GLOBAL BEST PRACTICES OR CULTURAL IMPERIALISM? AN ETHICAL CRITIQUE OF INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION STANDARDS IN EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

International accreditation standards in educational management are widely promoted as pathways to ensuring quality assurance, global competitiveness, and institutional credibility. However, beneath this universalist appeal lies a growing ethical debate about the potential of such standards to impose Western-centric values and practices upon diverse educational systems—thus perpetuating cultural imperialism. This paper critically examines the ethical tensions embedded

within international accreditation practices, drawing on contemporary scholarly literature and case analyses. It argues that while global best practices can promote accountability and improvement, they can also marginalize local knowledge systems and institutional autonomy. The paper proposes an ethical framework grounded in contextual autonomy, procedural justice, and distributive equity, offering recommendations for decolonizing and localizing accreditation in education management.

Keywords: *International accreditation, cultural imperialism, ethics, educational management, globalization*

Introduction

In the contemporary era of globalization, education systems are no longer confined within national boundaries but are increasingly interconnected through transnational collaborations, partnerships, and benchmarking processes. One of the most visible mechanisms through which this interconnectedness manifests is accreditation, which serves as both a gatekeeper and a facilitator of quality assurance across borders. Accreditation, in its simplest form, refers to a structured and formalized process by which an educational institution, program, or course is evaluated against a set of predefined quality criteria to ensure its effectiveness, relevance, and alignment with global standards (Harvey & Williams, 2021). Through this process, institutions gain external validation that their operations meet certain academic and administrative benchmarks of excellence. In recent decades, the pursuit of international accreditation has intensified, particularly among universities and professional schools seeking global visibility and competitiveness. Institutions increasingly regard accreditation from international bodies—such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) as symbols of prestige and legitimacy (Duarte, 2023). This global race for accreditation is driven by strategic motivations: enhancing institutional credibility, attracting international students and faculty, improving research collaborations, and aligning with global educational and labor market demands. However, while accreditation has been lauded as a hallmark of quality and accountability, its global expansion raises profound ethical and cultural concerns. A central tension lies in the question of whose standards are being globalized and whose values they represent. When global "best practices" are defined predominantly by Western-based agencies, the process risks privileging Euro-American epistemologies and governance models while marginalizing other cultural and philosophical traditions in education (Marginson, 2019; Knight, 2020). In this context, international accreditation may inadvertently function as an instrument of cultural imperialism, shaping curricula, governance, and quality frameworks according to Western ideals of rationality, efficiency, and managerialism. Thus, this paper critically interrogates the ethical dilemmas embedded in the

globalization of accreditation standards. It examines whether international accreditation genuinely enhances quality and accountability in education across diverse contexts or whether it perpetuates asymmetrical power relations under the guise of quality assurance. The discussion highlights the complex interplay between globalization, quality assurance, and cultural autonomy, offering a nuanced ethical critique of international accreditation as both a potential tool for global educational improvement and a mechanism of subtle cultural domination.

Literature Review

The Globalization of Accreditation Standards

The globalization of accreditation is deeply intertwined with the broader processes of neoliberal reform in higher education. Beginning in the late 20th century, universities worldwide came under increasing pressure to demonstrate measurable outcomes, efficiency, and accountability, paralleling the rise of market-oriented ideologies in governance and management (Altbach & de Wit, 2021). In this environment, accreditation emerged as a mechanism for standardizing performance indicators, benchmarking institutional practices, and legitimizing educational systems within the global knowledge economy. Global organizations such as the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and UNESCO's Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC) have been instrumental in promoting transnational frameworks of quality assurance. These frameworks aim to harmonize academic standards, facilitate international recognition of qualifications, and support cross-border student mobility (Harvey, 2022). Through these mechanisms, accreditation has evolved from a localized practice into a globalized system of governance influencing national education policies and institutional reforms. Proponents argue that this harmonization enhances transparency, comparability, and global trust in higher education systems (Knight, 2020). It allows for greater collaboration among universities, easier student and staff exchanges, and the creation of a more unified global education market. Particularly in developing countries, international accreditation is often perceived as a pathway to legitimacy, capacity building, and integration into the global academic community (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Such accreditation helps institutions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America gain visibility and credibility that can attract investment, research funding, and international partnerships (Obizue, Enomah & Onyebu, 2025).

Documented Benefits of International Accreditation

Empirical research indicates that institutions undergoing accreditation often report tangible improvements in institutional governance, leadership accountability, and academic quality management. Stensaker et al. (2022) found that accreditation stimulates the establishment of systematic internal quality assurance mechanisms, promoting a culture of evidence-based

decision-making. It compels universities to continuously monitor their performance, gather data, and adopt reflective practices that foster continuous improvement (Tavares, 2018). Moreover, international accreditation enhances stakeholder confidence, including that of students, employers, governments, and professional associations. It provides assurance that academic programs meet international benchmarks of competence and ethical practice. In professional fields such as medicine, law, business, and engineering, accreditation ensures that graduates possess globally recognized qualifications and transferable skills (Frank et al., 2020). This not only improves employability but also supports international mobility and collaboration among professionals. Additionally, accreditation serves as a tool for institutional branding and market positioning. Universities with international accreditation often leverage it as a competitive advantage in attracting high-quality students and faculty. It symbolizes commitment to excellence and global relevance, aligning with international rankings and quality metrics increasingly used by policymakers and stakeholders worldwide (Duarte, 2023).

Critical Perspectives: Cultural Imperialism and Ethical Concerns

Despite the apparent benefits, critics argue that international accreditation is not ideologically neutral. It reflects and reproduces Western hegemonic values about what constitutes quality in education. Tikly (2020), observes that many global accreditation models were historically shaped by North American and European traditions that prioritize managerial efficiency, individual meritocracy, and standardized assessment values that may conflict with communal, relational, or holistic educational philosophies found in other cultures. As a result, institutions outside the Global North often feel compelled to conform to standards that do not fully resonate with their socio-cultural realities. This process has been described as a form of epistemic colonization, where dominant systems of knowledge and evaluation overshadow local epistemologies, indigenous pedagogies, and community-based learning traditions (Andreotti, 2021). When universities in Africa or Asia restructure curricula, administrative frameworks, or even language policies to align with Western-dominated benchmarks, the result may be a loss of educational sovereignty and erosion of local identity (Zembylas, 2022). From an ethical standpoint, these dynamics raise serious concerns about justice, inclusion, and respect for cultural diversity. The imposition of external standards can create a dependency syndrome, where local institutions rely on foreign validation rather than cultivating contextually relevant models of quality. Furthermore, accreditation agencies seldom account for local resource constraints, governance realities, or developmental priorities, thereby exacerbating global inequalities in higher education (Bamberger, 2024). Ultimately, the challenge lies in reconciling global comparability with local authenticity developing accreditation systems that recognize the legitimacy of diverse educational traditions while upholding rigorous quality standards. The ethical imperative, therefore, is not merely to globalize standards but to pluralize them to create frameworks that are inclusive, dialogical, and sensitive to the cultural and epistemological contexts in which education occurs.

Theoretical and Ethical Framework

Cultural Imperialism and Power Asymmetry

Cultural imperialism, within the context of global accreditation, can be understood as a subtle yet powerful process by which the dominant culture's values, norms, and epistemologies become institutionalized as universal standards of "quality." This domination often occurs under the guise of modernization, internationalization, or global best practices (Tomlinson, 2018). In higher education, it manifests when accreditation agencies predominantly located in the Global North, set parameters that determine what constitutes excellence in teaching, research, and institutional governance. These frameworks, though presented as objective and neutral, are embedded with Western epistemic assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge, effective pedagogy, and efficient administration. Accreditation agencies such as the AACSB, EQUIS, and the ABET often wield significant symbolic and structural power. Their endorsement not only shapes global perceptions of institutional quality but also determines access to academic partnerships, funding opportunities, and international student markets. Consequently, institutions in the Global South often experience a power imbalance in which they must conform to external models of evaluation that may not align with local priorities or educational philosophies (Shahjahan, 2019). This creates a form of epistemic dependency where institutions internalize Western quality models as superior, while indigenous approaches are marginalized or dismissed as substandard. Moreover, this asymmetry reinforces global hierarchies. Accreditation bodies act as arbiters of legitimacy, while institutions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America become the "subjects" of evaluation rather than co-creators of standards. This dynamic mirrors the broader historical patterns of colonialism, where knowledge production and validation were controlled by the West. The global education system thus risks perpetuating a neocolonial structure, where intellectual and institutional sovereignty in the Global South is eroded in favor of Western-centric notions of modernization. From an ethical standpoint, such dominance challenges the foundational principles of equality and mutual respect in global educational collaboration. When accreditation frameworks privilege one cultural paradigm over others, they implicitly devalue diverse ways of knowing and learning. As a result, the process not only undermines cultural diversity but also limits the potential for innovation that arises from contextualized, pluralistic approaches to education.

Ethical Principles in Accreditation

Ethics serves as a crucial lens for examining how accreditation processes can either promote fairness and respect or perpetuate inequality and exclusion. Three key ethical principles contextual autonomy, procedural justice, and distributive justice help illuminate the moral dimensions of accreditation in global higher education.

1. Respect for Contextual Autonomy

The principle of contextual autonomy emphasizes the moral right of institutions and societies to define educational quality based on their cultural traditions, developmental priorities, and social realities (Kehm & Teichler, 2020). This principle resists the idea that quality is a one-size-fits-all concept. It recognizes that higher education in Kenya, Brazil, or India may pursue different missions than institutions in the United States or the United Kingdom. For instance, while Western universities often emphasize research productivity and international rankings, universities in developing contexts may prioritize community engagement, nation-building, or indigenous knowledge preservation. When global accreditation systems impose rigid criteria that neglect such contextual missions, they violate institutional autonomy and the ethical principle of self-determination.

2. Procedural Justice

Procedural justice refers to the fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness of the processes by which decisions are made (Bamberger, 2024). In the realm of accreditation, it implies that evaluation procedures should involve meaningful participation from local stakeholders, including administrators, faculty, and national quality agencies. Ethical accreditation should therefore avoid top-down imposition of standards and instead promote co-creation and dialogue between global and local actors. Furthermore, the evaluation criteria and assessment methods should be transparent, understandable, and adaptable to local conditions. The absence of procedural justice such as when accreditation decisions are opaque or biased toward Western norms, undermines trust and accountability within the global education system.

3. Distributive Justice

Distributive justice concerns the fair distribution of benefits and burdens among institutions participating in accreditation (Tavares, 2018). This principle becomes particularly relevant when considering the economic and administrative demands that international accreditation imposes. Many accreditation processes require extensive documentation, faculty development, and infrastructural investments that may strain the limited resources of institutions in low-income countries. When accreditation frameworks fail to account for these disparities, they exacerbate existing inequalities granting elite, well-funded universities an advantage while marginalizing those in developing contexts. According to Obizue, Chukwuemeka & Iwezu (2025), Ethical accreditation should promote equity by adjusting expectations and offering capacity-building support to ensure that institutions from all regions can participate meaningfully. Collectively, these ethical principles underscore that accreditation must go beyond technical compliance. It should embody moral commitments to fairness, inclusivity, and respect for cultural pluralism. When accreditation systems neglect these principles by enforcing universal standards without contextual adaptation, they not only become ethically problematic but also risk perpetuating global academic injustice.

Case Studies and Illustrations

1. Business School Accreditation (AACSB and EQUIS)

The experience of business schools provides a striking illustration of the ethical tensions embedded in global accreditation. Accreditation systems such as the AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) and EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System) have become benchmarks for excellence in management education worldwide. However, these frameworks are deeply rooted in Western academic traditions that emphasize research productivity, publication in English-language journals, and faculty composition based on doctoral qualifications from elite institutions (Zeleza, 2021). Many universities in the Global South find these requirements misaligned with their local realities. For instance, African and Asian business schools may focus more on entrepreneurship, informal economies, or social innovation areas underrepresented in Western research journals. Additionally, faculty shortages, limited funding for research, and contextual teaching priorities make it difficult for such institutions to meet the stringent demands of AACSB or EQUIS standards (Tikly, 2020). As a result, these schools face systemic disadvantages and reputational pressures that reinforce dependency on Western validation. This scenario exemplifies how accreditation can function as a symbolic mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, rewarding conformity to Western norms while marginalizing alternative knowledge systems. Ethically, this raises questions about whether global accreditation truly promotes quality or merely enforces uniformity that privileges certain cultural and economic models over others (Obizue, Abu, Agba & Babatunde, 2025).

2. Health Professions Accreditation

Accreditation in the health sciences provides another perspective on the ethical complexities of applying global standards across diverse contexts. Frameworks such as those established by the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) aim to ensure that medical training meets global competency and patient safety requirements (Frank et al., 2020). While these frameworks enhance international recognition and mobility of medical professionals, critics argue that applying identical standards globally can be both unrealistic and unjust. In countries with limited healthcare infrastructure, the strict adherence to international accreditation criteria may divert scarce resources away from local health priorities. For example, hospitals or medical schools in low-income settings might invest heavily in meeting documentation and infrastructural benchmarks instead of addressing community-based health challenges such as malaria or maternal mortality. In such cases, the ethical dilemma lies in whether the pursuit of international recognition compromises social responsibility and local relevance. Hence, accreditation must be approached with flexibility, ensuring that standards are adaptive rather than prescriptive, and that they reinforce, not replace local healthcare objectives.

3. African Higher Education Context

In the African higher education landscape, the debate on accreditation and decolonization has been particularly vibrant. African scholars argue that international accreditation frameworks, while beneficial in promoting quality, often reproduce patterns of dependency by imposing Western benchmarks as the default models of excellence (Zeleza, 2021). This dependency manifests when universities in Africa rely on Western agencies for validation, thus reinforcing the notion that quality and credibility must come from outside the continent. To counter this, regional initiatives such as the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) have emerged, spearheaded by the African Union in collaboration with the Association of African Universities (AAU). These frameworks aim to contextualize quality assurance, emphasizing indigenous pedagogical practices, regional development goals, and local cultural values. They represent an important ethical step toward reclaiming autonomy and resisting epistemic domination by external agencies. However, challenges remain. The limited financial and technical capacity of regional accreditation bodies often constrains their ability to operate independently of international donors and development partners. This raises a new ethical question: can African accreditation truly be autonomous if it relies on funding and expertise from the same global actors whose models it seeks to reform? The African case thus underscores the need for ethical pluralism in accreditation, recognizing that true quality assurance must balance global comparability with local authenticity, ensuring mutual respect and partnership rather than hierarchy and subordination (Obizue, 2022).

Discussion and Ethical Implications

The ethical debate surrounding international accreditation in educational management revolves around a persistent and complex tension between universalism and cultural relativism. On one hand, universalism emphasizes the value of shared standards, transparency, and comparability qualities that enable the recognition of qualifications and the mobility of students and professionals across borders. On the other hand, cultural relativism insists on the legitimacy of local contexts, arguing that educational quality cannot be meaningfully defined without reference to cultural history, societal needs, and epistemic traditions (Knight, 2020). From an ethical perspective, neither extreme provides a sustainable solution. A strictly universalist approach risks imposing a hegemonic model of education that disregards diversity and perpetuates inequality. Conversely, a purely relativist stance may isolate institutions, undermining international collaboration and recognition. The ethical challenge, therefore, lies in finding a middle path through ethical pluralism a balanced framework that values global comparability while honoring cultural diversity and contextual relevance. Ethical pluralism acknowledges that multiple conceptions of “quality” can coexist and that legitimacy should stem not from conformity to external models but from authentic alignment with both global standards and local values. When international accreditation is adopted uncritically, it risks transforming education into a globally standardized commodity, driven more by market demands and prestige metrics than by moral or social purpose (Tikly, 2020).

Universities may begin to prioritize what is measurable such as rankings, publication counts, or Western-style curricula over what is meaningful, such as local community engagement, moral education, or indigenous knowledge preservation. This commodification erodes the cultural identity of education, reducing it to a transactional enterprise rather than a transformative social good.

Ethical educational management must therefore resist the instrumentalization of accreditation. The moral responsibility of educational leaders is not merely to meet benchmarks but to question whose benchmarks they are meeting and for whose benefit. Accreditation processes must be situated within a broader moral vision of education one that values human development, social justice, and epistemic inclusion as much as efficiency and performance. In this view, ethics demands that accreditation serve people and communities, not just systems and statistics. Moreover, ethical implications extend to issues of equity and justice. The current global accreditation architecture disproportionately favors institutions with access to resources, infrastructure, and English-language scholarship. Institutions in developing regions face not only logistical and financial barriers but also epistemological ones, as their ways of teaching, researching, and knowing are often marginalized. From an ethical standpoint, this constitutes a form of structural injustice: a system that perpetuates inequality under the guise of global standards. To mitigate these inequities, accreditation must be reimagined as a collaborative and developmental process, not a competitive or punitive one. This means shifting the emphasis from compliance to capacity-building, helping institutions strengthen their internal quality systems in ways that are responsive to their local missions and challenges. It also requires mutual respect and humility from accrediting agencies, recognizing that knowledge flows both ways and that Western models are not inherently superior. Furthermore, ethical reflection must be institutionalized within accreditation itself. Accrediting bodies should engage in continuous ethical reflexivity, examining how their standards and practices impact educational diversity, cultural sustainability, and social equity. This form of moral introspection transforms accreditation from a bureaucratic mechanism into a dialogical process of learning, empathy, and global solidarity. Ultimately, the ethical horizon of international accreditation is not uniformity but mutual flourishing, a vision of global education where excellence and equity coexist, where institutions are empowered to innovate within their contexts, and where cultural diversity enriches rather than fragments the pursuit of knowledge.

Way forward

1. **Contextual Adaptation**
   International accrediting bodies should institutionalize flexibility in their frameworks, allowing for contextual interpretation and adaptation of standards. Rather than enforcing identical criteria across diverse regions, agencies should recognize variations in educational philosophy, socioeconomic conditions, and developmental goals. For instance, institutions focusing on rural education, local language development, or indigenous

knowledge systems should be evaluated based on their relevance and impact within those contexts not by Western performance metrics (Kehm & Teichler, 2020). Contextual adaptation ensures that accreditation fosters genuine quality improvement rather than superficial conformity.

2. **Capacity-Building Support**
   Global accreditation organizations have an ethical duty to promote capacity building rather than compliance enforcement. This includes providing technical assistance, mentorship programs, and financial support for under-resourced institutions (Tavares, 2018). By investing in institutional development, accrediting bodies can reduce global disparities and empower local institutions to meet standards on their own terms. Ethical accreditation should therefore be developmental and inclusive building strength rather than imposing strain.

3. **Inclusive Representation**
   Accrediting agencies must democratize their governance structures by ensuring diverse representation from the Global South in policy formulation, evaluation teams, and decision-making committees (Bamberger, 2024). This inclusivity will enhance cultural legitimacy and reduce epistemic bias in defining what counts as quality. Representation also ensures that the voices of historically marginalized regions contribute to shaping global norms, fostering ethical fairness and shared ownership in accreditation governance.

4. **Reciprocal Learning**
   Accreditation should be reimagined as a reciprocal process of mutual learning, where knowledge and innovation flow in multiple directions (Altbach & de Wit, 2021). Institutions from the Global North can learn valuable lessons from indigenous pedagogies, community-oriented teaching models, and holistic educational practices developed in the Global South. This two-way dialogue transforms accreditation into an ethical partnership rather than a hierarchical transmission of norms.

5. **Ethical Reflexivity**
   Accrediting agencies should embed ethical reflexivity within their operational frameworks by periodically assessing the cultural, social, and moral implications of their standards (Harvey, 2022). This involves asking critical questions: Do our criteria marginalize local practices? Do they promote equity and inclusion? What unintended consequences do they produce? Through such reflexive evaluation, accreditation bodies can ensure that their standards evolve in ethically responsible and globally sensitive ways.

Together, these recommendations aim to reframe accreditation as a moral partnership grounded in respect, reciprocity, and justice rather than a unidirectional mechanism of global control.

Conclusion

International accreditation holds tremendous potential as a catalyst for quality enhancement, institutional accountability, and cross-border collaboration in education. It can promote excellence, transparency, and global recognition when implemented with fairness and flexibility. However, without ethical reflexivity, it risks becoming a vehicle for reproducing inequalities and imposing cultural uniformity. The uncritical export of Western-centric standards can inadvertently reinforce global hierarchies, marginalize local epistemologies, and erode educational sovereignty in the Global South. True global best practice, therefore, should not be equated with uniformity but with mutual respect for difference. The ethical imperative is to design accreditation systems that uphold excellence while celebrating diversity, that demand accountability without erasing identity, and that encourage competitiveness without fostering dependency. Accreditation should aspire to global solidarity rooted in cooperation, shared learning, and moral responsibility rather than global dominance. A decolonized approach to accreditation in educational management envisions institutions that are not merely compliant with international standards but authentically grounded in their cultural, social, and developmental contexts. Such institutions become sites of ethical transformation spaces where global and local values intersect to produce education that is both world-class and world-conscious. The ultimate goal is an accreditation paradigm that reflects the richness of human diversity, empowering all nations to define, pursue, and achieve educational quality on their own terms, while contributing meaningfully to the global community of learning.

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