

# Is There a Focus on Information Literacy as a Transversal Skill Within the Institutional Accreditation Process?

Elitsa Lozanova-Belcheva<sup>(✉)</sup>

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Sofia, Bulgaria  
lozanovabe@phls.uni-sofia.bg

**Abstract.** The aim of the paper is to compare the standards and criteria of different organizations that accredit some of the top universities in the world according to the QS World University Rankings for 2015/2016. Regional accreditation organizations in USA support information literacy outcomes, but I found some differences between their practices and the criteria of other accrediting agencies. Information literacy is mentioned as important indicator of students’ competency in some of them, but not in others. The paper also investigates the Criteria system for institutional accreditation of higher schools in Bulgaria where standards are similar with regulations of the quality of university programs around the world but without a focus on information literacy. The conclusions refer to insufficient awareness of the importance of information literacy as a transversal skill in the digital society and its role for the social inclusion of young people.

**Keywords:** Information literacy · Transversal skills · Institutional accreditation · Higher education institutions · Accreditation standards

## 1 Introduction

During recent years the importance of information literacy has increasing and has been recognized as one of the traversal competencies or “key competences”, defined as “knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will help learners find personal fulfilment and, later in life, find work and take part in society. These key competences include ‘traditional’ skills such as communication in one’s mother tongue, foreign languages, digital skills, literacy, and basic skills in math and science, as well as horizontal skills such as learning to learn, social and civic responsibility, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness, and creativity”<sup>1</sup>. Still, I could not identify a clear emphasis on that skill in the process of Institutional Accreditation for colleges and universities.

There are few research papers that emphasize the importance of collaboration between librarians and faculty and focus on the importance of information literacy within institutional accreditation process [1–7].

---

<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/competences\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/competences_en.htm).

Past research analysed accreditation criteria and the impact of information literacy in different aspects. For example, according to Saunders “terms related to information literacy skills ...are scattered throughout the accreditation documents, and are not concentrated solely in the sections dealing with libraries” [3]. Other researchers concentrated their work on regional accreditation organizations (USA) such as the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the North West Commission on Colleges and Universities and how they supported information literacy outcomes. Each of the documents of the six regional accrediting associations of higher education institutions included standards for educational quality and, within these criteria, we can find different views of the importance of information literacy in the context of educational process. A content analysis of their standards “illustrates that library and learning resource programs, even if not always named explicitly, are campus players in improving teaching and learning” [4].

## 2 Methodology

I chose one of the prestigious ranking of universities around the world as a tool for the identification of the top universities for the 2015/2016 academic year. The QS World University Rankings® [8] are based on the comparison of world universities in four major categories: research, teaching, employability, and internationalization. Each of the six indicators “carries a different weighting when calculating the overall scores. Four of the indicators are based on ‘hard’ data, and the remaining two are based on major global surveys – one of academics and another of employers – each the largest of their kind”. These indicators are: **academic reputation (40%)** – “is measured using a global survey, in which academics are asked to identify the institutions where they believe the best work is currently taking place within their own field of expertise”; **employer reputation (10%)** – “is also based on a global survey the survey asks employers to identify the universities they perceive to be producing the best graduates. This indicator is unique among international university rankings”; **student-to-faculty ratio (20%)** – “is a simple measure of the number of academic staff employed relative to the number of students enrolled. In the absence of an international standard by which to measure teaching quality, this indicator aims to identify the universities that are best equipped to provide small class sizes and a good level of individual supervision”; **citations per faculty (20%)** - aims “to assess universities’ research impact. So the more highly cited research papers a university publishes, the stronger its research output is considered”; **international faculty ratio (5%) and international student ratio (5%)** – “the two indicators aim to assess how successful a university has been in attracting students and academics from other nations”.

### 2.1 Limitations of the Study

I originally intended to analyze the top 50 universities from the QS World University Rankings® 2015/16 and to find the accreditation standards by which those universities are accredited, to summarize the differences between them, and to explore the case of

Bulgarian higher education institutions' accreditation system. But in the process of investigation I found that it was very difficult to identify all accrediting institutions for all fifty universities and, especially, their accrediting criteria. Although I used different sources of information, such as the directory 4 International Colleges and Universities [9], an international higher education institution search engine reviewing accredited Universities and Colleges in the world including 11,606 Colleges and Universities, ranked by web popularity, in 200 countries but found that it was complicated to find equivalent documents for the accreditation of all fifty universities.

For that reason, my conclusions were based on the content analysis of the accrediting criteria of the regional agencies that accredited the top 20 US universities among the top 50 world universities (see Table 1).

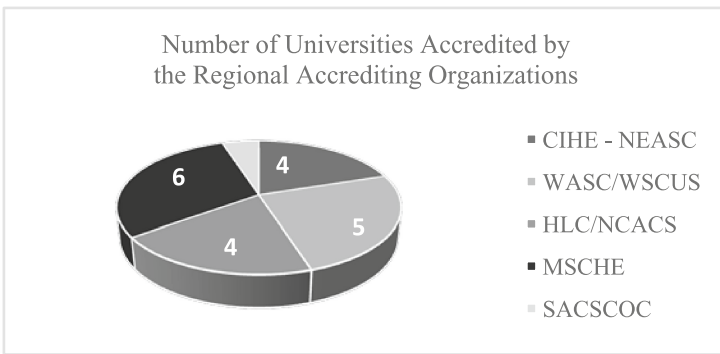
**Table 1.** US universities accredited by six regional accrediting organizations

QS rank	University	Accrediting agency	IL in standards
100.0	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)	Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE) of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)	Yes
98.7	Harvard University	CIHE – NEASC	Yes
98.6	Stanford University	Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)	Yes
97.9	California Institute of Technology (Caltech)	WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)	Yes
94.6	University of Chicago	Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS)	Yes
94.4	Princeton University	Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)	Yes
92.2	Yale University	CIHE – NEASC	Yes
91.9	Johns Hopkins University	MSCHE	Yes
91.8	Cornell University	MSCHE	Yes
91.5	University of Pennsylvania	MSCHE	Yes
89.7	Columbia University	MSCHE	Yes
88.4	University of CA, Berkeley	WASC	Yes
88.2	University of CA, Los Angeles (UCLA)	WASC	Yes
87.9	Duke University	Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)	Yes
87.8	University of Michigan	NCACS	Yes
87.7	Northwestern University	NCACS	Yes
82.5	University of California, San Diego (UCSD)	WASC	Yes
81.5	Brown University	NEASC	Yes
80.5	New York University	MSCHE	Yes
80.3	University of Wisconsin-Madison	NCACS	Yes

Source: <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings>

### 3 Key Findings

The comparison of the top 20 US Universities, shown in Fig. 1, and their accrediting agencies showed that six were accredited by Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). Five universities were accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and its Commission, the Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). Four schools were accredited by Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE)<sup>2</sup> of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)<sup>3</sup> and another four by North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS) and Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of NCACS<sup>4</sup>. And the last university was accredited by Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).



**Fig. 1.** Number of universities accredited by the regional accrediting organizations

I found some similarities differences through a content analysis of the criteria and standards of accreditation of those accrediting organizations, shown in Table 2.

In the accreditation documents of CIHE – NEASC, WSCUC, and MSCHE, the information literacy was part of the standards concerning students’ skills and library resources and training. In HLC and SACSCOC there was indirect relation with information literacy in instruction provided by university libraries.

<sup>2</sup> NEASC's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education is the regional accrediting body for 241 colleges and universities in New England and eleven overseas institutions.

<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1885, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges is one of six regional accrediting bodies in the United States and provides public assurance about the educational quality of over 2,000 public and independent schools, technical/career institutions, colleges and universities in New England plus International Schools in more than 65 nations worldwide.

<sup>4</sup> The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) was founded in 1895 as one of six regional institutional accreditors in the United States. Through an agreement between the HLC and the Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (CASI), the North Central Association has been dissolved.

**Table 2.** Accreditation organizations

Accreditation organization	Standards and criteria for accreditation	Year of publication/revision
CIHE – NEASC	Standard 4: The Academic Program. <u>4.7</u> . ... The institution provides appropriate orientation and training for use of these resources, as well as instruction and support in <b>information literacy</b> and information technology appropriate to the degree level and field of study Standard 7: Library and Other Information Resources. <u>7.10</u> . The institution ensures that throughout their program of study students acquire increasingly sophisticated skills in <u>evaluating the quality of information sources</u> appropriate to their field of study and the level of the degree program [10]	July 1, 2011
CIHE – NEASC	Standard 4: The Academic Program. <u>4.12</u> , Expectations for student achievement, independent learning, <b>information literacy</b> , skills in inquiry, and critical judgment are appropriate to the subject matter and degree level and in keeping with generally accepted practice <u>4.15</u> . Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English ... and the capability for continuing learning, including the skills of <b>information literacy</b> . [11]	July 1, 2016
WSCUC	Standard 2. Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions. <u>2.2a</u> Undergraduate programs engage students in an integrated course of study of sufficient breadth and depth to prepare them for work, citizenship, and life-long learning. These programs ensure the development of core competencies including, but not limited to, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, <b>information literacy</b> , and critical thinking... [12]	2013, Revised April 2015
HLC	Criterion Two. Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct. <u>2 E/2</u> . Students are offered guidance in the <u>ethical use of information resources</u> Criterion 3. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support. <u>3.D/5</u> . The institution provides to students guidance in the <u>effective use of research and information resources</u> [13]	August 1992; Last Revised: June 2014
MSCHE	Standard 11. Educational Offerings. Several skills, collectively referred to as “ <b>information literacy</b> ,” apply to all disciplines in an institution’s curricula. These skills relate to a student’s competency in acquiring and processing information in the search for understanding, whether that information is sought in or through the facilities of a library, through practica, as a result of field experiments, by communications with experts in professional communities, or by other means. Therefore, <b>information literacy</b> is an essential component of any educational program at the graduate or undergraduate levels. Standard 12. General Education. Institutions should identify and provide a recognizable core of general education... There is an inherent relationship among these skills. This interrelatedness is evident in the concept of “ <b>information literacy</b> ,” which embraces all of the specific general education skills [14]	1919; Last Revised 2006
SACSCOC	3.8. Library and Other Learning Resources. 3.8.2. The institution ensures that users have access to regular and timely <u>instruction in the use of the library and other learning/information resources</u> (Instruction of library use) [15]	2012

Furthermore, I gave special attention to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education where information literacy was mentioned much more widely than at the others accrediting commissions:

“The information literacy skills include the ability to:

- determine the nature and extent of needed information;
- access information effectively and efficiently;
- evaluate critically the sources and content of information;
- incorporate selected information in the learner’s knowledge base and value system;
- use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose;
- understand the economic, legal and social issues surrounding the use of information and information technology; and
- observe laws, regulations, and institutional policies related to the access and use of information.

Closely tied to information literacy is the need for technological competency at all levels within an institution and its curricula..... Institutions should provide both students and instructors with the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to use the information, new technology, and media for their studies, teaching, or research. ... In addition to information literacy and technological competency, the institution’s curricula should be designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency...” [14].

Here I found a clear focus on the importance of information literacy as a core competency not only for the educational process but also for students’ professional future. The Requirements of Affiliation And Standards For Accreditation of MSCHE was an example for other accreditation agencies. Those standards corresponded with my research question about the impact of information literacy as an accreditation criteria.

## 4 Bulgarian Higher Education Accreditation Standards

Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski was at the 701th place in the QS World University Rankings. So, there was not a base for comparison with the top twenty US Universities. The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency Criteria system for institutional accreditation of schools of higher education was similar to US regional accrediting agencies in Criteria 1.4. “High School has created the necessary conditions to support training and development of students. 1.4.2.2 Access to libraries, the opportunity to work with computers, special offices and labs” [16]. Information literacy or specific library trainings in that sense is not mentioned.

There are many of reasons for this lack of attention:

- insufficient awareness of the importance of information literacy as a transversal competence from the national accrediting body;
- a lack of systematic programs for information literacy within the curriculum except at the American University in Bulgaria while information literacy is partly covered

in the curricula at institutions such as the Sofia University, Medical University, New Bulgarian University;

- ignorance of the significant role of the university library and its role in lifelong learning and building core competences.

The Bulgarian criteria system for institutional accreditation of higher education institutions needs to be revised along with the new concepts in higher education and especially with the students' expectations and attitudes and their social integration and professional realization.

## 5 Conclusions

A content analysis of US and Bulgarian higher education institutions accreditation systems identified that information literacy is recognized as an important skill within the educational process but is not yet a priority field in all universities. US higher education institutions had a long tradition with information literacy trainings, but there is not such practice among universities around the world.

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education Accreditation Standards are an excellent example for those national systems as Bulgarian.

The Bologna process as a European reform process aimed to creating the European Higher Education Area and harmonizing various systems of European higher education could be considered along with the necessity of information literacy education in all European Universities.

## References

1. Bradley, C.: Information literacy in the programmatic university accreditation standards of select professions in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. *J. Inf. Lit.* **7**(1), 44–68 (2013). <http://dx.doi.org/10.11645/7.1.1785>
2. Saunders, L.: Perspectives on accreditation and information literacy as reflected in the literature of library and information science. *J. Acad. Librarianship* **34**(4), 305–313 (2008)
3. Saunders, L.: Regional accreditation organizations' treatment of information literacy: definitions, collaboration, and assessment. *J. Acad. Librarianship* **33**(3), 317–326 (2007)
4. Gratch-Lindauer, B.: Comparing the regional accreditation standards: outcomes assessment and other trends. *J. Acad. Librarianship* **28**(1), 14–25 (2002)
5. Oakleaf, M.: *The Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*. Association of College and Research Libraries, Chicago (2010)
6. Thompson, G.B.: Information literacy accreditation mandates: what they mean for faculty and librarians. *Lib. Trends* **51**, 218–241 (2002)
7. Becher, M.: Instruction coordinators and higher education accreditation: a study of awareness and assessment documentation use. *J. Acad. Librarianship* **39**, 573–581 (2013)
8. QS Quacquarelli Symonds Limited. QS World University Rankings® 2015/16. <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2015>
9. 4 International Colleges & Universities. <http://www.4icu.org/>
10. NEASC's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE). Standards for Accreditation (2011). [https://cihe.neasc.org/downloads/Standards/Standards\\_for\\_Accreditation.pdf](https://cihe.neasc.org/downloads/Standards/Standards_for_Accreditation.pdf)

11. NEASC's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE). Standards for Accreditation (2016). [https://cihe.neasc.org/sites/cihe.neasc.org/files/downloads/2016\\_Standards\\_for\\_Accreditation.pdf](https://cihe.neasc.org/sites/cihe.neasc.org/files/downloads/2016_Standards_for_Accreditation.pdf)
12. WSCUC Handbook of Accreditation (2013, Revised 2015). <https://wascsenior.box.com/shared/static/oxgx719tnw5bn8b4kp28.pdf>
13. Higher Learning Commission (HLC). The Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components. <https://www.hlcommission.org/Criteria-Eligibility-and-Candidacy/criteria-and-core-components.html>
14. Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Requirements of Affiliation and Standards for Accreditation. <http://www.msche.org/publications/CHX-2011-WEB.pdf>
15. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement (2012). <http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/2012PrinciplesOfAcreditation.pdf>
16. National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency Criteria System for Institutional Accreditation of higher schools (2011). [http://www.neaa.government.bg/images/Criteria\\_EN/Kriterialna\\_sistema\\_za\\_IA\\_eng.pdf](http://www.neaa.government.bg/images/Criteria_EN/Kriterialna_sistema_za_IA_eng.pdf)