



Validity of degrees issued by private institutions in Switzerland

Office circular

1. While higher education in Switzerland is primarily dispensed by public institutions, there are also many private ones. Some of these private institutions cater primarily to Swiss clients. As such, they are part of Switzerland's public higher education sector and therefore receive public subsidies. Other private institutions were created mainly for the purpose of servicing international students and are not part of Switzerland's public higher education sector. Between these two extremes, there are situations that combine both realities where the same institution offers separate curricula to address the needs of both the Swiss and international markets.

2. As a general rule, in Switzerland no prior authorisation is required in order to offer higher education courses, organise examinations or issue private degrees. In certain cases, however, the federal or cantonal authorities, depending on their respective area of authority, will supervise private institutions and/or authorise them to offer courses and issue degrees. This supervision means that private institutions are required to accept a certain amount of public control. They must undergo quality inspections if they wish to issue protected titles that will be recognised as such. Non protected titles are nevertheless common.

3. Private institutions that are not part of Switzerland's public higher education sector, are not compatible with it, or are not entirely supervised by public authorities offer a different, but not necessarily lower, level of quality. There are several prestigious private institutions that are entirely independent from Switzerland's public higher education sector. Not all private institutions are prestigious, however. Apart from particularly regulated cases, Swiss tradition has been to allow clients or the labour market itself to decide whether a private institution offers education quality rather than to leave this decision up to the State. In keeping with international trends, Switzerland is currently introducing accreditation procedures that draw no distinction between public and private institutions. Accreditation attests to the fact that the public authorities have conducted an external quality inspection, recognise the institutions but do not provide them with public subsidies.

4. A coherent accreditation system for the higher education sector (i.e. ISCED tertiary-level A) has not yet been completely introduced in Switzerland:

- The Confederation fully regulates the university of applied sciences (UAS) sector, which includes both public and private institutions. In order to use the name UAS or issue UAS Bachelor's and Master's degrees, the institution must be accredited by the Confederation.
- The Confederation (owner of Switzerland's two federal institutes of technology, the ETH in Zurich and the EPF in Lausanne) and the Cantons (owners of public cantonal universities) work together within the Swiss University Conference (SUK) to coordinate the public higher education sector. The Cantons are given considerable freedom with regard the private universities located on their territory. Some Cantons have established procedures that enable private institutions to obtain authorisation to use a given name. This is done for the sole purpose of preventing confusion between different types of institutions and in no way constitutes a value judgement. Basing itself on a proposal made by the Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ), the SUK decides at its own discretion whether to confer accreditation on public institutions, private institutions or their individual degree programmes.

Institutions may apply for accreditation as higher education institutions (HEIs), which includes the following categories: traditional universities; universities of applied sciences; teachers colleges; institutions within the HEI sector that offer only Bachelor's degree programmes; and institutions within the HEI sector that offer only continuing education and training (CET), if certain minimum requirements are met.

Institutions may also apply for accreditation of individual Bachelor's and/or Master's degree programmes. Such accreditation is only possible for institutions that are either already accredited as HEIs or recognised as HEIs by virtue of the Federal Act of 8 October 1999 on University Funding and Cooperation (SR 414.20).

The Higher Education Bill is currently being examined by the Federal Parliament. Among other things, this new Federal Bill provides for the term "higher education" to be used only by public or private institutions that have been accredited as such by the appropriate national authority. Such protection has already been conferred upon the term "university of applied sciences". As in the past, unaccredited institutions will remain free to use unprotected terms (e.g. academy, etc.). The Higher Education Bill is not expected to come into effect before 2013.

5. As far as recognition of Swiss HEI qualifications are concerned:

- Federal or cantonal legislation determines which degrees are recognised for regulated professions (e.g. medical practitioners, lawyers, etc.). Generally speaking, only HEIs recognised by virtue of federal legislation issue such degrees. Only in very rare cases (e.g. theology) are degrees for regulated professions issued by private institutions.
- For unregulated professions (e.g. managers, journalists, etc.), it is up to employers to decide whether to "recognise" the value of a degree; however, these degrees have more weight if they obtain accreditation or certification of quality issued by generally recognised private bodies.
- As far as admission to a higher level of studies is concerned, it is up to the HEI to decide whether to recognise the value of the prospective student's prior qualifications. As with the recognition of foreign qualifications from countries with which Switzerland has no corresponding international agreement, the HEI relies on recommendations made by Swiss ENIC, which acts under a mandate from the State Secretariat for Education and Research (SER).

6. Private institutions based in Switzerland that are not accredited as HEIs by the Swiss University Conference (SUK) may only issue private degrees. Such degrees:

- generally do not confer any entitlement upon the holder to gain direct access to a higher level of studies within Switzerland's public higher education sector;
- generally may not be used by the holder to carry out a profession that is regulated in Switzerland;
- may be used by the holder to carry out an unregulated profession; appreciation of the value of private degrees is left up to employers.

Generally speaking, there are no international agreements protecting the value of private degrees; in all cases, it is up to the national authorities in the host country to decide whether to recognise foreign qualifications.

Private institutions are able to legitimately carry out their activities in Switzerland by virtue of the principle of economic freedom. They may also use a name that is not subject to an accreditation requirement (e.g. "university" is currently used freely in most Cantons, at least until the proposed Higher Education Act comes into effect in 2013). However, this does not mean that the Swiss authorities recognise the studies offered, nor the examinations passed nor the qualifications issued.

7. Generally speaking, the use of professional names and titles is not regulated. The Confederation has adopted provisions aimed at protecting certain federally recognised titles within the VET/PET sector as well as within the HEI sector (albeit limited to titles awarded by the two federal institutes of technology – ETH Zurich and EPFL – and all public and private universities of applied sciences). However, there are no federal legislative provisions prohibiting the private use of titles (i.e. for non-professional use).

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