

HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION IN THE UNITED STATES

What International Education Professionals Need to Know Session 2.05

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Part 2: The European Perspective
by
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This paper contains three main sections. The first section points to some of the features where Europe differs from the US in the context of this EAIE-session. This is not – and is not meant to be – an in-depth analysis of the area of higher education in Europe.

The second section outlines some of the results from a mini-survey among European international education professionals on their understanding and use of US accreditation.

The third section deals with specific cases to show why it is necessary to check the accreditation status of higher education institutions inside and outside of the US.

Part 1: Selected features / background information

Most countries attach a high importance to the national sovereignty over higher education. Higher education is strongly linked to national history, linguistic identity, cultural specificities, national economic development and social cohesion, and is therefore seen as a field of national policy-making. This has led to very different attitudes and practices on recognition of qualifications in Europe with a lot of barriers – both real and conceived – to mobility. Institutions are generally autonomous regarding recognition of degrees/courses from other institutions.

In Europe the main tradition is to have systems of higher education belonging to the national state. Often the institutions are state owned. Institutions belonging to any such system of higher education are *a priori* considered recognised/accredited – they are considered as providers of quality education although systems of quality assurance and accreditation are a relatively new development in the region. The main driving force now is the Bologna Process with a European Higher Education Area as a goal. Quality assurance or accreditation is usually entrusted to one agency in each country. These agencies are often owned by - or at least commissioned by - the government in the country where they operate. Quality assurance/accreditation is largely a mandatory process.

Recognition practises in Europe are sought harmonised through cooperation and information exchange, through ratification of the joint Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisboa, 1997), through initiatives in the Bologna Process and through bi-/multilateral agreements. Developments in the field of recognition/QA/accreditation is institutionalised.

It might not be very well known, but the USA has in fact signed the Lisboa convention. The federal authorities of the US can not ratify the convention since the 52 individual states are autonomous regarding education, but it implies that the US government in principle support the philosophy behind the convention and take an active part in the further development in the field.

Even though the 52 states are autonomous regarding a.o.t. education, viewed from “outside” it appears as a federal system of education with a reasonably clear qualifications framework. Even if this is not the case, one can for practical reasons see it like that and in the field of recognition one needs to be practical and show a certain degree of pragmatism.

How, then, shall higher education qualifications from the US be handled in Europe? How do we – and how should we regard the US system of recognition?

Part 2: Mini-survey on understanding and use of US accreditation among European international education professionals

Through a mini-survey among professionals at institutions of higher education and at ENIC/NARIC offices, it is shown that there is some confusion and/or differences of opinion among European international education professionals regarding accreditation in the U.S., but some trends seem clear:

- An accredited institution in the U.S. is generally regarded as a recognised institution by European international education professionals, provided the accrediting body is a member of CHEA. There are different opinions as to which category of accreditation (regional or national) fulfils the requirements.
- Qualifications earned from an institution in the U.S. with *regional* accreditation from a member of CHEA will normally be recognised.
- Qualifications earned from an institution in the U.S. with *national* accreditation from a member of CHEA might be recognised by some.
- Qualifications earned from a program of study in the U.S. with *professional* accreditation from a member of CHEA will normally be recognised.
- Institutions outside the U.S., but with institutional or program accreditation from a member of CHEA, will normally be considered recognised. Opinions differ as to which category of accreditation (regional, national or professional) fulfils the requirements.
- European institutions of higher education always review the accreditation of US institutions before entering into exchange agreements/programmes.
- For Professional Licensing the competent authorities will normally require at least professional accreditation.
- Accreditation is seen as a tool for protecting
 - employers from substandard employees
 - “our own” students from substandard competitors for admission or jobs
 - students from entering substandard institutions
 - our recognised institutions from substandard applicants
 - our recognised institutions from entering into cooperation with substandard institutions
 - (state) loan funds/ providers of grants by preventing students from spending taxpayers’ money on substandard (or fraudulent) institutions/study programmes.

General guidelines:

- Qualifications earned from an institution in the U.S. with *regional* accreditation from a member of CHEA should normally be recognised, but make certain the institution is accredited as an institution of higher education.
- Qualifications earned from a program of study in the U.S. with *professional* accreditation from a member of CHEA should normally be recognised. The institution does not need institutional accreditation in addition. Make certain the program is accredited as higher education.
- Qualifications earned from an institution in the U.S. with *national* accreditation from a member of CHEA might be considered for recognition if your own institution is a single-subject institution offering programmes in the same field of study. Make certain the institution is accredited as an institution of higher education.
- Institutions outside the U.S., with *regional* accreditation from a member of CHEA, should normally be considered recognised, but make certain the institution is accredited as an institution of higher education.
- Qualifications with *professional* accreditation from a member of CHEA earned from institutions outside the U.S., should normally be considered recognised. Make certain the program is accredited as higher education.
- Qualifications earned from an institution outside the U.S. with *national* accreditation from a member of CHEA might be considered for recognition if your own institution is a single-subject institution offering programmes in the same field of study. Make certain the institution is accredited as an institution of higher education.

The next section will show how to use the tools available, and why it is important to carefully check the accreditation status of an institution when dealing with a qualification from the US.

Part 3: <<Please see the PowerPoint presentation>>