



Beyond Borders: What Global Accreditation Teaches Us About Program Governance

When international credentialing organizations negotiate mutual recognition agreements, they don't just compare course catalogs. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association's (ASHA) agreement with counterparts from Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland examined "educational and other requirements expected of each other's certificate holders, including academic course content, the amount and distribution of clinical practice hours prior to certification being awarded, degree designations, accreditation of academic programs, experience, and assessment mechanisms" (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, n.d.). This deep dive reveals international accreditation's lesson for governance: it forces us to distinguish between essential standards and inherited assumptions.

The World Federation for Medical Education (WFME), founded in 1972 in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), provides healthcare's most instructive accreditation example. WFME doesn't accredit individual medical schools, it evaluates and recognizes the accreditation agencies themselves, examining "the legal standing, accreditation process, post-accreditation monitoring, and decision-making processes" (World Federation for Medical Education, n.d.-a). WFME's Recognition Criteria cover four areas: (1) Background: scope of authority and acceptance; (2) Accreditation standards: existence, appropriateness, and review; (3) Process and procedures: site visits, qualifications, decisions, complaints; and (4) Policies and resources: conflict controls, consistent application, due process, records, information dissemination (World Federation for Medical Education, n.d.-b).

The Enhanced Nurse Licensure Compact (eNLC), enabling nurses to practice across 43 US jurisdictions with one license, implemented 11 uniform requirements including mandatory federal background checks and standardized disciplinary provisions (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, n.d.). The compact distinguished what's truly necessary for public protection versus what's customary but negotiable.



Similarly, ISO/IEC 17024—harmonizing personnel certification worldwide—requires demonstrating that "members of the governing body do not have a conflict of interest in their overall capacity to serve that could compromise the integrity of the certification process" (International Organization for Standardization, 2012). This demands structural separation: board members shouldn't simultaneously serve on examination committees or participate in appeals involving their practice areas.

The National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs require certification programs to show "the governance structure and the process for selection and removal of certification board members protects against undue influence" (Institute for Credentialing Excellence, 2021, Standard 2.A), taking concrete forms: public representation with actual decision-making authority, documented authority flows, and financial independence.

What International Accreditation Reveals About Governance

International accreditation and mutual recognition can help credentialing organizations understand which governance requirements are critical versus those which are somewhat more flexible and can be based on geographic or organizational preferences. These are the key building blocks to an exemplary governance structure:

- **Conflict of interest controls:** Evaluates whether agencies implement systematic controls preventing conflicts from compromising decisions—not just disclosure forms.
- **Consistent application:** Decisions must follow documented, consistently applied processes rather than individual preferences or institutional knowledge.
- **Qualification and training:** Strong governance ensures people implementing processes are qualified and trained.
- **Public accountability:** Stakeholders can independently verify accreditation status, which builds public trust.
- **Public representation:** Not tokenism, but actual decision-making authority. ISO/IEC 17024 and NCCA both require demonstrated stakeholder representation on governance bodies
- **Due process and appeals:** The recognition criteria require demonstrated due process mechanisms. Accreditation decisions must be defensible, documented, and subject to appropriate appeal processes.



- **Documented authority flows:** Clear policies showing which bodies recommend versus decide ▪ Financial independence: Especially critical when certification programs exist within membership associations
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The Path Forward

International accreditation offers a diagnostic tool: Would our governance withstand review by external auditors using accreditation criteria? Could we demonstrate systemic conflict controls, consistent application with documented evidence, qualification requirements for decision-makers, followed due process, and public accountability?

The goal isn't standardization – it's governance maturity. Strong governance demonstrates clear role boundaries, evidence-based requirements, carefully structured stakeholder input, systemic conflict management, and focus on competency rather than credentials as proxies.

Apply the same scrutiny to your governance that international reviewers would. Not because you're seeking mutual recognition, but because questions about authority, accountability, evidence, and impartiality are fundamental to credentialing integrity wherever you operate. If your governance can withstand that examination, you're building something that deserves stakeholder trust.

References:

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