



## Accreditation and Quality in the United States: Practice and Pressures



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In the United States, accreditation is the primary form of external quality review of colleges, universities and programmes. Accreditation is carried out by private non-profit organisations designed for this specific purpose and is a non-governmental enterprise. It is more than 100 years old, emerging from concerns to protect public health and safety and to serve the public interest.

The use of the term 'accreditation' in the US is not identical to how the term is used in other countries. An institution or programme is considered accredited if it 1) meets the standards of an accrediting organisation, 2) sustains effective means of assuring quality - has processes and mechanisms to manage quality and 3) maintains strategies to improve its quality over time. Accreditation involves compliance with quality standards, mechanisms for quality assurance and strategies for quality improvement.

Accredited status does not give an institution or programme a license to operate. Authority to operate is granted by individual states in the US, not by accreditors. Accreditation does not guarantee transfer of credits between two accredited institutions and it does not guarantee degree equivalency among accredited institutions. Determination of transfer and degree equivalency are the province of individual institutions and programmes, not accreditors.

The US accreditation structure is decentralized and complex, mirroring the decentralization and complexity of American higher education. Approximately 6,500 degree-granting and non-degree-granting institutions that may be public or private, two-or four-year, non-profit or for-profit were accredited in 1998-99. More than 20,000 programmes in a range of professions and specialties that include law, medicine, business, nursing, social work and pharmacy, arts and

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journalism were accredited in 1998-99 as well. The US higher education enterprise spends approximately \$230 billion per year, enrolls more than 15 million credit students and employs approximately 2.7 million full-and part-time people.

Regional organisations accredit public and private two-and four-year institutions. Almost all of these colleges and universities are non-profit and degree-granting. Regional accreditors undertake a comprehensive review of all institutional functions. They are called 'regional' because, historically, this institutional accreditation in the US has been organised in clusters of states or regions of the country, with the scope of these particular accreditors limited these states.

National organisations accredit public and private two-and four-year colleges and universities as well. Some national organisations focus on faith-based or other single-purpose institutions. Others review primarily for-profit degree-granting and non-degree-granting institutions. Yet others review a combination of for-profit and non-profit institutions. They are called 'national' because their scope includes all 50 states and, unlike regional accreditors, they are not confined to certain areas of the country.

Specialised and professional organisations accredit specific programmes or schools including law schools, medical schools, engineering schools and programmes and health profession programmes. They are called 'specialised and professional' because their scope is confined to specific educational areas rather than entire institutions.

## **The purposes of USA Accreditation**

US accreditation serves several purposes. These are to:

### 1) Indicate quality

Accredited status is a signal to students and the public that an institution or programme meets at least minimal standards for e.g., faculty, curriculum, student services and libraries. Accredited status is conveyed only if institutions and programmes provide evidence of fiscal stability as well.

### 2) Assist with access to US federal funds

Accreditation is required for access to US federal funds such as student grants and loans for tuition and other federal programmes. The federal government relies on accreditors to confirm the quality of institutions and programmes in which students enroll. Federal student aid funds are available to students only if the institution they are attending or the programme in which they are enrolled is accredited by an organisation 'recognised' by the United States Department of

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Education(USDE), a federal agency(Please see below, 'Holding Accreditors Accountable'). The United States awarded \$60 billion in student grants and loans in 1997-98.

### 3) Ease transfer

Students who wish to move from one institution to another and have their credits transfer must have these credits scrutinised by the receiving institution or programme to which they want to transfer. These institutions and programmes examine, among other things, whether or not the credits a student wishes to transfer have been earned at an institution or programme that is accredited. Although accreditation does not guarantee transfer and is but one among several factors taken into account by receiving institutions, it is viewed carefully and is considered an important indicator of quality.

### 4) Employer confidence

Employers consider accredited status of an institution or programme when evaluating credentials of job applicants and when deciding whether to support tuition requests from current employees seeking additional education.

Accredited status is not a requirement in the Us, but is highly coveted because of the purposes that it serves.

## How Accreditation Operates

Review of institutions and programmes for US accredited status may occur every few years to every 10 years. The earning of accreditation is not a 'one-time' event. Periodic review is a requirement for all US institutions and programmes to remain accredited.

To obtain accreditation, an institution or programme must go through a number of steps stipulated by an accrediting organisation. These steps include preparation of evidence of the activities and accomplishments of the institution or programme, scrutiny of this evidence and a site visit by faculty and administrative peers and action to decide the accreditation status of an institution or programme.

- \* institutional or programme self-study: institutions and programmes prepare a written summary of their performance based on an accrediting organisation's standards:

- \* use of peer review: faculty and administrative peers review the self-study and serve on

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visiting teams that examine institutions and programmes after the self-study is completed. Peers also serve on accrediting commissions or boards that make judgements about whether the institution or programme is to be accredited:

- \* reliance on site visit: a visiting team is usually dispatched by an accrediting organisation to review an institution or programme. The self-study is the basis for the team visit. Peers, accompanied by public members(non-academics who have an interest in higher education), generally make up the team. All team members are volunteers and are usually not compensated. Some accreditors do provide may a modest stipend for service;

- \* accreditation action(judgement): accrediting commissions make judgements about whether institutions and programmes will receive accreditation or whether accreditation will be denied:

- \* periodic external review: institutions and programmes continue to be reviewed in cycles of every few years to 10 tears. A self-study and site visit are usually part of this periodic review.

Accreditation organisations and their activities are primarily funded by US colleges and universities and programmes themselves. These institutions and programmes pay the cost of the accreditation review and annual membership dues to accrediting organisations. Some accreditors have grants for foundations or corporations, but these funds are not primary sources of ongoing revenue.

## **Holding Accreditors Accountable**

In the US, accreditors are accountable to the institutions and programme they accredit. They are also accountable to the public and government. To address the accountability demands of these constituents, accreditors undergo a periodic external review of their organisations known as 'recognition'. Recognition of an accrediting organisation is based on specific standards. The scrutiny culminates in a judgement about whether the accreditor has met standards. Recognition is carried out either by another private organisation, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation(CHEA), a national coordinating body for national, regional and spacialised accreditation or, as indicated above, the USDE, a US federal agency. Approximately 75 institutional and programmatic accreditors are currently recognised by either CHEA or the USDE. Although accreditation is an non-governmental activity, recognition may or may not be.

The five recognition standards used by CHEA to review accrediting organisations place primary emphasis on academic quality assurance and improvement for an institution or programme. These standards require accreditors to advance academic quality, demonstrate accountability,

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encourage purposeful change and needed improvement, employ appropriate and fair procedures in decision-making and continually reassess accreditation practices.

CHEA recognition calls for review at least every 10 years with a five-year interim report. The CHEA Committee on Recognition (a group of institutional representatives, accreditors and public members) reviews accreditors for CHEA recognition based on a self-study completed by the accreditor. CHEA may also conduct a site visit. The committee recommends to the CHEA governing board that recognition be affirmed or denied to an accreditor. The CHEA board determines whether or not an accreditor is recognized.

The USDE recognition review usually takes place every five years. USDE review involves a written petition from the accreditor and, at times, a visit to the accreditor. USDE staff recommends to the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). This is a group of educators and public members appointed by the US Secretary of Education and charged to recommend the recognition or denial of recognition of an accrediting organisation. The committee, in turn, recommends action to the US Secretary of Education. The Secretary determines whether or not an accreditor is recognised.

There are 11 USDE standards for recognition in federal law. They address the multiple dimensions of institutional or programme operation, including student achievement, curriculum, faculty, libraries, student affairs, finance, governance, continuing education, facilities and recruitment and admissions. The fundamental thrust of the federal review is to assure that the resources and capacity of an institution or programme are highly likely to produce student achievement.

CHEA and USDE recognize 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 consolidate the place of these organisations and their institutions and programmes in the national higher education community. USDE recognition is essential for accreditors whose institutions or programmes seek eligibility for federal student aid and other federal funds.

## **Recent Challenges: Pressures on USA Accreditation**

Accreditation in the US finds itself beset by a number of pressures. Some of these pressures are not unique to the US and may be found in a number of other countries. Some reflect specifically US issues and concerns about quality review:

- \* pressure for accreditation to become more public with its reviews and decision-making;

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- \* pressure to provide more information about student learning outcomes in addition to information about resources and processes of institutions and programmes;
  - \* pressure to accommodate more and more electronically-delivered degrees, programmes and courses in addition to scrutiny of site-based activity;
  - \* pressure to act internationally as well as nationally;
  - \* pressure to act nationally in addition to operating regionally(in the case of the regional accreditors).

These pressures on accreditation have the potential to reposition the role of accreditation in US society. Accreditation would shift from a primarily private undertaking that directly serves college and universities in their efforts to assure and improve quality to a more public undertaking that directly serves students, the public and government through providing consumer and market information about quality, especially student learning outcomes.

Historically, accreditation has been a system of self-review intended to improve the capacity and resources of institutions to undertake teaching, learning and research. It is a catalyst for creating an ongoing institutional conversation about the management of quality. Accreditation has been driven by traditional academic values(e.g., the values of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and general education) with institutions as the primary audience of accrediting efforts. Accreditation has been a powerful force for continuity in US higher education.

Increasingly, however, accreditation is expected to take on additional and, in some ways, quite divergent tasks. These tasks include providing detailed public information about the results of accreditation review, with particular attention to student learning outcomes. Accreditors are asked to pay specific attention to student information needs and public and government concerns about quality for money. This contrasts with the heretofore private role of accreditation review and with the primary focus of accreditation review on institutional capacity and resources, rather than outcomes.

For example, accreditors are increasingly asked to provide consumer protection, shielding students from poor quality higher education by making public information about marginal or inadequate institutions, whether they are accredited or not. Students want to know about 'diploma mills' and 'accreditation mills'. Accreditation is also becoming an indicator of the market value of a higher education programme or institution. For example, corporations moving into higher education seek accreditation more because it enhances the worth of their investment to the public and less because it is instructive about managing quality.

Finally, in this repositioning, accreditation is supposed to be a significant force for change(in

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contrast to a force for continuity) – accommodating the growing diversity of new providers and student attendance patterns in higher education by functioning as the arbiter of quality and providing a basis for public judgements about these new providers and patterns. The expectation is that e.g., distance learning operations, the growing for-profit sector in higher education and more and more programmes that involve course-taking not leading to a degree – all will be scrutinized for quality by the accrediting community. Little attention is paid to the extent to which these new providers are significantly at variance with the type of higher education institutions and programmes that accreditation was invented to assist.

## **Pressure on All US Accreditors to Make Review and Decisions More Public**

As indicated above, US accreditation is a private activity – carried out by non-governmental bodies. In addition to this private status of the organisation itself, the accreditation review and decision-making process is similarly private. Especially in the private higher education sector, institutional self-studies and team reports are not likely to be public documents. For both public and private institutions, accrediting commission deliberations about accredited status are not public.

The rationale for this privacy is that accreditation review is intended as a formative evaluation that takes place among peers. To make this evaluation public would reduce the likelihood of candid exchange among peers, thereby reducing the consultative value of the accreditation review to improve the quality of performance of institutions. Although a number of countries routinely make this review public, the US does not.

Nonetheless, as higher education becomes both an increasingly essential and expensive commodity in the US, constituencies such as federal and state governments, students and the general public want to know more about what goes into the ultimate decision about accredited status. Why does one institution become accredited and another is denied accreditation? Why do few institutions lose their accredited status?

These same constituents are also calling for additional evidence on which to make comparative judgements about institutional and programmatic quality. Ranking systems-publications such as US News and World Report's Americas Best Colleges, Yahoo and The Princeton Review—are quite popular and have emerged as a significant source of information to students and the public about higher education and comparative quality. Ranking systems are sometimes juxtaposed to accreditation as evidence that these constituents want ways to make comparisons between and

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among higher education institutions and that accreditors should provide this information.

Such comparative judgements are neither easy nor, for a number of accreditors, desirable. The confidentiality of a review's detailed results creates hurdles for comparative judgements about quality. Accreditation relies on the mission of an institution or programme as the key basis for judgement about its quality. This, too, makes comparative judgement difficult. For example, an accreditation standard about curriculum is the same for a community college and a research university. At the same time, what counts as evidence of meeting this standard effectively is expected to vary considerably, based on the distinct mission of these two types of institutions. How can meaningful and reliable comparisons be made?

This pressure for more information about the accreditation review is, at its core, an growing interest in institutional and programme quality. One way that accreditors can respond is to work through the institutions and programmes they accredit so that these operations provide more public information about quality. Accreditors can hold institutions and programmes accountable for expanded information-sharing practices as one way to respond to this pressure.

This information can be obtained through, for example, electronic institutional and programmatic portfolios or 'fact books' describing performance. Accreditors might also urge that institutions and programmes develop a 'quality grid' based on data that describe the effectiveness of the institution or programme. This grid or matrix of quality would contain information about, e.g., the likelihood of graduation or the achievement of other educational goals, certification or licensure success, and rates of transfer and employment all help students to make decisions about college attendance. The grid could include data on documented student competencies. Institutions and programmes might also consider developing a 'performance profile' - information to the public about annual goals and provide evidence that these have been achieved.

## **Pressure to Become More Outcomes Focused**

In addition to the public interest in a more public accreditation review, constituents are also seeking more information about student learning outcomes. These constituents ask: what are the student learning outcomes associated with a college, university or programme? What counts as evidence of student learning outcomes? How does this evidence contribute to our judgements about institution or programme quality? Accreditors are asked to inform students and the public about the learning gains and competencies of students in response to the oft-repeated query: is this a quality institution or programme?



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In response, accreditors have begun to cast their standards and their expectations of institutional and programmatic performance in term of 'outcomes' or what student learn. They are building capacity to work with institutions and programmes to develop evidence of student learning and assisting the institutions and programmes themselves to develop capacity to do this. However, there is great resistance within the higher education community to moving toward student learning outcomes as a means to manage quality.

Some institutions and programmes claim they already have evidence of student achievement or learning outcomes(grades) and do not understand why other constituents of accreditation state that this information is not available. They maintain that faculty in the classroom have good evidence of student learning outcomes and should not be pressured to provide more. These institutions and programmes further maintain that recent pressure for additional attention to student learning outcomes is a call to reduce the teaching and learning experience to only measurable objectives that does not capture the fullness of the collegiate experience.

Although the current evidence of student learning outcomes may satisfy some in higher education, it is simply not enough for accreditation's other constituents outside colleges and universities. This helps to explain why some states in the US have begun to require that public colleges and universities to provide such evidence as a condition of obtaining state public funds. It also clarifies why the US Congress and the USDE, in the 1998 reauthorisation of the federal Higher Education Act(HEA), chose to place additional emphasis on student achievement as a determinant of quality. The HEA is the federal legislation governing federal funds to higher education issues.

While acknowledging that institutions and programmes do make some judgements about student learning outcomes, accreditors can nonetheless work with institutions to develop additional capacity to respond to this pressure. This might include obtaining direct evidence of student competencies through tests, portfolios or other means in addition to grades. Accreditors can hold institutions and programmes accountable for developing and using evidence of student learning outcomes to make judgements about institutional and programmatic quality and how to improve it. Some institutions have been successful in this area, and some accreditors have been discussing the feasibility of urging others to approach student learning outcomes in this way.

There are some models available. CHEA has developed a Competency Standards Project, an alternative accreditation review based on student learning outcomes. The standards for the review focus on student achievement, institutional support for student achievement and institutional organisation for student achievement. It is available through CHEA, with an

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overview on the CHEA website([www.Chea.org](http://www.Chea.org)). Corporate information technology training from, for example, Microsoft or Cisco, is built on a competency model, offering higher education a way of organising a determination of quality through attention to outcomes. An estimated 2.4 million information technology certifications were issued worldwide in 1999.

## **Pressure to Address the Expanding World of Electronically-delivered Education**

With the growing numbers of students, traditional institutions and new providers of higher education engaged in electronic delivery of higher education; accreditors are being asked to build capacity to assure quality in these environments. Institutions and programmes want to assure that their emerging electronic initiatives are sustaining quality; students and the public want to know which of the many electronic initiatives are worthy of tuition dollars and time; federal and state governments want to make sure that any use of public tax dollars is confined to quality higher education operations.

Electronically-delivered education takes several forms. First, traditional site-based institutions and programmes are incorporating electronic delivery into existing courses and programmes or establishing on-line colleges. Some are developing entire degrees. University of Maryland University College(UMUC), for example, enrolled 40,000 students in 1999-2000 in on-line programmes. Second, electronically-based consortia of courses, programme or institutions are developing. For example, the Southern Regional Education Board(SREB) has developed an electronic campus with more than 3,200 on-line courses and available through more than 260 institutions in 16 states in 1999. Third, 'new providers' of higher education that rely primarily on electronic delivery are emerging. Virtual universities such as United States Open University and Western Governors University are two examples.

Whatever the form of electronically-delivered education, it creates responsibilities for accreditors. Working with institutions and programmes, they are responsible for identifying the distinctive features of distance delivery and assuring that quality review practices are adequate to review these features. This could include reconsideration of existing accreditation standards or the development of new standards. Especially in the case of virtual universities, this may involve greater attention to student learning outcomes than in a site-based setting.

Accreditors, institutions and programmes also have political responsibilities, working to demonstrate to the federal government that their quality review practices that have been effective for site-based education can be equally effective when applied to electronically-based

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environments. They have responsibility for working with government to rethink the federal student grant and loan programmes where electronic delivery alters existing policy agreements.

The eight US regional accreditors have responded to this pressure with the development of a common platform of inquiry and scrutiny of distance-delivered education. They are currently reviewing a proposed set of practices for the review of electronically-offered degree and certificate programmes. While each of the regional accreditors will continue to rely on the specific quality standards of their respective regions, the set of practices provide a common foundation for application of these standards to distance delivery.

Some of the national and specialised accreditors have developed specific quality standards for distance delivery. Other accreditors are continuing to use existing standards, but are developing additional strategies to accommodate some of the variations in teaching and learning that especially computer-mediated instruction has introduced. For example, AACSB - The International Association for Management Education - has identified key issues in distance learning while the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education has published key questions about distance learning and teaching education.

## **Pressure to Act Internationally**

Pressure on accreditors to expand their international review activity is increasing. There is growing interest in US institutions and programmes to operate internationally and a growing interest of accreditors in undertaking more and more reviews of non-US-based institutions and programmes. The US federal government is giving greater attention to international higher education. Institutions and programmes around the world are coming to value of the US accretor's seal of approval and more and more are approaching them for review. And distance-learning operations can very quickly go international, which calls for additional attention to this area.

In addition, with distance learning enabling students to wander the globe in search of educational experiences and distance providers free to beam their wares anywhere, accreditation and quality assurance agencies and organisations are finding themselves besieged with requests for judgements about institutions throughout the world. Students in one country, for example, want information ranging from transfer of credit to admission to graduate school to tuition reimbursement to the portability of degrees across the globe. These questions simply cannot be answered without attention to fundamental quality issues.

At present, accreditation of US institutions and programmes operating outside the US or of

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non-US institutions and programmes operating outside the US is fairly limited. In 1999, the 56 CHEA participating accreditors reported that they were accrediting 355 institutions or programmes, almost all of which are US institutions operating outside the US. These US accreditors, along with their international colleagues, are energetically seeking alliances with quality assurance agencies to obtain more and better information about the operation and quality of institutions and programmes in other countries. In addition, they are exploring avenues such as substantial equivalency, mutual recognition, meta-accreditation and transfer networks.

These international challenges before US accreditors include examining whether, at some point, they need to coordinate standards for international quality review among institutional and programmatic reviewers. Perhaps even more pressing for the US is the need to examine the term and conditions under which US accreditors are individually willing to undertake an international review. Some accreditors review US institutions and programmes operating abroad; others do not. Some accreditors review non-US institutions and programmes operating outside the US; others will not. Should there be more coordination here? Or, as long as each accreditor is clear about its willingness to operate internationally, is the current situation satisfactory? Finally, there is a need to expand communication and cooperation between US accreditors and quality-assurance organisations around the world.

### **Pressure on Regional Accreditors to Act Nationally**

As mentioned above, there are eight regional accrediting commissions in the US, each accrediting institutions in a specific cluster of states. Distance learning institutions (e.g., Western Governors University) and site-based institutions operating cross-regionally (e.g., University of Phoenix) have called into question whether the long-standing regional structure should give way to a national approach to accreditation. For some, emerging distance learning offerings and site-based institutions operating cross-regionally render a strictly regional approach obsolete. This 'acting nationally' might take place through regional commissions adopting a set of national standards to which all eight commissions subscribe to make judgements about institutional quality. The commissions would exist to apply the national standards.

However, the response of the regional commissions to 'nationalise' in this way has been an emphatic 'no'. They - and their institutional constituents - are powerfully committed to retain a regional structure with regional standards. To accommodate this, the regional commissions have taken two steps. First, they have all approved a common policy for the accreditation of site-based institutions operating cross regionally. Regional standards prevail, but the conduct of an

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accreditation review involves consultation and decision-making among regions in which the institution is operating.

Second, as mentioned above, the regional accreditors have developed a draft common platform for review of distance learning to respond to the pressure of expanded electronic delivery. This platform is also a response to the pressure to nationalise. The platform does stipulate common areas of inquiry that the regional commission should pursue such as institutional context, curriculum, faculty, student support and evaluation. It does not, however, impinge on specific regional accreditation standards and judgements about quality made by a region. These standards and judgements are the sole province of the regional accrediting organisation.

The five pressures in accreditation in the US have the potential of fundamentally altering activity. The more likely outcome, however, is something more modest than fundamental change. Accreditation will be modified in some ways - perhaps greater emphasis on student learning outcomes, some additional to public information and more accommodation of electronic delivery. At the same time, the basic commitments of accreditation will remain: the commitment to peer review, a consultative style and primary emphasis on quality improvement.

## Summary

Accreditation in the US is a complex set of activities involving dozens of accrediting organisations and thousands of institutions and programmes. Accreditation involves compliance with accreditation standards as well as capacity for quality assurance and quality improvement. While not required for institutions and programmes, it is a coveted status because it brings the benefits of access to government funding, strengthening employer confidence in education and easing transfer of credit (in addition to assuring quality).

Accreditation is also the primary means by which US colleges and universities sustain their institutional autonomy and self-regulating authority. It is a peer-driven, consultative process culminating in a judgement about whether or not an institution or programme is may be designated as accredited.

At present, there are five major pressures on accreditation. Accreditation is being pushed to become more public, to provide more information about student learning outcomes, to accommodate more electronically-delivered education, to increase international activity, and (for regional accreditors) to operate nationally. The fundamental challenge for accreditors is to respond to these challenges while maintaining the desired traditional features of their enterprise. For some of these pressures, this appears promising. For other pressures, it is difficult.

Underlying these pressures are various forces that would reposition accreditation in the US from a primarily private activity intended to serve the quality assurance and improvement needs of colleges and universities to a more public activity to serve the needs of consumers, the market and government in making judgements about quality for the purposes of decision making about what college to attend, business investment in higher education and use of taxpayer dollars for tuition.

Whatever the pressures, accreditation in the US will remain a powerful and important presence in higher education, to government and to the public. The accrediting community's response to these pressures and what underlies them will determine whether and to what extent it will be repositioned in society. 

