally: relying on low quality teaching staff to teach large numbers of students.

This is where concern for quality rightly resides: in the practice of education, not simply in linking it to profitability. In fact, it is an accurate assessment that in much of the world, private nonprofit education is also of obvious lower quality compared to the public sector. But this statement holds less significance than one might suspect. Bright-line distinctions between for profit and nonprofit in education are lacking in many countries (Kinser, 2010), meaning that many legally nonprofit institutions are rather indistinguishable from for-profit institutions in practice. India is a good example of this phenomenon, with legal prohibitions against for-profit higher education, yet with an extensive revenue-generating private sector. The flip side is represented by a country like Ukraine, which requires the for-profit form out of skepticism that any private institution would truly be nonprofit. The key point is to resist presuming profit and poor educational quality are inexorably linked.

The last private sector division that should be mentioned is cross-border higher education (Kinser, et al, 2010; Lane and Kinser, 2011b). This provides an interesting case for private provision since most branch campuses are sponsored by public sector institutions, but the overseas locations are usually regulated as private entities by the host country. Lane (2011) points out that branch campuses often overlap the Levy (1986) typology categories. In some cases they are considered something superior to what is currently in place. In other instances that reflects a different approach. And, in some countries particularly in the Middle East, the branch campus model is relied upon to provide demand absorbing capacity. The regulatory and funding mechanisms are often different for branch campuses than for native private higher education institutions. Some countries have also developed distinctive quality assurance models, and in all cases, the quality assurance procedures must also include home country agencies. Organizationally, too, the campuses may be set up as essentially for-profit enterprises. In some cases for-profit corporations may have an ownership stake in the venture, or may hire a for-profit company to manage the enterprise. For example, Monash University's campus in South Africa and Xi'an Jiaotong –

Liverpool University in China are both operated in partnership with for-profit Laureate International Universities. The complicated nature of these multilateral relationships, and the typically explicit public purpose for which many of the institutions are recruited by host governments, suggests a blurring of the ordinary division of higher education into public and private provision, and between nonprofit and for-profit. Generalizations can be presented, but the reality on the ground may not comport to abstract conceptualization.

### **Private Higher Education Funding Mechanisms**

A great paradox in the current era is the combination of a nearly universal value of access to higher education and an austerity agenda that has limited government's ability to fully fund access for all those who wish to avail themselves of it. Partly the funding constraints are driven by the growing cost of higher education, especially when balanced against other compelling projects that governments also wish to support. And, unlike most other public needs, higher education is one arena where there is demonstrated evidence that user fees and other non-governmental sources of revenue can be reasonably used to support much of the activity. This fundamental reality has been translated into a philosophy funding for higher education that relies on the principles of cost-sharing: "the simple fact that the underlying costs of higher education are shared by governments (or taxpayers), parents, students, and philanthropists" (Johnstone, 2006, p. xv). This has become over the last quarter century a global policy trend where costs are increasingly shifted from governments to parents and students, in addition to other forms of private-public partnerships (Cheng, 2009), with the privatization of higher education as a widespread result.

It is a truism that private higher education cannot exist without some form of cost-sharing at the system level. It seems that the global rise of private higher education followed the growing acceptance of tuition fees for public higher education in many countries around the world. In other words, once you recognize the principle of nongovernmental support for higher education, it seems virtually impossible to prohibit private sector provision. This is the case even when the intent of policies regarding funding and cost-sharing in the public sector were not taken with the development of the private sector in mind.

There are three main models for funding private higher education. The first is through the payment of tuition fees either by students, their families or their employers. There are several methods to facilitate the payment of fees, and the government can take on more or less responsibility for helping private education be affordable. On the one end are countries that have very limited or no government involvement in affordability questions. Most subsidies for higher education are devoted to the public sector, leaving private higher education as a commodity governed by the market for its services. On the other end are direct subsidies to students in the form of grants that provide essential tuition discounting, often means-tested, so that low income students can still pursue higher education. Sometimes these can be the practical result of a "so-called" loan scheme, where the principal is never collected, as is seen in some countries in Africa for example (Pillay, 2013). In the middle are strategies for deferring tuition fees for some period of time after graduation, or extending payments so that tuition fees are not paid all at once before beginning the program of study. The deferred payment strategy is most common globally, and may be referred to as a student loan (United States), graduate tax (Ethiopia), or income contingent

contribution (Scotland). The benefits to the student are in creating more manageable payments by stretching out the time for repayment. For institutions, usually these plans allow the private sector to get all of the money for education upfront via a lender, though there are cases of institutionally financed loan schemes in the United States and elsewhere. Ironically, the deferred payment model may not actually reduce the cost of education for the student, especially when debt financing uses some elements of market-based interest rates.

A second strategy for financing the private sector is via direct or indirect support from the government. This could include grants to students for the payment of tuition as mentioned earlier, but also direct subsidies of the institutions themselves. Governments fund particular institutions, for example, to encourage programs with specific workforce development goals. International branch campuses in many countries enjoy direct subsidies from the government or from a government-controlled foundation as a way of covering start-up expenses for these new institutions (Lane and Kinser, 2011a). Another form of direct support may be in the form of research grants, though these are relatively less common as the number of research-focused private sector institutions is small. A final subsidy that private sector institutions get is a tax exemption often provided to non-profit institutions in many countries in recognition of the fundamental public purpose of education. It is, however, quite uncommon for for-profit higher education to have tax-exempt status. And even with ostensibly nonprofit institutions, excessive revenue may still be taxed under the idea that as profits are made, taxes should be paid.

In general it should be understood that government funding of private sector higher education is not unusual. Salerno (2004) suggests it is preferable to think of funding decisions more as a process where governments decide: 1) what institutions are legitimate higher education entities, and which are not, 2) which of these providers will receive funding, and 3) how funding will be disseminated among the various eligible entities (p. 109-110).

The third form of financing is through private philanthropy, or its for-profit cousin, private equity. The United States has a strong tradition of supporting private nonprofit higher education through philanthropic contribution, with tax code provisions that create incentives for donating to an institution of higher education. This model is not as common elsewhere, though it has conceptual parallels in the charitable foundations that support many private institutions in India and Africa, as well as the more common private sector sponsorship by religious denominations. In the for-profit world, private equity serves much the same purpose. With so much more capital at its disposal, however, the volume of money funneled to the sponsored institutions can be enormous. Kroton Educacional, a Brazilian education company, has a market capitalization of over US\$6 billion (Knobel, 2013). If it were a nonprofit, that valuation would put it among the top 15 of endowments in the United States. Another for-profit company, Laureate International Universities, was given US\$150 million by the International Finance Corporation to expand its presence in Africa (Redden, 2013). This form of financing is potentially quite significant for companies that are seeking to expand their market share, allowing them to outspend all but the wealthiest institutions, and providing the capital necessary to quickly ramp up capacity. This last point helps explain why they have been welcomed in many countries that have limited resources to facilitate state-sponsored expansion of the higher education system.

The range of funding options in private higher education in many ways simply mimics the newly diversified funding for public education in much of the world. Indeed, Parker (2012) suggests that the global trend for higher education has been to operate increasingly as a market-driven entity (see also Johnstone, 2006). The relative importance of the various strands is different, however, and the influence that non-governmental actors have over the delivery of higher education is correspondingly greater. Moreover, private higher education finance often is designed explicitly to lead to excess revenue generation. The regulatory frameworks need to address what can be done with this revenue, and guard against private interests serving to warp the public purpose of higher education.

### **Private Higher Education Regulatory and Policy Frameworks**

The primary reality concerning regulation and policy with respect to private higher education is that it did not emerge before, and therefore guide, the establishment of private sector institutions. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases, there was little recognition of the coming explosion of private higher education and almost no examples of a government that anticipated a private sector and specified what role it should play within the country's system of higher education. The history and political context matter, of course, but what is most salient is the level of "surprise" (Levy, 2006) that many policy-makers found upon realizing the private sector behemoth on their door step.

The for-profit sector in the United States provides a relevant example (Kinser, 2006). A series of incremental changes in the federal Higher Education Act in the late 1990s and early 2000s, coupled with new agenda from accreditation agencies to focus on mission fulfillment as the key criteria for quality assurance, led to huge enrollment increases in for-profit institutions by 2010. The changes mostly were not targeted to benefit for-profit higher education specifically. They were aimed at encouraging online higher education, making it easier for institutions to recruit students, raising limits on how much financial aid institutions could receive. For accreditation agencies, the mission focus was intended to support innovation in higher education by accepting more nontraditional faculty roles and allowing alternative curricular models to flourish. The intent may not have been to support the for-profit form, but the result could not have been more plain. In little more than a decade, enrollment went from about three percent of the overall student population to nearly 13 percent, and the biggest companies were opening new campuses and buying up smaller competitors at a frenetic pace. And when they ran out of for-profit institutions to buy, they turned to nonprofit institutions and simply converted them to for-profit status.

This unanticipated development of for-profit higher education drew the attention of policy-makers. It was easy to ignore the sector when it was little more than a rounding error in overall enrollment. But its fast growth and growing reliance on federal tuition aid subsidies triggered several governmental investigations that revealed worrisome and problematic behavior on student recruitment and low quality outcomes. Some restrictions that had been lifted in the previous decade were reinstated, and new rules were proposed to reign in the worst abuses. Accrediting agencies also realized the incentives for the for-profit sector were in conflict with the assumptions made under existing transfer of ownership policies. They made changes to their rules to make it more difficult to convert a nonprofit institution to for-profit status and to pay closer attention to the business models proposed by the institutions seeking

accreditation. The new regulatory environment disrupted the for-profit providers' plans for future growth, with enrollments after 2010 declining across the board for three straight years. Many campuses have closed, and several large corporations are on the verge of bankruptcy. But other for-profit institutions have remained resilient, continuing to grow and even thrive during this period. And others that have struggled have turned the corner and are now stronger institutions poised for further growth.

The United States case demonstrates a common pattern in private higher education, albeit one compressed into little more than a decade. A nascent private sector is encouraged, passively or actively, by regulatory changes. Small openings within the broader system are exploited leading to outsized growth and expanding revenue streams. The available money encourages behavior that puts revenue generation ahead of good academic quality. Regulators begin to pay attention and realize that unintended consequences are reducing the efficacy of the private sector as a model for increasing access. Low quality and weak student outcomes become more obvious. New rules are established in order to tamp down the worst actors and force the remaining ones to modify their operations.

Despite having very different regulatory regimes, countries such as England, Australia, Vietnam, China, Brazil, and South Africa, all find themselves at various points along the continuum. Private higher education in post-communist Europe saw similar issues as it sought legitimacy within formerly state-dominated systems (Slantcheva and Levy, 2007). Growth rarely has occurred unabated, leading scholars to anticipate the decline of private higher education in future years as a result (Kinser, et al. 2011; Levy, 2013).

There are a few lessons that can be learned from these patterns, though, suggesting regulatory frameworks for private higher education that may provide useful models for policy reform. First, much of the growth of private higher education takes place within a policy framework that is based on increasing student access to education. Brazil and India for example are seeking to raise their age cohort participation rate above 30 percent. They are relying on the private sector to help them get there. By focusing on access, policies tend to provide incentives for enrollment with only weak accountability for outcomes of the educational process. A reformed regulatory framework should include outcomes-based measures to ensure that institutional practices will have the effects desired by policy-makers in terms of skilled workforce and a competitive economy, among other goals. Brazil is recognizing this reality now (Bowater, 2015).

Second, a debt-financed private sector needs to have a method for ensuring that the education provided is worth the cost. On the one hand, protections are needed for students to make sure they are not being asked to take on too much debt. On the other hand, easy access to money needs to be maintained to provide a viable path to education for low-income students. The balance between the two allows sufficient revenue to flow to the private institution in order to maintain sufficient quality and allow reasonable return on investment by the student.

Third, the private sector should fit as a rational part of a higher education system, and have a distinctive role in light of the public sector mission. In most countries, the state supported institutions have elite status, leaving native private sector institutions to work predominately in a demand absorbing function.

Policy makers should take into consideration the history and academic culture of the public sector when determining if a more competitive system is desired. For example, instituting policies of student choice across sectors can lead to a high pressure sales environment to boost enrollment at the expense of student success. Identifying and enforcing distinctive academic roles for institutions can help define the private market for education.

Lastly, the quality assurance mechanisms need to be adjusted to relate to the distorting pressures that can come from a tuition-fee dependent revenue model. This becomes even more relevant when the educational institution is owned by a publicly-traded corporation. Short-term financial gain can be had at the expense of long-term educational progress (Kinser, 2007). In other words, it is easy to be a successful business without being a successful institution of higher education.

### **Quality assurance**

Formal systems of quality assurance in higher education are a fairly new phenomenon. Although there are examples in the United Kingdom and the United States that are more than a century old, the modern accreditation model in the United States began in the 1950s and 1960s, and the system currently in place in England was established in the 1990s. Indeed, across much of the world, quality assurance was not an important feature of higher education regulation or governance until the 1990s. Since that time, however, most countries have established quality assurance mechanisms for higher education. As evidence of the global trends, in 1991, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) was founded with eight charter members. The organization now includes over 250 quality assurance agencies representing countries from Albania to Vietnam.

There are several reasons this trend toward quality assurance has occurred over the last quarter century (Kinser, 2014). Most significant is the fact that the diversification of higher education systems led to a greater variety of higher education institutions. A unified public sector, with a flagship national university at its core, was increasingly paired with other tertiary institutions, public and private. Universities themselves became more central to the economic development of nations and regions, leading to greater calls for accountability and results from regulators and policy-makers. In this evolving landscape, quality assurance became the calling card for validating new organizational forms and missions. No longer could higher education assume that society would continue to trust the value of its activities, without verifying results.

Not coincidentally, the growth of private sector institutions also emerged as a global phenomenon during this time. Non-governmental provision of education removed state sponsorship as an implicit quality assurance mechanism, and required other methods to ensure that the private sector continued to serve the traditional public purpose of higher education. This can be construed at its most basic as simple consumer protection, much as the government has an interest in protecting any commercial activity from fraudulent products. But because of the argument that higher education is expected to serve the public good (e.g., Chambers, 2005), quality assurance also evolved into a system that was intended to protect the value of higher education from too close of an association with market forces. As the majority of the newly emerging private sector consisted of small institutions, underfunded and

narrowly focused on lower level studies, the danger of unscrupulous providers taking over the marketplace was - and is - real. The expansion of tuition fees as a source of funding, as well as the financial aid and loan schemes that help students pay for higher education, further led quality assurance to be seen as a way to establish the legitimacy of institutions that would provide value for the financial investments students and society are making in them.

The growing demand for higher education also encouraged widespread adoption of quality assurance mechanisms. Demand plus institutional diversity means choice becomes an important feature of more higher education systems. Quality assurance provides information to students about the various options they have for continuing their education. It also sets a floor for the provision of education so that any legitimate institution must meet a minimum standard for the delivery of courses and degrees. Demand can also lure institutions to substitute profit for academic standards as the guiding measure of success. Quality assurance is intended in part to verify that market forces have not captured the mission of higher education.

It is important to also note the role of internationalization of higher education as a driving force for the significance of quality assurance. Quality assurance is almost everywhere a national responsibility. It reflects the notion of educational sovereignty: that is, the right of a country to determine what educational products will be offered within its own borders (Lane & Kinser, 2014). The involvement of foreign actors in the education space requires vigilance to guard against fraudulent actors taking advantage of a local population. This is not just a role for external quality assurance agencies. The internal quality control of universities is also significant here. It is a much different process to ensure quality in a program delivered on a traditional campus than it is to make sure a program half a world away maintains similar levels of quality. Finally, internationalization means that local cultural norms for higher education will need to be made explicit so that foreign providers can understand the systems they seek to enter. This is particularly important when internationalized higher education acts essentially as private sector actors, looking to develop alternative revenue streams to draw resources from one country into another (Lindsay & Blanchett, 2011).

### **Quality Assurance Mechanisms for Private Higher Education**

Quality assurance reviews have become fairly standardized over the past quarter century, with broad consensus over the activities covered by quality assurance and the method of evaluation used by quality assurance agencies. The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) has done much to establish a set of good practices (INQAAHE, 2007) that serves in practice as a guide for quality assurance agencies worldwide. Several of these guidelines are relevant to the review of private higher education. The following is meant as a critique of these policies, with specific consideration of how they might be ineffective for private sector providers.

First, the guidelines describe the relationship between the quality assurance agency and the institutions it covers as one that:

- recognises that institutional and programmatic quality and quality assurance are primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves;

- respects the academic autonomy, identity and integrity of the institutions or programs;
- applies standards or criteria that have been subject to reasonable consultation with stakeholders; and
- aims to contribute to both quality improvement and accountability of the institution. (INQAAHE, 2007, p. 8).

These items relate to the dual nature of quality assurance. It has both internal and external dimensions. The basic assumption of modern quality assurance practice is that an institution's own internal processes and procedures are a necessary component of any reasonable quality assurance regime. The role of a quality assurance agency is to provide external validation for the internal management of quality. Moreover, the institution is also expected to be given some sovereign authority over its own programs and deference toward the decisions of program managers. This means that the institution gets a say in the assessment of quality, and in some cases literally gets to define what quality means. These guidelines underline a key component of quality assurance: the institution under review is presumed to want to get better. It not only has the capacity for improvement, but is motivated to improve. The private sector, however, may have motivations and interests other than quality improvements. It may want to protect its revenue or profits, or it may have a particular interest in establishing or expanding programs where it sees extra student demand. The emphasis on institutional autonomy can allow the private sector institution to manipulate the process by identifying distinctive program goals and propose favorable quality measures. To be sure, the goal of accountability is still a significant barrier too unfettered private sector action. But quality assurance guidelines may still leave the door open for private interests to take precedence over the public good.

A second important dimension for the private sector involves the guidelines' stipulation for what quality assurance standards should cover. These include

the core activities of an institution of higher education or program. The standards should explicitly address all areas of institutional activity that fall within the [quality assurance agency's] scope, such as teaching, learning, research, community work, etc. (INQAAHE, 2007, p. 8)

This aspect of the guidelines shows that quality assurance, in general, must touch on all key aspects of higher education activities and performance, including faculty credentials and learning outcomes. In fact, a 2010 INQAAHE survey of 50 small states (Stella, 2010), most with populations under 1.5 million, revealed how common this sort of comprehensive evaluation is, even for countries with limited resources. The survey also documented nearly universal applicability of quality assurance standards to private sector institutions. It is clear, then, that quality assurance is considering teaching and learning elements in the private sector. The fact that these issues are part of the review, however, does not mean that they have been satisfactorily addressed. The countries in the INQAAHE study reported frustration with an inadequate system of reporting on quality of teaching and learning. Yet even within this system, their quality reviews showed that private sector faculty did not have the requisite qualifications to teach in the programs they were assigned to. They also noted that private providers expanded student enrollments beyond what they could reasonably serve in a quality program. These

survey results provide good evidence that quality assurance agencies are aware of the problems with private providers, even though they may struggle to address the underlying issues.

Third, the INQAAHE guidelines make clear that the quality assurance review process should include a multi-step process. The institution conducts a self-evaluation, then that self-evaluation is subjected to external peer review, and finally the agency has a follow-up procedure to make sure all recommendations are being followed by the institution. The self-study allows the organization under review to conduct its own evaluation of its operations, and the quality assurance agency is responsible for verifying the resulting brief. The program is essentially conducting its own audit to collect proof that it is actually meeting the standards itself. An external review of the self-study is intended to validate the claims made in the brief by subjecting them to on-site analysis and verification. Both processes are open for manipulation by an unscrupulous provider as they imply a level of trust in institutional integrity and access to revealing documentation by the external reviewers. The final step of required follow-up procedures represents additional difficulties. If organized centrally, a large bureaucracy is needed to manage the process. If decentralized, coordination of activities and the possibility of inconsistent reviews must be considered. The capacity of the education provider to adequately respond to the quality assurance demands of the external review must also be considered. On the one hand demands for data and reporting of information must be appropriate to the quality assurance task and not burdensome to the educational organization. On the other hand, the quality assurance unit needs to ensure that the educational provider has the internal controls necessary to maintain quality before, during, and after the external review. In countries where resources are limited, this can be a difficult responsibility for the quality assurance agency. And, because many private sector providers themselves have limited resources, it can be a delicate balancing act to determine when the follow-up review is necessary for quality assurance without being a financially debilitating burden for the institution.

Finally, the INQAAHE guidelines require the quality assurance agency to review each institution under its jurisdiction in an “equivalent” way. This would seem to preclude treating private sector providers differently from other higher education entities. Many countries, however, do have separate policies for private institutions of higher education, or at minimum subject them to closer scrutiny within a common framework. Most with separate policies offer a parallel process for the private sector, mainly focusing the variations on those issues that are distinctive to the private sector: ownership, financial accounting, or advertising for example. Some, though, offer very different or even unique processes. Cyprus and Mauritius, for example, have quality assurance systems which currently only apply to private higher education. The trend, however, especially in larger countries, is towards a more integrated approach. This reflects both the maturing of the quality assurance systems, as well as the more routine way that many countries now view the private sector.

Whereas the format of the quality assurance review has become relatively well-established, there is less consensus over the scope of the review. Here the challenge is less about whether the private sector is included, but rather whether the majority of private activity is even considered higher education under the jurisdiction of the quality assurance regime. In systems where quality assurance is limited to judgments about degree granting universities or similar postsecondary institutions, relatively few private sector providers might be included. The Program for Research on Private Higher Education

(PROPHE) reviewed the private sector in over 100 countries and found the majority of activity in the non-university category. This review likely underreports the extent of lower level or short-cycle private higher education because only countries with accurate counts of these institutions could be included in the tally. Even the most robust quality assurance procedures cannot evaluate what they do not recognize.

Another concern about scope is whether all eligible institutions or programs actually complete the quality assurance process. PROPHE's global assessment of the private sector also found that private providers are typically very small in terms of enrollment, but constitute on average the majority of higher education institutions in the reviewed countries. Other research documents how quickly they have emerged on the global scene (Kinser, et al, 2010; Levy 2006). Small institutions that pop up quickly can readily avoid regulatory scrutiny by operating under the radar. The INQAAHE survey of small states' quality assurance systems (Stella, 2010) documents this concern as well, noting that many private entities have not received authorization to operate as legally required. This difficulty in capturing all of the institutions that are required to submit to quality assurance review is exacerbated by gaps in the human and financial resources necessary to support the full implementation of quality assurance systems.

In all, these common mechanisms for quality assurance show a system that has the potential to provide adequate oversight of the private sector, but many questions about its efficacy in practice remain. The difficulties seem not to be about lacking the will to insist on high quality private higher education. Nor does the problem seem to be a lack of awareness of a problem. Rather constraints exist regarding the capacity to fully review the myriad of private sector providers in countries with limited resources, as well as the ability to monitor compliance with quality assurance norms within a system that is designed to rely on self-reports and institutional academic integrity.

### **Quality assurance of online education**

Online education is growing quickly around the world, even as concerns about the digital divide remain. Much like the development of mobile phone technologies, however, allowed some previously unconnected communities to bypass wired phone access for wireless phone technology, the online university can provide virtual access to education while by-passing the development of physical campuses. Some of the online activity comes from traditional universities seeking to expand access by using technology to reach students who otherwise could not attend. More comes from private for-profit institutions that are looking for the revenue that online provision represents. In the United States, for example, most of the enrollment increases of the last decade came from online divisions of for-profit institutions (Kinser 2010). Whether from for-profit or traditional higher education, these are just the examples of how institutions are designing and delivering educational credentials online. The procedures and policies regarding quality assurance for these institutions are quite similar to what would occur in campus-based face-to-face models (Jung & Latchem, 2012). Questions about faculty and student learning should still be answered. Reliance on the institutional self-report and external review would still be standard.

There are, however, a few differences between quality assurance in face-to face versus online education that should not be ignored. The first involves answering questions about jurisdiction. Should online programs be regulated only when they have a physical presence in a country or region? Or can the mere presence of students be a sufficient trigger for quality assurance review? Many online programs do not have physical or legal presence in countries where students nevertheless are engaged in academic pursuits. In these cases, countries would find it difficult to identify the responsible party and have any leverage to require them to submit to a quality assurance review.

The second difference is in how online programs are structured. The academic facilities are virtual, meaning there is no library to visit and no classrooms to assess. Many quality assurance standards assume physical campuses and give detailed requirements about books in the library or the size of an adequate classroom space. These standards obviously need adjustment for institutions that operate by providing online access to faculty and books.

The issues with quality assurance in these instances can be readily solved. Much of the work has already been done via the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education (2005). The guidelines focus on international education but contain good advice about working with the country of origin for academic programs and making the expectation for quality assurance explicit to all who seek to serve students in their borders. In this, it is little different from the principles of academic sovereignty that guide all interests in educational activity. It is creative problem solving combined with technological expertise. Another strategy is represented by the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement developed in the United States by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE, 2014). This is a voluntary agreement that establishes standards for cross-border higher education offered via distance education. States agree to accept courses and programs from other participating states without requiring additional regulatory approval. Such bilateral or multilateral agreements hold great potential for similar activities on a global scale.

Another form of technology inspired education is more difficult to address. These are represented by the many non-institutional actors who are developing innovative ways of delivering education via technology. A report by IBIS capital (2013) on global e-learning initiatives shows that one-third of all private equity expenditures in global education are at the postsecondary level, with up to 75% of all mergers and acquisitions focused on e-learning enterprises. This is a trillion dollar industry worldwide and the goals of the investors are more about making a profit than developing education as a public good. The most visible component of this trend are the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that emerged in recent years with much publicity. What makes MOOCs so difficult to assess is that they are not delivered for credit, nor do they fit into any program of study. Although they are developed by traditional—and quite reputable—institutions, they have no formal connection with the quality assurance programs that those institutions have gone through. Other technology enhanced educational models include those based on badges and stackable credentials (Carey, 2012), or outsourced course provided by a third party such as StraighterLine. More variety comes from the role of competency based programs that can award credentials based on assessments and not course work.

Quality assurance is designed to handle institutionally based programs that lead to a recognized credential. There is no method yet to address individual courses or learning modules that do not directly connect to an educational program at an institution of higher education. Recently, the US Council on Higher Education Accreditation established a working group to explore quality assurance for alternative providers of education. This has promised to establish some working principles, but the quickly changing landscape still looks daunting for a robust quality assurance effort.

### **Employment models for private sector faculty**

The basic assessment of private sector faculty in much of the world is that they are part-time employees with minimal academic credentials (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2010). Moonlighting is common as well, with public sector faculty augmenting their salaries by teaching extra in the private sector. Altbach and his colleagues are clear in framing this as a fundamental tactic necessary for the existence of a viable private sector: “In much of the world the private sector survives by hiring academic staff from public universities who teach part time at private universities” (Altbach, Reisberg and Pacheco, 2012, p. 16). But even they acknowledge another reality about the status of faculty in the private sector: data are largely unavailable on faculty employment status and roles. Much of the information on the private sector relies on small surveys, anecdotal evidence and the participation of selected country experts. There are a few generalizations, however, that seem to hold up from this research. First, with some exceptions, public universities tend to pay better than private universities. The public sector also offers better working conditions, defined by fewer teaching hours. Private sector academics tend to have less job security and not have as much autonomy in designing and teaching their classes. Research is rarely an expectation for faculty in private higher education, and their contracts typically specify only teaching obligations. So participation in administrative responsibilities or engagement in shared governance is uncommon. In sum, faculty are paid only to teach in the private sector, not paid that much, and have little autonomy in their role.

Additional data on the employment status of faculty in private higher education comes from PROPHE (Table 1). The researchers provide detailed data on private higher education in 17 countries (plus the United States, not discussed here). Only nine of those countries had any verifiable data on the employment status of the private sector faculty, specifically whether they were employed full-time or part-time. This ranged from a low of 40.4 percent in Russia, to a high of 81.5 percent in Mexico. All but two countries, Russia and Chile, had more than half of the private sector academics working full-time; most are part-time academics. In addition, nine of the countries were able to provide the academic credentials of private sector faculty. Four of the countries reported that the majority of the private sector faculty held graduate degrees, and two—Russia and Poland—reporting that most held doctorates. The other five countries reported far fewer private sector faculty with graduate degrees, generally only around one-third of the faculty held these credentials. These limited data generally support the global reality as identified by Altbach, et al (2012). They also, however, point out the variability among countries, and the great difficulty in gathering comparable information on the private sector academic. Most information comes anecdotally, such as from a recent story where an educational consultant in Brazil was quoted with concerns about the lack of academic staff with doctorates in the private sector

(Bowater, 2015). In this case, we can use PROPHE information to validate the assertion, but it is rare that such empirical data are available.

Table 1  
PROPHE Data on Private Sector Faculty

Country	Part-Time Faculty %	Faculty with PhD %	Faculty with Masters %
Brazil	61.3	17.7	43.0
Bulgaria	76.6	--	--
Chile	47.8	15.7	23.2
Dominican Republic	54.4	1.9	34.7
Egypt	--	4.1	25.6
Georgia	74.4	45.7	54.3
Japan	61.5	--	--
Malaysia	--	4.1	25.6
Mexico	81.5	3.6	27.0
Poland	63.3	83.4	16.6
Russia	40.4	59.2	--

Note: Data year for each country varies.

Source: [http://www.albany.edu/dept/eaps/prophe/national\\_data.html](http://www.albany.edu/dept/eaps/prophe/national_data.html)

Levy (2005) discusses the role of faculty in designing curriculum in the private sector, and concludes that they may have greater autonomy than their public sector colleagues. This is because dictates about what to teach from a central ministry do not always apply to the private sector. Levy limits this observation by noting that the reverse is also true in the many cases where public entities place strict requirements on course offerings from the private sector through validation schemes and other formal oversight roles. Absent this oversight, Levy notes that many private sector institutions just copy the curriculum from the public sector anyway. They do this not just out of convenience but also to derive legitimacy from being able to promote nearly identical course structures as the established public sector. There is also the familiarity that faculty moonlighting from their public sector roles would have in simply repeating the same course for their private sector employers.

The predominance of faculty with multiple teaching positions in the private sector suggests that they would have less time to devote to students with a consequent decline in quality. This may be a logical conclusion, but research that tests this proposition is lacking. There is evidence to support the conclusion that private sector faculty generally teach more students as compared to their public institution peers (Table 2), though this is not universal and in many of the documented cases the differences are not great. Still it seems clear that private sector faculty in demand-absorbing institutions are required to teach more students simply because more students are interested in enrolling.

A second issue emerges with public sector employees taking on additional teaching responsibilities in the private sector. As Altbach, Reisberg and Pacheco (2012) make clear, this is an existential issue for the private sector. The additional workload would likely impact not just the students in the private institution, but their public sector students as well. In addition, even though research is not typically a demand in the private sector, it often is in the public sector. Additional teaching activity in the private

sector would likely lead to reduced research productivity by the participating faculty. The blame for this situation, however, is not easy to ascribe. The private sector can be targeted for poaching academics from the public sector, rather than investing in their own faculty. The faculty who take on such roles may be held responsible for permitting the neglect of their students and research in their publicly funded positions. At the same time, relatively low salaries for public sector academics in many countries force faculty to seek out additional money from other sources in order to maintain a middle class lifestyle (Altbach, Reisberg and Pacheco, 2012). And the private sector is able to employ experienced academics with sufficient credentials, based on the public sector employment, to serve as faculty in a second, part-time capacity. If not for the availability of this source of talent, many private sector institutions would be forced to hire even less qualified people, or would simply have to close.

Table 2  
Number of students per full-time faculty

Country	Public sector students	Private sector students
Armenia	12	23
Brazil	16	117
China	14	11
Columbia	21	32
Ethiopia	29	75
Germany	11	45
Italy	30	54
Japan	10	21
Kazakhstan	15	28
Latvia	31	17
Malaysia	15	19
Mexico	28	98
Nigeria	27	16
Norway	18	31
Russia	18	37
Saudi Arabia	20	25
United Kingdom	20	14
United States	21	17

Adapted from Androushchak and Yudkevich, 2012

### Summary of Policy Recommendations

Reviewing the role of private higher education, quality assurance and the faculty role suggests several policy recommendations. These are summarized below:

- The great diversity of the sector and the variations among countries in how it is identified and treated shows that a universal definition of private higher education is lacking. Policies should be developed that target behaviors by private sector entities, rather than targeting institutions

with imprecise labels that may leave out some entities, or inappropriately include others, in the regulatory reforms.

- Since excess revenue generation is a feature of much of the private sector globally, policies should explicitly designate what can be done with this revenue. For examples, policy should address whether revenue can be distributed to owners, invested in related or unrelated businesses, converted into foreign currency, or removed from the country. Alternatively, policy can insist that excess revenue must remain in the educational institution for the benefit of students. These policies may be different for different types of institutions or different ownership models, and can also be linked to the tax status of the institution.
- The globalization of education has resulted in great mobility of students, staff, curriculum, and institutions. Private sector entities have emerged to facilitate and participate in international activities. Clear identification of when a foreign entity is subject to native regulatory action is needed. Statements of educational sovereignty may be helpful to guide policymakers in formulating these policies.
- Quality assurance of higher education is widespread and has developed reasonable international standards. Policies should not only adhere to these standards, but also be able to sustain a sufficient review and audit process to determine whether the standards are being met. Enforcement should be directed toward correcting low quality in a formative assessment process, with clear authority to close down entities that are not fulfilling their quality commitments.
- It is important to recognize that funding decisions for public sector institutions, national policies regarding admissions and curricula in the public sector, and traditions regarding the role and status of public universities in society, may combine to encourage the growth of the private sector. For example, the financial standing of the public sector impacts the private sector by limiting access and encouraging the development of demand-absorbing institutions. The salaries paid to public sector staff may inadvertently encourage faculty to moonlight in the private sector. Policies that seek to address the academic standing of the private sector should take into consideration how public sector actions can influence the private sector business model.

### **Areas for Further Research**

International data to answer key questions on the quality of private higher education and their academic staff are missing or difficult to find. Additional research in several areas is needed to address this deficiency.

- A review of regulations regarding private higher education, including the range of legal definitions of private and for-profit higher education, should be completed. The aim would be to develop a taxonomy of private sector regulation that could guide further research into the efficacy of various regulatory models.
- Likewise, a review of quality assurance policies, standards, and procedures for the private sector is needed, expanding upon the limited review conducted by INQAAHE as described in this paper.

- Comprehensive data on private sector faculty should be collected. In particular, information on faculty roles and activities from single country cases should be subjected to rigorous comparative analysis to determine whether patterns are idiosyncratic or have broader matches with global trends.

## Conclusion

This brief review shows the complexity of the private sector globally, as well as the variety of mechanisms that can serve to advance quality in the sector. It is limited, however, by a lack of empirical data to firmly answer the key questions. The result is that common claims about credentials, work load, and performance are repeated regularly, so much so that it is easy to accept them as given. But when one attempts to validate the generalizations by giving numbers and examples, it becomes clear the claims are based on relatively small samples. To be sure, there is little information emerging that is inconsistent with the notion that private higher education is often poorly resourced, with under-qualified teachers, low expectations for students, and obviously low academic quality compared to the public sector. But the diversity of the sector, and the difference among higher education traditions in various countries, means that counter-examples are easily found. Unfortunately, these are typically treated as outliers to the reality of private sector existence worldwide, rather than explored for what they say about the levers necessary to bring non-elite demand-absorbing institutions into the realm of serious, even semi-elite private sector provision.

Without solid comparative global work in the area of private higher education quality and academic performance, paying particular attention to the staffing of these institutions, the field will remain a problematic arena for policy reform. A few modest attempts at this have been made via the collective work of PROPHE researchers (Kinser, et al, 2010). And from the review here, there is a good baseline of information to continue these analyses and determine what is known about the sector and where gaps exist. This more comprehensive assessment of the private sector is needed to develop better theories of private investment in education, the motivations of its proprietors, and the impact that regulation can have to ensure that private interests do not overwhelm the public purpose of education.

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