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East Africa to Crack Down on Unaccredited Universities

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Nairobi, Kenya

Concerned that a growing number of students are enrolling in poor-quality private universities and diploma mills, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda are working together to develop more stringent oversight of their higher-education systems.

Last month higher-education officials from the three countries met in Nairobi, where they agreed to establish a regional accreditation and quality-assurance system, and to be more aggressive in shutting down unaccredited institutions. Now, each country runs its own university-accreditation system. Officials hope a more coordinated approach will prevent the spread of substandard universities and diploma mills.

Lax oversight and slow accreditation have allowed unaccredited colleges, which are technically illegal, to flourish in East Africa in recent years. Their growth has been fueled by demand from students unable to find places elsewhere. In Kenya, for example, 50,000 students competed last year for 12,000 spaces in the country's public universities and accredited private institutions.

The three countries form the East African Community, an intergovernmental organization with political and cultural ties. The community has directed the Inter-University Council for East Africa to take aim at all unaccredited programs, including universities, branch campuses of foreign institutions, and Internet-based programs that make few, if any, academic demands on their students.

Education officials in Nairobi say some private colleges that provide only vocational programs were claiming to be branches of well-known foreign universities. "We are aware of colleges that have made many students believe they would get degrees from foreign universities without effort," said Kilemi Mwiria, Kenya's assistant minister for higher education. (Only eight foreign universities are accredited in the region.)

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Kenya plans to evaluate all its public and private higher-education institutions to ensure that they offer only the programs they are licensed to teach. Last year Kenya nullified 231 degrees awarded by Newport International University, in Nairobi. The university claimed to have a license from the State of Wyoming, but officials said it had no authority to offer degrees in Kenya.

William Sabaya, secretary of Tanzania's Higher Education Accreditation Council, said it needed a system of checking out diploma mills and other substandard educational institutions. Education officials there also want to create a database to track legitimate higher-education institutions. Now it is difficult for students to find out if a university has been accredited.

At the same time, the three countries are working to enact laws that will allow internationally recognized universities to open branch campuses there or to partner with local colleges — rather than establish entire universities, as the law now requires — if they wish to offer academic programs in the region.

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