

# On the Urgent Need to Protect Accreditation from Political Intervention

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As authoritarian regimes come to the realization that interfering directly in university governance can result in societal pushback, indirect mechanisms (such as the use of assessment reforms and budgetary austerity) serve as safer and longer-lasting approaches to weaken and silence the higher education sector, a key component of civil society and a potential source of resistance. Accreditation plays a significant role as an educational policy steering mechanism, and, in contexts like the US, where governments have made their [contempt](#) for the higher education system explicit, actions to reform accreditation are already in motion.

In the US, the Trump administration has issued an executive [order](#) directing accreditors to scrutinize diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, which this administration has characterized as unlawful; to recognize new accrediting bodies; and to make it easier for institutions to change accreditors. These proposed reforms for accreditation are in line with recommendations made by the conservative Heritage Foundation and its [Plan 2025](#). A coalition of some of the most Trump-aligned states (e.g., Florida) has formed a Commission for Public Higher Education, which is effectively a new institutional [accreditor](#) that promises “transparency and efficiency”—despite the fact that existing US accreditors have in place some of the most transparent of recognition processes. There is also great concern that the second promise, efficiency, should not come at the expense of fitness for purpose, which has long been recognized as the central feature of quality assurance. The [American Association of University Professors](#) has already expressed opposition to this new accreditor based on concerns about the ability of a politically motivated initiative to uphold academic freedom.

These developments carry significant implications for higher education around the world. Accreditation in the US is revered throughout the world for its autonomy from governmental intervention. Throughout history, that independence has served the public interest. What is remarkable about the creation of a new accreditor in the US is that political interference is being presented under the veneer of “public higher education.” This is an astute and disingenuous strategy, as independent accreditors have protected the public good in the US system since as early as 1885 and nearly 80 years before the first Higher Education Act was introduced in the US Congress. Recent developments will certainly tarnish the international reputation of the US system of accreditation and may also lead to less transparent and independent forms of quality assurance elsewhere in the world. In a more direct sense, these changes also have very real consequences for institutions elsewhere, given that [American](#)

[accreditation agencies](#) recognize programs and institutions in more than 80 countries.

Although perhaps the most globally significant, the accreditation reforms in the US are not alone in the global higher education landscape. Indeed, they join a long list of eroding democracies that have come under authoritarian control—notably exemplified by Argentina, Türkiye and, until recently, Hungary—that have sought to weaken and discredit higher education to exert ideological control and see eliminating independent quality assurance as a key goal. These and other distressed democracies now face conditions all too common in authoritarian settings, where there is [no public expectation](#) of university autonomy and where universities have set up [centers](#) to spread their political leader’s ideas, as is the case in China.

Ideological and political intervention in accreditation matters highlight the dire lack of international alternatives when the domestic accreditation landscape turns unfavorable. In some countries, like [Ecuador](#), the quality assurance framework recognizes accreditations granted by agencies from other countries under specific circumstances. However, this generally does not amount to international accreditation but is instead the recognition of a national accreditation from another country. Some programmatic accreditations, like in engineering and business, are indeed international, but they do not apply to entire institutions. Examples of true international accreditation are still too difficult to find, even within harmonized regions like the European Higher Education Area and [MERCOSUR](#), involving Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

Regional and international accreditation for institutions would not only respond to the more globally integrated contemporary higher education system and serve the growing internationally mobile student population; it would also be significantly less likely to be swayed by political control in a world that is increasingly politically polarized, fueled by social media algorithms and AI-fueled disinformation. Evidently, the creation of regional and international accreditation systems is daunting. A parallel exercise, the UNESCO Global [Convention](#) on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, has gained 41 signatories in seven years, illustrating the challenges of deep global cooperation and trust-building. Yet resisting illegitimate government intervention in higher education matters nation by nation, as the US example illustrates, might be equally or perhaps even more daunting. Unfortunately, government overreach in higher education is no longer a far-fetched possibility but is today’s reality in an increasing number of countries.