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**ACCREDITATION AND RECOGNITION IN THE UNITED STATES**

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## ACCREDITATION AND RECOGNITION IN THE UNITED STATES

Accreditation in the United States is a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and programs 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, nongovernmental, non-profit organisations designed for this specific purpose.

### Scopes and Types of U.S. Accrediting Organisations

U.S. accrediting organisations review colleges, universities and programs in 50 states and a number of other countries. More than 6,400 U.S. institutions are accredited by recognized accreditors.<sup>1</sup> These institutions may be degree-granting and non-degree-granting, public or private, for-profit or non-profit operations. More than 18,700 programs are accredited by recognized accreditors as well, including law, medicine, business, nursing, social work and pharmacy, arts and journalism.<sup>2</sup>

There are three types of U.S. accrediting organisations:

- *Regional accreditors*: Accredite 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 regional accredited are degree-granting and not-for-profit.
- *National accreditors*: Accredite 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 nondegree and for-profit.
- *Specialized and professional accreditors*: Accredite specific programs or schools including law schools, medical schools, engineering schools and programs, and health profession programs. Some of these schools may be freestanding.

### The Purposes of U.S. Accreditation

In the U.S. accreditation serves the following purposes:

- *Assuring quality*. Accreditation is the primary means by which colleges, universities and programs assure quality to students and the public. Accredited status is a signal to students and the public that an institution or program meets at least threshold standards for its faculty, curriculum, student services and libraries. Accredited status is conveyed only if institutions and programs provide evidence of fiscal stability

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1. The terms “recognized” and “recognition” are used throughout this paper in relation to accrediting organisations. A “recognized” accreditor is an organisation that has been reviewed for quality by either by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) or the United States Department of Education (USDE) and has met their respective standards. Please see pp. 4-6.

2. Council for Higher Education Accreditation. *Fact Sheet #1: Profile of Accreditation*, Washington DC, August 2003.

- *Access to federal funds.* Accreditation is required for access to federal funds such as student aid and other federal programs. Federal student aid funds are available to students only if the institution or program they are attending is accredited by a recognized accrediting organisation. The United States awarded \$69 billion (US) in student grants and loans in 2002 alone.<sup>3</sup>
- *Easing transfer.* Accreditation is important to students for smooth transfer of courses and programs among colleges, universities and programs. 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 program is important to employers when evaluating credentials of job applicants and when deciding whether to provide tuition support for current employees seeking additional education.

## U.S. Accreditation and Government

Accrediting organisations operate in an environment in which two of the major levels of government in the U.S. 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 U.S must be authorized 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 authorized 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 programs 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 U.S. 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 expenditures 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

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3. Hartle, Terry; Simmons, Christopher; Timmons, Becky. *Paying for College: How the Federal Higher Education Act Helps Students and Families Pay for a Postsecondary Education*. Washington DC: American Council on Education, 2003. Also available at [www.acenet.edu](http://www.acenet.edu).

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 programs. The federal government wants this judgment about quality in order to decide whether institutions and programs will be eligible for federal funds to assist students with grants and loans and whether institutions or programs will be eligible for funds for research and other purposes. Accrediting organisations that affirm the quality of institutions and program to the federal government must, in turn, be reviewed for quality based on federal standards or “recognized.” Whether an organisation chooses to be federally recognized is at the discretion of the accreditor and not a requirement to operate.<sup>4</sup>

### **How U.S. Accreditation Operates**

Accreditation of institutions and programs 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 programs. Self-accreditation is not an option.

An institution or program 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 program, 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 programs 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 programs 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 program. 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 programs as well as public members. These commissions may affirm accreditation for new institutions and programs, reaffirm accreditation for ongoing institutions and programs, and deny accreditation to institutions and programs.
- *Ongoing external review*: Institutions and programs 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.

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4. Please see pp. 4-6 for a discussion of recognition.

## **“Recognition” of U.S. Accrediting Organisation**

Accreditors are accountable to the institutions and programs 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 “recognized,” 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, nongovernmental national coordinating body for national, regional and specialized 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, nineteen (19) institutional accrediting organisations are or have been recognized by either CHEA or the USDE or both. Sixty-one (61) specialized accrediting organisations are or have been recognized by CHEA or USDE as well.<sup>5</sup>

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 solidify the place of these organisations and their institutions and programs in the national higher education community. USDE recognition is required for accreditors whose institutions or programs seek eligibility for federal student aid funds.

### ***CHEA (Nongovernmental) 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 program. 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 scrutinizes 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 programs 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 programs to provide consistent, reliable information about academic quality and student achievement to foster continuing public confidence and investment.

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5. 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 programs.
- *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.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Federal (Governmental) Recognition***

The USDE recognition standards call on accreditors to place primary emphasis on whether an institution or program is of sufficient quality to qualify for federal funds for student financial aid and other federal programs. 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 program 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 recognize or not recognize an accrediting organisation. The committee, in turn, recommends action to the U.S. Secretary of Education.

The USDE recognition standards call on accrediting organisations to “...address the quality of the institution or program 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.
- Curricula.
- Faculty.
- Facilities, equipment, and supplies.
- Fiscal and administrative capacity as appropriate to the specified scale of operations.
- Student support services.

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6. This language illustrates the recognition standards and is not the full or official policy. Please consult the CHEA Website at [www.chea.org/about/recognition.cfm](http://www.chea.org/about/recognition.cfm) for the formal policy that is used in CHEA recognition reviews.

- Recruiting and admissions practices, academic calendars, catalogs, publications, grading, and advertising.
- Measures of program 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 program 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, program reviews, and any other information that the Secretary may provide to the agency.<sup>7</sup>

## **International Activity of U.S. Accreditation**

### ***The Role of Accrediting Organisations***

U.S. accrediting organisations play three significant roles in international quality review. First, a number of organisations accredit institutions and programs that operate internationally. Institutional and programmatic accrediting organisations review U.S. institutions and programs operating outside the U.S., non-U.S. institutions and programs operating outside the U.S. or, in rare cases, non-U.S. institutions and programs operating in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> Accrediting organisations make independent decisions about whether to undertake international activity. These organisations develop their own policies and standards for review of international operations. There is no centralized or coordinated initiative for international accreditation in the U.S.

Twenty-nine (29) of the recognized accrediting organisations in the U.S. 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 U.S. entities operating outside the U.S. Specialized accrediting organisations reviewed 210 operations. The majority of specialized accreditation (188 of the 210 operations) were non-U.S. entities operating outside the U.S.

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

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7. United States Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education. 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 U.S. Secretary of Education. June 2000. Available at [www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/accreditation/](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/accreditation/)

8. See the CHEA Letter from the President, "International Quality Review and Accreditation: The Role of U.S. Recognized Accrediting Organisations" (August 2002). Also available at [www.chea.org/Research/index.cfm](http://www.chea.org/Research/index.cfm).

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.<sup>9</sup>

### ***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 U.S. 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 U.S. accreditors to the U.S. 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 U.S. 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 U.S. higher education institutions, U.S. 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 U.S. 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 U.S. education, accreditation and student financial assistance, as well as information about studying and teaching in the U.S. Created in 1996, UNEI provides information and connections to education systems outside the U.S., U.S. study abroad programs, and teaching in countries outside the U.S. 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, decentralized U.S. system.<sup>10</sup>

### **U.S. Accreditation and Recognition of Qualifications**

“Recognition of qualifications” is a phrase that is not generally used in the U.S. However, as used by colleagues in other countries, it may refer to acceptance of degrees, transfer of credit, or individual certification and licensure. U.S. institutions play the dominant role in judgments about degrees and credits, not accreditation. Individual states within the U.S. 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.

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9. Please see pp. 9-10 for additional detail.

10. For additional information, please go to [www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/international/USNEI/](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/international/USNEI/).

### ***Accreditation and Acceptance of Degrees***

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

In the U.S, 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 programs 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 program 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 programs in specific fields (e.g., nursing, law, medicine). Specifically, many states require that the individual has graduated from an accredited program in order to sit for certification and licensure examinations. And, for some federally-recognized 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 U.S. 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 U.S. as well as information about U.S. education.<sup>11</sup>

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 U.S. educators and credential evaluators to judge international qualifications and how they respond to

U.S. 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.<sup>12</sup>

### **U.S. Accreditation, Codes of Practice, and Regional or International Agreements**

Accrediting organisations, institutions and higher education associations have a range of involvement in various codes of practice and regional and international agreements. The examples offered below describe some of the activities in which accrediting organisations are engaged.

#### *Codes of Practice*

A number of U.S. accrediting organisations, when undertaking international activity, rely on the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) “Principles of Good Practice in Overseas International Education Programs for Non-U.S. Nationals” issued in 1990<sup>13</sup> In 2001,

CHEA provided “Principles for United States Accreditors Working Internationally: Accreditation of Non-United States Institutions and Programs” for use by accrediting organisations as they operate outside the U.S.<sup>14</sup> The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) has a Member Code of Ethics to which its member accrediting organisations subscribe. This Code is to be honoured by member accrediting organisations when they operate internationally as well as nationally.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Regional or International Agreements*

CHEA and the lead umbrella association for U.S. higher education, the American Council on Education (ACE), signed a Joint Declaration on Higher Education and the General Agreement on Trade in Services with the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) and the European

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11. As described on the AACRAO Website at [www.aacrao.org/credential/](http://www.aacrao.org/credential/)

12. See [www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/international/USNEI/us/visitus-forrecog.html](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/international/USNEI/us/visitus-forrecog.html)

13. COPA, a nongovernmental, non-profit coordinating organisation for institutional and programmatic accreditation, ceased operation in 1993.

14. Available on the CHEA Website at [www.chea.org/Research/index.cfm](http://www.chea.org/Research/index.cfm)

15. Available on the ASPA Website at [www.aspa-usa.org](http://www.aspa-usa.org)

University Association (EUA) in September 2001. The purpose of this regional declaration is to affirm that, in the countries represented by these organisations, the responsibility for academic operation and academic quality rests with higher education institutions and their accreditation and quality assurance bodies. The declaration was issued, in part, as a response to the concerns raised by WTO/GATS and the negotiations around trade in services as this affects higher education and accreditation. It urges the countries represented by these associations not to make further commitments in the negotiations.

The Accreditation Board of Engineering Technology, Inc. (ABET), the sole U.S. accreditor of engineering programs, has recently established a “Western Hemisphere Initiative,” a regional agreement with Canada and Mexico. As of this writing, a number of Latin American countries have expressed interest in joining the initiative as well. The purpose of the initiative is cooperation in building regional capacity in the western hemisphere that fosters the development of quality assurance systems and promotes mutual recognition of quality assurance systems.

A prominent international agreement involving ABET is the Washington Accord, a multi-national agreement signed in 1989 by six engineering accreditation and quality assurance organisations that establishes “substantial equivalency” among accreditation and quality assurance bodies in for the quality of engineering education. The Accord also establishes that graduates of programs accredited by the accrediting organisations of each member country are prepared to practice at the entry level. ABET is the secretariat for the Accord.<sup>16</sup>

### **U.S. Accreditation and Regional and International Organisations**

The U.S. accrediting community participates in a number of regional and international organisations that address accreditation and quality assurance.

The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), established in 1991, has a number of U.S. accrediting organisations among its members. U.S. members are active on the governing board and its various activities. The purpose of INQAAHE is to collect and share information on current and developing theory and practice on assessing, improving and maintaining quality in higher education.<sup>17</sup>

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation established an International Commission in 2001 as a policy forum for consideration of key issues affecting higher education and quality assurance in an international setting. These issues include the WTO/GATS negotiations and the import and export of higher education. Approximately 45 individuals from 20 countries participate. The commission functions as a deliberating, coordinating and communicating body to address quality review issues affecting students, institutions, quality assurance and accrediting organisations around the world. Its current work is focused on quality in distance learning, the role of market forces and quality in an international setting, the role of nationally-based quality assurance organisations in relation to supra-national organisations and educational equity for students and nations.

The Centre for Quality Assurance in International Education (CQAIE) is an organisation that brings together higher education institutions and programs as well as accrediting and quality assurance organisations in various countries.<sup>18</sup>CQAIE has three purposes: to assist countries in developing and

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16. Available at [www.washingtonaccord.org/](http://www.washingtonaccord.org/)

17. Please see [www.inqaahe.nl](http://www.inqaahe.nl)

18. See [www.cqaie.org](http://www.cqaie.org)

enhancing quality assurance of higher education, to promote globalization of the professions and to monitor issues of quality in international higher education. In 1999, CQAIE created the National Committee for Trade in Education (NCITE), a voice for trade issues in higher education and quality assurance. NCITE advises the office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) on issues related to the current WTO/GATS negotiations.

A number of U.S. accrediting organisations and higher education associations are part of the UNESCO Forum for International Quality Assurance, Accreditation and the Recognition of Qualifications that was established in 2001. This body, too, brings accreditation and quality assurance leaders from a variety of countries.<sup>19</sup>

## **U.S. Accreditation and Key International Issues**

Three international issues have been of major interest and concern to U.S. accrediting organisations and the higher education community: (1) the negotiations taking place under the auspices of the WTO and GATS, (2) efforts among accreditation and quality assurance organisations to establish international standards for accreditation and quality assurance and (3) the expansion of distance learning and the need to assure that students and the public are protected from dubious providers of both higher education and accreditation.

### ***WTO/GATS***

The current WTO/GATS negotiations for liberalization of trade in services include higher education and accreditation among the services under consideration. A number of U.S. accrediting organisations and higher education associations (including CHEA) oppose the inclusion of higher education and accreditation in these trade negotiations, although NCITE has been an active proponent of inclusion of higher education and accreditation in WTO/GATS. CHEA and ACE in particular are active in attempting to assure that if higher education and accreditation remain within the sphere of GATS, the autonomy of accreditation and higher education in matters of academic quality (e.g., eligibility for accreditation and accreditation standards) and other academic judgments (e.g., institutional judgments about acceptance of credits, academic standards and admission to programs) is well-protected.

### ***The Worldwide Quality Register and Other International Frameworks***

Discussions of the feasibility and desirability of international standards for accreditation and quality assurance have been going on for a number of years. Most recently, these discussions have focused on the concept of a “Worldwide Quality Register” as put forward by the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP). Based on extensive consultation undertaken by CHEA during the last 18 months, most U.S. accrediting organisations do not support the concept of the Register in its present form. They seek additional consultation about the Register in areas such as the development of the standards that would be used and the relationship between sanctioning the quality of an accreditation or quality assurance organisation and determining the quality of an institution or program that is reviewed by one of these organisations.

UNESCO, through its Forum on Quality Assurance, has suggested that, as an alternative to WTO/GATS, UNESCO should produce “education regulatory tools” comparable to GATS. While this framework is in the early stages of consideration, it would appear to attempt to establish international

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19. See [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)

standards in a manner similar to the Worldwide Quality Register. Because this suggestion involves a single set of controls for international higher education and quality assurance and because UNESCO, as with WTO, is a multinational organisation of governments, this suggestion is engendering some concern among U.S. accreditors.

U.S. accrediting organisations and institutions have been clear and direct that they wish to work collegially with international colleagues. They seek to be active partners in addressing the challenging international issues before accreditation and higher education. At the same time, these organisations and institutions are also clear that they cannot support international undertakings that rely on a single set of controls for higher education and accreditation in all countries. They respect the different cultural and social contexts in which higher education and quality assurance have developed in various countries. And, they wish to preserve key features of U.S. accreditation and higher education such as the self regulation of higher education through a private, voluntary system of accreditation; the autonomy of institutions in matters of academic quality; and the autonomy of accrediting organisations in matters of eligibility and recognition of institutions and programs.

### ***Distance Learning and Protecting Students and the Public***

U.S. accreditors are well aware of the growth in export of higher education through distance learning. While they can assure that their accredited institutions and programs have sound and reliable export practices in this area, they cannot be held accountable for institutions and programs that do not seek accreditation. As indicated above, accreditation is not required to become licensed as a higher education institution in most instances. This includes operations that export higher education through distance learning.

U.S. accreditors are addressing this issue primarily through providing extensive information about the role of accreditation in distance learning on their Websites and in other forms of communication. Students and potential students would also benefit from examining the standards and policies that various U.S. accreditors use when reviewing distance learning. The eight regional accrediting commissions, for example, have adopted a common platform for review of distance learning. This platform provides detailed expectations of quality in a distance environment, including curriculum, faculty and use of technology.<sup>20</sup>

CHEA has established the only database of all accredited institutions in the U.S. that are accredited by recognized organisations.<sup>21</sup> It is a good source of information about reliable institutions, including distance learning operations. In addition, CHEA has developed two “Fact Sheets” or sets of questions that students and the public may use when attempting to determine the reliability of a distance learning institution or program.<sup>22</sup> The *Fact Sheets* stress that students and potential students ask key questions about quality, especially when an institution cannot provide evidence that it undergoes any external quality review. These might include questions about standards for quality, how these standards are met, whether courses and programs will transfer and whether courses, programs and degrees will be accepted by

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20. Statement of Commitment by the Regional Accrediting Commissions for the Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs and Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs (2001). Available on the Websites of regional accreditors. Website addresses are available through CHEA at [www.chea.org/Directories/index.cfm](http://www.chea.org/Directories/index.cfm).

21. The CHEA Institutional Database is available at [www.chea.org/institutions/search.cfm](http://www.chea.org/institutions/search.cfm).

22. Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Fact Sheet #4: Twelve Important Questions About External Quality Review (September 2001) and Fact Sheet #6: “Diploma Mills and” Accreditation Mills” (May 2003). Available at [www.chea.org/Research](http://www.chea.org/Research).

employers. A third *Fact Sheet* provides an overview of assuring quality in distance learning by the 17 recognized institutional accrediting organisations with institutions that offer courses and programs through distance learning.<sup>23</sup>

This “shining the light” approach is likely to be effective as long as U.S. accrediting organisations and institutions continue working closely with colleagues in other countries and all continue to give priority to protecting students and potential students against dubious providers of distance learning in higher education. As accrediting organisations and quality assurance agencies around the world becoming more and more familiar with each other practices and standards, this will enable everyone to identify questionable providers more expeditiously.

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23. Fact Sheet #2: The Role of Accreditation and Assuring Quality in Electronically Delivered Distance Learning (September 2001). Available at [www.chea.org/Research](http://www.chea.org/Research).