

# Accreditation System of Distance Higher Education in the U.S. and Its Implications for China

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**Abstract:** Distance higher education is an important component of the Chinese higher education. How to enhance the quality of distance higher education is one of the key issues to be addressed in the research areas of distance education and higher education. As a crucial step to quality improvement, the constitution of accreditation system in distance higher education balances the benefits of all parties involved. This paper explores the American accreditation system of higher education and distance education and concludes with suggestions for the constitution of the Chinese quality assurance system: 1) establishing third-party institutions to share part of the government roles; 2) constituting the accreditation system; 3) setting up appropriate standards; 4) publicizing results of quality assurance work; and 5) building internal quality assurance mechanism. This paper is aimed to provide some reference to the constitution of accreditation system of distance higher education in China, facilitate the solution of quality problems in distance education, and promote the continuous improvement and development of distance education in China.

**Keywords:** Distance Higher Education, Quality Assurance System, U.S., China

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## 1 Introduction

Due to the fact that the quality of distance higher education is related to not only higher education itself

but a system, we should make efforts to establish a perfect system to ensure the interest of all beneficiaries and ensure the sustainable development of distance higher education.

For organizations, the quality assurance system can help them identify whether they meet the required standards, help them face external pressure, and help weak institutions and projects to establish self-improvement goals and continuous improvement, and enhance institutions' reputation and influence by means of accreditation; for students, it can assist students identify the quality of the school, but also enable students to exchange as per credits; for the government or the third parties, it can identify investment institutions; for the public, the quality assurance system can prove whether the organization can achieve public's expectations to the organization and whether it is trustworthy.

## 2 The quality assurance system of distance higher education in the U.S.

In the field of distance higher education, accreditation refers to the external quality inspection and evaluation for distance higher education institutions such as colleges or universities from the perspective of quality assurance and quality improvement<sup>[1]</sup>. With a consistent accreditation system for higher education, the U.S. government entrusts accreditation bodies accredited by the society, schools, and the government to certify the quality of education in institutions according to certain criteria. Such an accreditation system started from the federal system of the United States. As per the US Constitution, the educational systems of the states

are systemized and proposed by the state governments, and the federal government has no right to intervene. Therefore, there is no so-called “unified” education system in the United States, and accreditation bodies came into being accordingly.

## 2.1 Overview of the accreditation system

As per Figure 1, the accreditation system of American higher education quality is composed of leading departments, accreditation bodies, and institutions of higher learning. The accreditation body is the main body of the accreditation system of higher education quality.

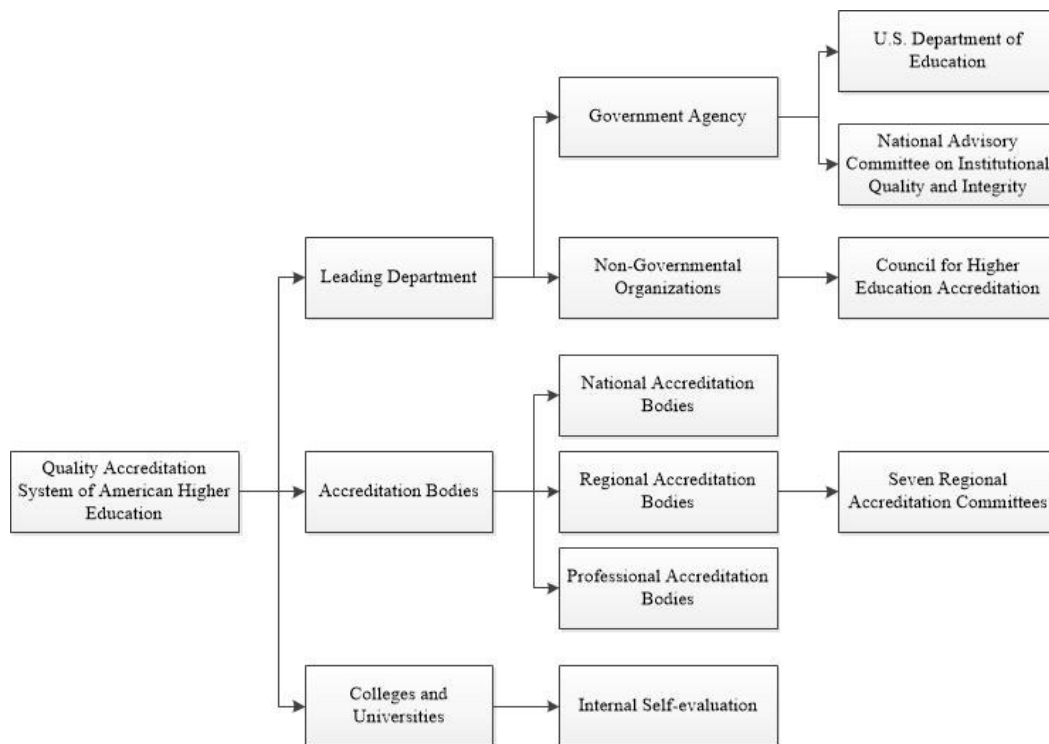


Figure 1. Quality Accreditation System of American Higher Education

There are two main ways for an accreditation body to be recognized by the senior department: First, it is recognized by the US Federal Department of Education; second, it is recognition by Council for Higher Education Accreditation organized by NGO.

As the US government has very limited control over education the government and accreditation bodies are more cooperative and mutually supervised.

Accreditation bodies are divided into three categories: national accreditation bodies, regional accreditation bodies and professional accreditation bodies. Judith Eton, chairman of the Higher Education Council, mentioned in the report 2012 that there are 80 accreditation bodies in the United States, including 11 national accreditation bodies, 7 regional accreditation bodies, and 62 professional accreditation bodies, and 7,818 higher education institutions and 22,654 professional subject programs have been accredited all over the country<sup>[2]</sup>.

Due to the independence of the states’ education system, private, unofficial, and non-profit regional

accreditation bodies are the main stream. There are seven regional accreditation committees: NEASC, NCA, SACS, MSA, NWA, WASC-ACCJC and WASC-ACSCU, which are responsible for accrediting public institutions and private institutions, profitable and non-profit institutions, two-year and four-year colleges and universities in their respective states. Regarding the content of the accreditation, the regional accreditation bodies are comprehensive, including administrative management, teaching management, subject design and so forth. Furthermore, national accreditation bodies have a wider range, such as vocational training colleges and religious colleges. Professional accreditation bodies mainly certify professional disciplines such as law, medicine, mechanical engineering and health care.

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Colleges and universities are the main subject of accreditation. At present, most American colleges and universities are certified by the local accreditation committee. Some of the colleges may be certified by national accreditation bodies, and some of specialized disciplines may be certified by professional accreditation bodies.

## **2.2 Distance education accreditation**

The history of distance higher education in the United States dates back to the end of the 19th century. At the beginning, the University of Chicago tried correspondence education in 1892 under the leadership of Mr. Harper, the first principal, and became the first university in the United States to provide distance education. Since then, American distance education evolved by correspondence education, radio and television education and online education has become an indispensable part of American higher education<sup>[3]</sup>. According to the Survey about Distance Higher

Education released by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2011, 1,758 American universities had distance education courses in 2006-2007, accounting for 35.02% of the number of higher education institutions, and about 2 million students enrolled in various forms of distance higher education. In 2007-2008, the number of registered students doubled to 4.27 million dramatically, accounting for 20.4% of all types of college students<sup>[4]</sup>.

The quality accreditation of American distance higher education focuses on whether the distance higher education institutions can establish an effective mechanism to guarantee and continuously improve the quality of education, judge whether the higher education institutions are fulfilling and can go on fulfilling their commitment and obligation in the quality of distance education for a period of time. The accreditation process is actually a process that helps schools identify problems and solve problems<sup>[5]</sup>. Currently, 86% of US distance higher education institutions are certified by regional accreditation bodies and 14% are certified by National accreditation bodies<sup>[6]</sup>. The accreditation of distance education is similar to the accreditation of face-to-face education, but the accreditation body has made corresponding adjustments to the accreditation standards and accreditation methods due to its uniqueness.

From the perspective of accreditation standards, the focus of accreditation includes school objectives, organizational structure, school resources, curriculum and teaching, teachers' support, students' support and student learning outcomes. Specifically, the standard of accreditation is as follows: whether the establishment of distance education courses is related to the purpose and training objectives of the accredited institutions; whether the organizational structure of the institution is able to provide high-quality distance education; whether the institution has adequate funding to support the high-quality distance education; whether the curriculum is reasonable; whether the teacher is qualified for the position in distance education, and accessible to acquiring the required resources and technical support; whether the student receives the required support services, such as consultation, facilities and instructional materials; and whether the accredited school regularly assess the quality of distance education based on students' learning outcomes.

## **3 The implications to the establishment of China's quality assurance system**

### **3.1 Establishing an accreditation body to appropriately dilute the government's functions in distance higher education**

The United States is a highly market-oriented country, but the government still hopes to improve the quality of education and develop in high efficiency from the macro level such as the formulation of laws and regulations and funding; American universities attach great importance to their own autonomy and established academic standards<sup>[7]</sup>. The accreditation body is a good intermediary to coordinate the government and universities. The accreditation body actively mobilizes the strength and academic authority of colleges and universities, and adopts the methods of self-evaluation and peer evaluation in colleges and universities, to enhance the quality of distance higher education.

### **3.2 Establishing an accreditation system**

The accreditation system originated in the United States and has been focused and followed by more and more countries, regions and international organizations. For example, Japan, Germany, Austria, Italy and Hong Kong have established higher education accreditation systems; The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education held a seminar on the accreditation model for higher education in November 2003. It analyzed the accreditation models of some countries, explored their strengths and weaknesses, and made recommendations for improving the accreditation system. The reason why the US accreditation system has received widespread attention is its unique advantages. The accreditation system can comprehensively reflect the interest of various distance higher education beneficiaries and balance the various groups such as institutions, governments, students and society. The accreditation system establishes a bridge between the government and the institution. The government understands the organization through the accreditation system, supports or subsidizes the organization; the student understands the organization through the accreditation system, selects the appropriate organization to participate in the learning activities; the organization passes the accreditation system to recognize its own quality problems and continues Improve to enhance competitiveness.

### **3.3 Establish appropriate standards for evaluation**

The Modern Distance Education Technical Standards Committee established a modern distance education

standard system in October 2001, and divided the distance education standards into 26 sub-criteria, including general standards, standards related to teaching resources, standards related to learners, standards related to teaching environment, and standard related to service quality and localization, and established some track research topics and give priority level of sub-criteria<sup>[8]</sup>.

Besides absorbing the advanced systems and norms of the United States, the United Kingdom and other countries, the standard makers should fully consider the Chinese characteristics and take the lessons and experience of the pilot schools in the past over 10 years. At the same time, the standard makers should fully consider for the various beneficiaries in distance education, such as students, employers, and teachers. Their perspectives and feedback often directly reflect the status quo and needs of distance education, making the standards more objective, scientific and practical. It is also worth noting that the standards are designed to help organizations improve their quality and thus develop sustainably, rather than constraining institutions and limiting their innovation. Therefore, the standard should not be too detailed or comprehensive. In addition to giving the organization a quality goal, it must give the freedom of innovation to some extent.

### **3.4 The transparent and publicized quality assurance work**

The Quality Assurance of Distance Education is all the activities and processes held by Distance Education System to control, review and evaluate the quality of education internally in accordance with certain standards and procedures to convince people that distance education institutions can provide qualified education services<sup>[9]</sup>. The quality assurance has two purposes: (1) improving quality; (2)gaining trust. And often the second purpose will be ignored by quality assurance activities. We tend to think that quality is nothing but about the organization and about teaching. But in fact, if we want to really do quality assurance, we must provide “evidence” to gain outside trust in the quality of distance education. The so-called “evidence” is to open up the quality assurance work process, disclose the results of quality assurance work, and let the outside world know the whole process. The quality assurance work is transparent, and the consumers of distance education—learners, parents, and employers of the company, have autonomy to choose distance-

based educational institutions, which creates a fairly competitive environment for distance education institutions. The market competition mechanism can be utilized to ensure quality, stimulate the competition awareness of colleges and universities, give full play to the market's competitive role, in order to achieve continuous improvement and improve the quality of distance education<sup>[10]</sup>.

### **3.5 Forming an internal quality assurance mechanism**

In the long run, under the highly centralized higher education management system, China's colleges and universities are only affiliates of educational administrations. They are only an extension of the administrative system in the higher education system. Colleges and universities lack the ability to effectively manage themselves and have no possibility of independent development. The same is true for distance higher education institutions. However, the internal quality assurance mechanism is of utmost importance, and the organization needs to meet the accreditation and evaluation of the accreditation body through its own construction and management. Fortunately, in recent years, it has been seen that many organizations have established internal quality assurance systems, and they have actively developed corresponding rules and regulations in student management, teacher management, examination management, and evaluation, and some institutions such as network college of Beijing Medical University introduce ISO9000 to ensure the standard of teaching and management. It is suggested that Chinese universities,

like American universities, establish internal standards and management norms based on external accreditation systems and accreditation standards to improve their own quality and obtain accreditation from accreditation bodies.

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