

Chapter 4

Accreditation and Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education: the United States

by
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This chapter provides a general overview of the mechanisms for accreditation and recognition of qualifications in higher education in the United States. It introduces the role of some main actors in this field of accreditation, such as the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and the United States Department of Education (USDE). Furthermore, it refers to the international activities of US accrediting organisations. Finally, it examines the role of accreditation in acceptance of degrees, transfer of credit and individual certification and licensure in the United States.

Accreditation in the United States is a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinise colleges, universities and programmes for quality assurance and quality improvement. Higher education creates, finances and otherwise sustains accreditation as a desired practice of self-regulation of its activities. Accreditation is more than 100 years old, emerging from concerns to protect public health and safety and to serve the public interest. It is carried out by private, non-governmental, non-profit organisations designed for this specific purpose.

4.1. Scopes and types of US accrediting organisations

US accrediting organisations review colleges, universities and programmes in 50 states and a number of other countries. More than 6 400 US institutions are accredited by recognised accreditors.¹ These institutions may be degree-granting and non-degree-granting, public or

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1. The terms “recognised” and “recognition” are used throughout this paper in relation to accrediting organisations. A “recognised” accreditor is an organisation that has been reviewed for quality by either the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) or the United States Department of Education (USDE) and has met their respective standards (see the introduction of the book).

private, for-profit or non-profit operations. More than 18 700 programmes are accredited by recognised accreditors as well, including law, medicine, business, nursing, social work and pharmacy, arts and journalism.²

There are three types of US accrediting organisations:

- *Regional accreditors*: accredit public and private, non-profit and for-profit, two- and four-year institutions. This is a comprehensive review of all institutional functions. Most institutions that are regionally accredited are degree-granting and not-for-profit.
- *National accreditors*: accredit public and private, non-profit and for-profit institutions, frequently single-purpose institutions, including distance learning colleges and universities, private career institutions and faith-based colleges and universities. The majority of nationally accredited institutions are non-degree-granting and for-profit.
- *Specialised and professional accreditors*: accredit specific programmes or schools including law schools, medical schools, engineering schools and programmes, and health profession programmes. Some of these schools may be freestanding.

4.2. The purposes of US accreditation

In the United States accreditation serves the following purposes:

- *Assuring quality*. Accreditation is the primary means by which colleges, universities and programmes assure quality to students and the public. Accredited status is a signal to students and the public that an institution or programme meets at least threshold standards for its faculty, curriculum, student services and libraries. Accredited status is conveyed only if institutions and programmes provide evidence of fiscal stability.
- *Access to federal funds*. Accreditation is required for access to federal funds such as student aid and other federal programmes. Federal student aid funds are available to students only if the institution or programme they are attending is accredited by a recognised accrediting organisation. The United States awarded \$69 billion (US) in student grants and loans in 2002 alone.³

2. Council for Higher Education Accreditation, Fact Sheet No. 1, “Profile of Accreditation”, Washington DC, August 2003.

3. Hartle, T., C. Simmons and B. Timmons (2003), *Paying for College: How the Federal Higher Education Act Helps Students and Families Pay for a Postsecondary Education*, American Council on Education, Washington DC (also available at www.acenet.edu).

- *Easing transfer.* Accreditation is important to students for smooth transfer of courses and programmes among colleges, universities and programmes. Receiving institutions take note of whether or not the credits a student wishes to transfer have been earned at an accredited institution. Although accreditation is but one among several factors taken into account by receiving institutions, it is viewed carefully and is considered an important indicator of quality.
- *Engendering employer confidence.* Accreditation status of an institution or programme is important to employers when evaluating credentials of job applicants and when deciding whether to provide tuition support for current employees seeking additional education.

4.3. US accreditation and government

Accrediting organisations operate in an environment in which two of the major levels of government in the United States have significant authority in relation to higher education:

- *State governments* have primary responsibility for education, including higher education. A public higher education institution in the United States must be authorised to operate by a state. A private higher education institution must be licensed by a state. The conditions associated with granting this authority or licensing vary from state to state. In most states, institutions may be authorised to operate or licensed without being accredited. State governments are the primary source of operating funds for public institutions. They also provide some grants and loans to students, but this is modest as compared to the federal government's support. State governments routinely review the finances and programmes of public institutions. Public institutions are funded through the annual or biannual budgeting of a state and must make their case for funding to state legislatures. State governments, directly and indirectly, play a prominent role in setting tuition and fees at public institutions. In addition, public and private institutions must comply with a range of state laws applicable to the rest of society in areas such as employment and contracts.
- The *federal government* of the United States cannot grant authority for institutions to operate nor license institutions. It cannot take action in academic areas such as curriculum, faculty and academic standards. However, the federal government is the main source of funds for student grants and loans as well as public funds for research that go to public and private institutions. Many requirements accompany the receipt of these funds, including annual reporting on the operation of an

institution, *e.g.* enrolment, graduation rates and annual expenditure for major institutional functions. The federal government also holds public and private higher education institutions accountable for thousands of federal laws applicable to society generally, *e.g.* civil rights laws, occupational safety laws and due process laws.

Accrediting organisations themselves are independent of state governments, other than that they must be incorporated in one of the 50 states in order to operate. Accrediting organisations may choose not to be independent from the federal government. For the past 50 years, accrediting organisations and the federal government have sustained a partnership relationship in which the federal government relies on accrediting organisations for judgments about the quality of institutions and programmes. The federal government wants this judgment about quality in order to decide whether institutions and programmes will be eligible for federal funds to assist students with grants and loans and whether institutions or programmes will be eligible for funds for research and other purposes. Accrediting organisations that affirm the quality of institutions and programme to the federal government must, in turn, be reviewed for quality based on federal standards or “recognised.” Whether an organisation chooses to be federally recognised is at the discretion of the accreditor and not a requirement to operate (see Section 4.5 for a discussion of recognition).

4.4. How US accreditation operates

Accreditation of institutions and programmes take place on a cycle that may range from every few years to as many as ten years. Accreditation is ongoing – the initial earning of accreditation is not entry to indefinite accredited status. Periodic review is a fact of life for accredited institutions and programmes. Self-accreditation is not an option.

An institution or programme seeking accreditation must go through a number of steps stipulated by an accrediting organisation. These steps involve a combination of several tasks: preparation of evidence of accomplishment by the institution or programme, scrutiny of these materials and a site visit by faculty and administrative peers, and action to determine accreditation status by the accrediting organisations.

The five key features of accreditation are:

- *Self-study*: institutions and programmes prepare a written summary of performance based on accrediting organisations’ standards.

- *Peer review*: accreditation review is conducted primarily by faculty and administrative peers in the profession. These colleagues review the self-study and serve on visiting teams that review institutions and programmes after the self-study is completed. Peers comprise the majority of members of the accrediting commissions or boards that make judgments about accrediting status.
- *Site visit*: accrediting organisations normally send a visiting team to review an institution or programme. The self-study provides the foundation for the team visit. Teams, in addition to the peers described above, may also include public members (non-academics who have an interest in higher education). All team members are volunteers and are generally not compensated.
- *Action (judgment) by accrediting organisation*: accrediting organisations have decision-making bodies (commissions) made up of administrators and faculty from institutions and programmes as well as public members. These commissions may affirm accreditation for new institutions and programmes, reaffirm accreditation for ongoing institutions and programmes, and deny accreditation to institutions and programmes.
- *Ongoing external review*: institutions and programmes continue to be reviewed over time on cycles that range from every few years to ten years. They normally prepare a self-study and undergo a site visit each time.

4.5. “Recognition” of US accrediting organisation

Accreditors are accountable to the institutions and programmes they accredit. They are accountable to the public and government who have invested heavily in higher education and expect quality.

In addition, accrediting organisations undergo a periodic external review of their organisations based on specific standards known as “recognition”. To be considered “recognised” accrediting organisations must demonstrate that they meet these standards. As noted above, recognition is carried out either by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a private, non-governmental national coordinating body for national, regional and specialised accreditation or the United States Department of Education (USDE), a federal agency. Although accreditation is strictly a non-governmental activity, recognition is not.

As of 2002-03, 19 institutional accrediting organisations are or have been recognised by either CHEA or the USDE or both. Sixty-one specialised

accrediting organisations are or have been recognised by CHEA or USDE as well.⁴

CHEA and USDE recognise many of the same accrediting organisations, but not all. Accreditors seek CHEA or USDE recognition for different reasons: CHEA recognition confers an academic legitimacy on accrediting organisations, helping to solidify the place of these organisations and their institutions and programmes in the national higher education community. USDE recognition is required for accreditors whose institutions or programmes seek eligibility for federal student aid funds.

CHEA (non-governmental) recognition

The CHEA *Recognition Policy and Procedures* has five standards that are the basis for review of accrediting organisations for recognition. The standards place primary emphasis on academic quality assurance and improvement for an institution or programme. They require accreditors to advance academic quality, demonstrate accountability, encourage purposeful change and needed improvement, employ appropriate and fair procedures in decision-making and continually reassess accreditation practices.

CHEA accreditors are normally reviewed on a ten-year cycle with a five-year interim report. The review is carried out by the CHEA Committee on Recognition, a group of institutional representatives, accreditors and public members appointed by the CHEA Board of Directors. The committee scrutinises accreditors for their eligibility for CHEA recognition and review accreditors based on an accreditor self-study. The review may also include a site visit. The committee on recognition makes recommendations to the CHEA Board of Directors to affirm or deny recognition to an accrediting organisation.

The CHEA recognition standards call on accrediting organisations to:

- *Advance academic quality.* Accreditors are required to have a clear definition of quality and clear expectations that the institutions or programmes they accredit have process to determine whether quality standards are being met.
- *Demonstrate accountability.* Accreditors are required to have standards that call for institutions and programmes to provide consistent, reliable information about academic quality and student achievement to foster continuing public confidence and investment.

4. CHEA, *2003 Almanac of External Quality Review*.

- *Encourage purposeful change and needed improvement.* Accreditors are required to encourage planning for purposeful change and scrutiny for needed improvement through ongoing self-examination in institutions and programmes.
- *Employ appropriate and fair procedures in decision-making.* Accreditors are required to maintain appropriate and fair organisational policies and procedures that include effective checks and balances.
- *Continually reassess accreditation practices.* Accreditors are required to undertake self-scrutiny of their accrediting activities.⁵

Federal (governmental) recognition

The USDE recognition standards call on accreditors to place primary emphasis on whether an institution or programme is of sufficient quality to qualify for federal funds for student financial aid and other federal programmes. These standards require accreditors to maintain criteria or standards in specific areas: student achievement, curricula, faculty, facilities (includes equipment and supplies), fiscal and administrative capacity, student support services, recruiting and admissions practices, measures of the degree and objectives of degrees or credentials offered, record of student complaints and record of compliance with programme responsibilities for student aid.

USDE recognition review normally takes place every five years. USDE staff conduct the review based on communication with the accreditor, a written report from the accreditor and, from time to time, a visit to the accreditor. USDE staff make recommendations to the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), an appointed group of educators and public members, to recognise or not recognise an accrediting organisation. The committee, in turn, recommends action to the US Secretary of Education.

The USDE recognition standards call on accrediting organisations to “...address the quality of the institution or programme in the following areas”:

- Success with respect to student achievement in relation to the institution’s mission, including as appropriate, consideration of course completion, State licensing examination, and job placement rates.

5. This language illustrates the recognition standards and is not the full or official policy. Please consult the CHEA Website at www.chea.org for the formal policy that is used in CHEA recognition reviews.

- Curricula.
- Faculty.
- Facilities, equipment, and supplies.
- Fiscal and administrative capacity as appropriate to the specified scale of operations.
- Student support services.
- Recruiting and admissions practices, academic calendars, catalogues, publications, grading, and advertising.
- Measures of programme length and the objectives of the degrees or credentials offered.
- Record of student complaints received by, or available to, the agency.
- Record of compliance with the institution's programme responsibilities under Title IV of the Act, based on the most recent student loan default rate data provided by the Secretary, the results of financial or compliance audits, programme reviews, and any other information that the Secretary may provide to the agency.⁶

4.6. International activity of US accreditation

The role of accrediting organisations

US accrediting organisations play three significant roles in international quality review. First, a number of organisations accredit institutions and programmes that operate internationally. Institutional and programmatic accrediting organisations review US institutions and programmes operating outside the United States, non-US institutions and programmes operating outside the United States or, in rare cases, non-US institutions and programmes operating in the United States.⁷ Accrediting organisations make independent decisions about whether to undertake international activity. These organisations develop their own policies and standards for review of

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6. United States Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education (2000), *Current List of Nationally Recognized Agencies and State Agencies Recognized for the Approval of Public Postsecondary Vocational Education and Nurse Education and the Criteria for Recognition by the US Secretary of Education*, June (available at www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html).
 7. See the CHEA Letter from the President, "International Quality Review and Accreditation: The Role of US Recognized Accrediting Organisations" (August 2002) (also available at www.chea.org/Research/index.cfm).

international operations. There is no centralised or coordinated initiative for international accreditation in the United States.

Twenty-nine of the recognised accrediting organisations in the United States reported that they were operating internationally in fall 2001. Their accrediting activity took place in 65 countries. These organisations accredited 470 operations. Almost all the institutional accreditation (225 of 251 operations) was carried out by regional accrediting organisations. Of the 225 operations, 194 were US entities operating outside the US. Specialised accrediting organisations reviewed 210 operations. The majority of specialised accreditation (188 of the 210 operations) were non-US entities operating outside the United States.

Second, accrediting organisations, when they review US institutions and programmes, include in their respective reviews various other international activities of these operations. This includes, for example, partnership arrangements that US institutions and programmes may have with non-US operations, study abroad and other foreign study programmes and arrangements that include mutual acknowledgement of degrees between US and non-US institutions.

Third, accrediting organisations themselves are engaged with a range of regional and international activities that include formal agreements among accrediting organisations and quality assurance agencies in other countries, participation in international organisations of quality assurance agencies and participation in multinational organisations that do not have accreditation or quality assurance as a core business, but are engaged in some activities in this area.

The role of Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)

CHEA provides assistance to accrediting organisations and higher education through several types of international activity. These include functioning as a forum for international quality review issues through CHEA conferences and meetings, undertaking policy research and publications on a range of issues related to international quality review, representing the interests of US accreditors with multinational organisations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and representing the interests of US accreditors to the US federal government especially as this relates to the negotiations of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). CHEA uses its convening and advising functions to encourage various international initiatives by individual accrediting organisations.

CHEA is host to international visitors seeking to learn more about US accreditation. CHEA also maintains an International Database of accrediting organisations and quality assurance agencies in a number of countries. In general, CHEA tends to serve as a key point of information and exchange for US higher education institutions, US accrediting organisations and quality assurance organisations in other countries. It is also a point organisation for coordination with the federal government and Washington DC higher education associations.

The role of the US federal government

The federal government plays a major role in accreditation and international quality review through its extensive information-sharing activity. The United States Network for Education Information (USNEI) of USDE is the key means by which the federal government provides general information about US education, accreditation and student financial assistance, as well as information about studying and teaching in the United States. Created in 1996, USNEI provides information and connections to education systems outside the United States, US study abroad programmes, and teaching in countries outside the United States. USNEI also provides information about foreign diploma and credit recognition and how to be aware of fraud and abuse that may occur in the open, decentralised US system.⁸

4.7. US accreditation and recognition of qualifications

“Recognition of qualifications” is a phrase that is not generally used in the United States. However, as used by colleagues in other countries, it may refer to acceptance of degrees, transfer of credit, or individual certification and licensure. US institutions play the dominant role in judgments about degrees and credits, not accreditation. Individual states within the United States are the dominant players in individual certification and licensure, not accreditation. However, in each of the three instances, accreditation does play an important confidence-building and support role.

Accreditation and acceptance of degrees

US accreditation plays at most an indirect role in the acceptance of a degree from one institution by another institution. In general, acceptance of degrees from one institution by another is made easier if both institutions are

8. For additional information, see www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/edlite-index.html

accredited. However, whether accreditation is a requirement for acceptance of degrees is up to individual institutions.

In the United States, only institutions have the authority to grant degrees. This authority is granted by the state in which an institution is located at the time that the institution is given authority to operate (for public institutions) or licensed to operate (for private institutions). Institutions may, under some circumstances, seek to change or otherwise add to the degrees they offer and must obtain permission from a state to do this. In most states, institutions may be granted authority to offer specific degrees independent of whether or not these schools are accredited. While some of the 50 states may have similar laws and regulations with regard to offering degrees, each state makes an independent judgment about the laws and regulations they enact.

Whether a receiving institution will accept a degree from a sending institution is at the sole discretion of the receiving institution. Receiving institutions make these decisions based on, *e.g.* the compatibility of curriculum with the sending institution, judgments about academic quality, judgments about faculty and the accredited status of the sending institution. Some institutions have partnership arrangements by which they acknowledge the others' degrees as equivalent. These partnerships may be within a state, national or international. These arrangements are generally predicated on review of the degree programmes at each of the partnership institutions.

Accreditation and transfer of credit, with or without a degree

“Transfer of credit” refers to the acceptance of individual course credits, credits for an entire programme or credits associated with a degree from a sending institution by a receiving institution. As with acceptance of degrees, decisions about transfer of credit are made by institutions and accreditation plays an indirect role. The institution may – or may not – require that the sending institution be accredited. In general, transfer of credit works most smoothly when both the sending institution and the receiving institution are accredited. While the accredited status of a sending institution does not guarantee the acceptance of credits by the receiving institution, many institutional accreditors support policies that urge careful consideration of transfer requests from all accredited institutions. And, the type of accreditation sometimes makes a difference as well. In spite of considerable criticism, some institutions, for example, continue to demand that the sending institution be accredited by a certain type of accreditor (*e.g.* regional rather than national, see above).

Accreditation and individual certification and licensure

Certification and licensure are under the control of individual states. Accrediting organisations play a significant support role in the certification and licensure of individuals who complete programmes in specific fields (e.g. nursing, law, medicine). Specifically, many states require that the individual has graduated from an accredited programme in order to sit for certification and licensure examinations. And, for some federally-recognised accrediting organisations, the recognition process requires that the accreditor provide data about pass rates on these certification or licensure examinations.

Evaluation of education credentials

There are several organisations in the United States that assist students and potential students to evaluate their educational credentials. The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) houses an International Education Services (IES) unit that evaluates education credentials from around the world. IES provides information about education systems and institutions outside the United States as well as information about US education.⁹

The National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Academic Credentials is an organisation of associations that establishes standards for interpreting foreign credentials. AACRAO is a member of this Council. The Council also develops and publishes comparability standards for US educators and credential evaluators to judge international qualifications and how they respond to US certificates, diplomas and degrees.

USNEI also cites the Association of International Credential Evaluators, Inc. (AICE) and the National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES) as credential evaluation services. At the same time, the federal government does not recommend or endorse these organisations.¹⁰

9. As described on the AACRAO Website at www.aacrao.org/credential/

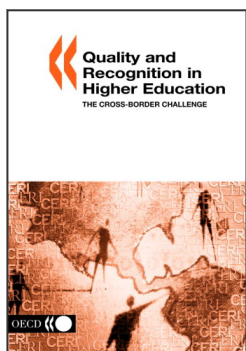
10. See www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/edlite-index.html

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