

Global Quality Assurance in Nursing Education: ACEN Standards and International Accreditation

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Abstract

Accreditation plays a critical role in ensuring the quality, credibility, and continuous improvement of nursing education programs worldwide. This article examines the role of accreditation in nursing education, with an emphasis on quality assurance, public trust, and the promotion of ongoing program evaluation and enhancement. Particular attention is given to the benefits of international nursing accreditation for students, faculty, institutions, employers, and communities of interest, including improved educational quality, enhanced global recognition, and increased mobility of graduates. The article also addresses challenges associated with international accreditation, such as time, financial costs, and the sustained commitment required to maintain compliance with accreditation standards. Additionally, the work highlights international accreditation efforts led by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN), outlining its global reach, comprehensive Standards and Criteria, and support for programs seeking this recognition. The article also provides an overview of the *ACEN Standards and Criteria* as applied in international contexts, illustrating how global quality benchmarks are implemented while respecting local regulatory and cultural frameworks. By applying consistent, globally relevant standards while allowing programs to reflect local regulatory and cultural contexts, international accreditation supports excellence in nursing education and contributes to the preparation of competent, ethical, and practice-ready nurses worldwide.

Key Words: Accreditation, Quality, Standards

Introduction

Nursing education quality is critical in preparing competent professionals who are capable of meeting the increasingly complex healthcare needs of individuals, families, and communities worldwide. As healthcare systems evolve and expectations for safe, ethical, and patient-centered care continue to grow, ensuring the quality and consistency of nursing

education has become a global priority. Accreditation is a peer-review, self-regulatory process by which non-governmental associations recognize educational institutions or programs that have been found to meet or exceed standards and criteria for educational quality.^[1] Therefore, accreditation serves as a key mechanism for evaluating and validating nursing education program quality, providing assurance that established standards of excellence are being met and maintained.

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In nursing education, accreditation functions as an external, peer-reviewed process that assesses program quality elements such as administration, faculty qualifications, student support, curriculum design, and measurable outcomes. Beyond quality assurance, accreditation encourages programs to engage in continuous improvement, supports workforce readiness, and enhances public trust. Internationally, accreditation has gained increased importance as nursing education and practice become more globally interconnected, with students, educators, and nurses seeking educational and professional opportunities across national borders.

This article explores the role of accreditation in nursing education, highlighting its significance in program development, quality assurance, and public confidence. It further examines the benefits and challenges associated with international nursing accreditation and describes global accreditation efforts led by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN). In addition to examining the role, benefits, and challenges of international nursing accreditation, this article outlines the *ACEN Standards and Criteria*² as quality indicators and describes how these standards are applied across diverse global educational settings. By outlining the *ACEN Standards and Criteria*^[2] and their application across diverse educational contexts, this article underscores the importance of accreditation in advancing high-quality nursing education, expanding educational opportunities for students, and strengthening the global nursing workforce.

The Role of Accreditation in Nursing Education

Accreditation has several primary roles related to nursing education. The first role is to provide quality assurance.^[3,4, 5, 6, 7] Nursing accreditation promotes high-quality nursing education regardless of where the program is located. Programs are expected to meet a set of standards specific to administration and resources, faculty, students, curriculum, and student outcomes. In essence, accreditation is a third-party “stamp of approval” indicating that the nursing program meets the benchmarks that have been set related to educational quality.

The second role of nursing accreditation is serving as an incentive for continuous improvement for nursing programs. Attaining and maintaining accreditation requires the program faculty to reflect, self-evaluate, and adapt based on best practices and evolving education and healthcare needs.^[3,4, 5, 6, 7] In essence, accreditation is a voluntary but vital process that assists in upholding the integrity and quality of nursing education while ultimately safeguarding patient safety and advancing the nursing profession.

Another role of nursing accreditation is related to public trust. Nursing accreditation can provide credibility and legitimacy for a program. The accreditation assures employers and the public that graduates are completing a rigorous high quality nursing education program. Graduates coming from an accredited nursing program are being prepared for the diverse nursing roles needed to provide patient-centered care and ethical practice, as well as being ready for effective leadership in contemporary healthcare environments.

Benefits of International Nursing Accreditation:

Attaining international accreditation benefits nursing programs, students, and faculty. The first program benefit is that the accreditation process drives continuous quality improvement in nursing education.^[3,4, 5, 6, 7] The program undergoes a rigorous self-evaluation and peer review process, leading to enhancements in curriculum relevance, teaching methodologies, and student support services. International accreditation demonstrates the extent to which the program meets educational quality standards specific to nursing education. The process heightens the faculty member’s and administrator’s awareness and responsiveness to areas needing further development as part of maintaining accreditation, which fosters ongoing self-examination, reevaluation, and focus on the future for continuous program improvement. Further, international nursing accreditation provides recognition as a quality nursing education program, which can assist in student recruitment as well as expanding the program’s global outreach.

International accreditation has several benefits for the students. The first benefit is that international accreditation can assist the students with education decision-making. Students and their parents seek out quality nursing programs and a program with international accreditation reflects the quality of the education provided. Students benefit from attending a nursing education program that meets international accreditation standards of educational quality. Finally, graduating from an internationally accredited nursing program can also assist with transfer of credits and/or acceptance into the next level of nursing education within the country as well as in other countries.

International accreditation also provides valuable benefits for the faculty and the communities of interest. Having international accreditation increases the faculty's awareness of areas needing

development and fosters a proactive approach to addressing those needs. [3,4, 5, 6, 7] Furthermore, accreditation offers opportunities for professional development and validation for the quality of educational practices.⁵ Finally, international accreditation serves as an indicator of program excellence and can assist employers in seeking out graduates from these programs since the quality of education demonstrated through accreditation helps to ensure the program is producing competent practitioners.

Accredited nursing programs typically have better program outcomes related to program completion, licensure pass rates^[8], and job placement rates. The ACEN publishes information regarding data collected annually from its programs in the *Report to Constituents*.^[9]

Table 1. Benefits and Challenges Related to International Accreditation

Benefits	Challenges
Drives continuous quality improvement	Time commitment of faculty and administration for the accreditation journey
Heightens the awareness of areas needing further development	
Provides recognition as a quality nursing program	
Assist students/parents with education decision-making; assist in student recruitment	Financial costs of accreditation
May assist with transfer of credits or admission to the next level of education	
Provides Professional Development Opportunities	Maintaining accreditation over time
Assists employers in hiring graduates from a quality program	

Challenges in Accreditation

While there are clear benefits to having international accreditation, there are also challenges, including costs and maintenance.^[5,6] There are two challenges related to the cost of achieving and maintaining international accreditation: time and finances. There is a time commitment by the faculty and administration for the accreditation journey

including writing a Self-Study Report, identifying evidence, and preparing for site visits. Additionally, the financial costs of the accreditation process include fees and the potential need to invest in infrastructure, faculty development, student support, and/or administrative support.

Another challenge is maintaining international accreditation. The program and faculty will need to

continue to maintain compliance with the Standards and Criteria in between accreditation visits. The process is not a “one and done” encounter; the process requires commitment to the ongoing self-evaluation, collection of data, and making changes for quality improvements when and if needed.

ACEN International Accreditation Efforts

The ACEN is a U.S.-based nursing accreditation agency that is recognized by the Department of Education in the United States as well as the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). The CHEA recognition includes accreditation of international nursing programs.

The ACEN mission is to support the interests of nursing education, nursing practice, and the public by the functions of accreditation, and the purpose of the ACEN is to provide specialized accreditation for all levels of nursing education programs located in the United States, U.S. Territories, and internationally.

The ACEN began accrediting programs internationally in 2000. The ACEN accredits nursing programs at all levels of nursing (e.g., practical, diploma, associate, baccalaureate, master’s, and clinical doctorate). Currently the ACEN has 26 accredited international nursing programs in 10 countries, an additional 20 programs in candidacy that will add an additional five countries, and six programs that have started the candidacy process.

ACEN Position Statement on Accreditation of International Nursing Education Programs^[10]

The ACEN is committed to quality in all types of nursing education programs and encourages self-evaluation, peer review, and the promotion of educational equity, access, and mobility through the functions of accreditation. Recognizing that accreditation is one way of enhancing the quality of nursing education and is a way to facilitate the nursing profession being the best and strongest it can be worldwide, the ACEN welcomes nursing programs outside the United States and U.S. Territories to pursue international nursing accreditation.

The ACEN asserts that accreditation is a voluntary, self-regulatory process by which non-governmental entities recognize educational institutions or programs that have been found to meet or exceed standards and criteria for educational quality. The ACEN acknowledges that nursing education programs located outside of the United States and its Territories can benefit from adherence to best practices and generally accepted guidelines for nursing education incorporated in the ACEN Standards and Criteria. To fulfill its mission to support the interests of nursing education, nursing practice, and the public, the ACEN seeks to broaden the impact of accreditation to encompass nursing education programs across the globe.

Therefore, in a spirit of cooperation, openness, and mutual respect consistent with its organizational values, the ACEN extends accreditation and related services to international nursing education programs.

Recognizing the need for global standards, the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) has developed Standards and Criteria that are appropriate for use internationally. Regardless of whether the nursing program is in the United States, a U.S. Territory, or located outside of the United States or whether the institution is public, private, religious, or hospital-based, all programs should be designed and implemented to ensure that the hallmarks of quality nursing education are achieved and maintained. The *ACEN Standards and Criteria*^[2] broadly reflect these elements of quality

education to provide a framework and support for nursing education worldwide. There are five ACEN Standards, and each Standard has several Criteria. Each ACEN accreditation Standard is one element of quality nursing education, and the Criteria are the subcomponents that ensure that the Standard is achieved. The ACEN also provides a Glossary of terms to ensure that all programs have the same definition of various components imbedded within the Standards and Criteria or ACEN materials.^[1] A high-level overview of each standard will be provided, as well as some examples regarding how they are applied in an international context.

Table 2. ACEN Standards^[2]

<p>Standard 1: Administrative Capacity and Resources</p> <p>The mission and/or philosophy of the nursing program reflects the governing organization's mission, goals, and/or values. The governing organization and nursing program have administrative capacity and resources that support effective delivery of the program and facilitate the achievement of the end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes for each nursing program type, and additionally for graduate programs the role-specific nursing competencies.</p>
<p>Standard 2: Faculty</p> <p>Faculty are educationally and experientially qualified for their assigned roles and responsibilities, maintain expertise, and are regularly evaluated to support the achievement of the end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes for each nursing program type, and additionally for graduate programs the role-specific nursing competencies.</p> <p>Full- and part-time faculty include those individuals teaching and/or evaluating students in didactic, clinical, and/or laboratory settings.</p>
<p>Standard 3: Students</p> <p>Student policies and services support the achievement of the end-of-program student learning outcomes and program outcomes for each nursing program type, and additionally for graduate programs the role-specific nursing competencies.</p>
<p>Standard 4: Curriculum</p> <p>The curriculum supports the achievement of the end-of-program student learning outcomes for each nursing program type, and additionally for graduate programs, the role-specific nursing competencies; and is consistent with safe practice in contemporary healthcare environments.</p>
<p>Standard 5: Outcomes</p> <p>Nursing program assessment demonstrates the extent of student learning at or near the end of the program as well as program outcome achievement using a systematic plan for evaluation (SPE).</p> <p>The faculty create and implement a written SPE* for each nursing program type to determine the extent of the achievement of each end-of-program student learning outcome and program outcome, and additionally for graduate programs the role-specific nursing competencies, to inform program decision-making to maintain or improve student and program performance.</p>

Standard 1 Administrative Capacity and Resources^[1, 2, 3] requires that the program identify the foundational structures necessary to support high-quality nursing education regardless of geographic location. This standard emphasizes the alignment of the nursing program's mission and philosophy with that of the governing institution, underscoring the importance of meaningful faculty, student, and stakeholder participation in governance and program decision-making. However, the Criterion related to the

mission and philosophy is written broadly, so nursing programs world-wide are able to provide evidence of this alignment with the institution. By requiring adequate fiscal and physical resources, Standard 1 reinforces that sustainable administrative infrastructure is essential for the effective delivery, evaluation, and continuous improvement of nursing education regardless of the country where the program is offered.

Standard 2 Faculty^[1, 2, 3] focuses on the qualifications, roles, and ongoing development of individuals responsible for teaching and evaluating nursing students across didactic, laboratory, and clinical learning environments. This standard recognizes faculty as being central to educational quality and requires that academic preparation, licensure, and professional experience align with institutional expectations and national regulatory requirements where the program is located. Emphasis is placed on structured orientation, continuous professional development, and performance evaluation to support effective teaching. However, the expectations for faculty orientation, ongoing professional development, and evaluation do not mandate U.S.-specific processes, but instead emphasize systematic support and accountability for teaching effectiveness. The inclusion of expectations related to preceptor use further reflects the importance of clear role delineation, preparation, and oversight in practice-based learning environments, ensuring that instructional quality is maintained across diverse educational experiences.

Standard 3 Students^[1, 2, 3] addresses the policies, resources, and institutional practices necessary to promote student success within nursing education programs. This standard emphasizes the importance of publicly accessible, current, and consistently implemented policies related to admission, progression, graduation, and grievance processes. It further underscores the role of faculty in selecting and evaluating learning (library) and technology resources that support student learning, as well as the responsibility of programs to orient students to those resources. By acknowledging country-specific approaches to educational funding and student financial responsibilities, Standard 3 allows programs to demonstrate compliance while reflecting local regulatory and cultural contexts.

Standard 4 Curriculum^[1,2,3,4] centers on the faculty's intentional design, implementation, and ongoing evaluation of the nursing curriculum to ensure

achievement of student learning outcomes. Faculty are expected to develop curricula grounded in professional nursing standards, contemporary practice concepts, and have clearly articulated end-of-program student learning outcomes that guide course sequencing and instructional strategies. This standard emphasizes alignment among learning activities, teaching methodologies, as well as formative and summative evaluation methods to support student progression towards achievement of the end-of-program student learning outcomes. Clinical learning experiences are required as a core component of nursing education, while flexibility is provided for the use of simulation and skills laboratories in accordance with educational best practices and the program's resources. For graduate programs, the integration and assessment of role-specific nursing competencies further demonstrate how curricula are tailored to advanced nursing practice expectations for the specialty area. The Criteria in Standard 4 assist the program in ensuring that its curriculum is consistent with contemporary nursing practice and standards within the country and geographic region where the program is located.

Standard 5 Outcomes^[1,2,3,4] focuses on the systematic assessment of student learning and program effectiveness through the collection and analysis of aggregate and disaggregate data. Central to this standard is the development and implementation of a systematic plan of evaluation that guides ongoing self-assessment and evidence-based decision-making. Programs are expected to evaluate outcomes related to student learning achievement, program completion, licensure performance where applicable, and employment. For graduate-level programs, assessment of role-specific nursing competencies provides additional evidence of educational effectiveness. By requiring programs to use outcomes data to inform planning and improvement, Standard 5 reinforces accreditation as a continuous quality improvement process rather than a periodic compliance exercise.

While the Standards and Criteria are the same for all nursing programs, each program “tells its story” regarding how it demonstrates compliance with the Standard and its Criteria. This enables all programs to maintain national requirements specific to each country while demonstrating compliance with a set of global nursing accreditation standards reflecting quality nursing education.

Beyond the publication of these international quality nursing education standards, the ACEN encourages all nursing education programs to consider pursuing accreditation. To support these efforts, the ACEN provides education that is easily accessible online through ACEN Academy eCourses. Program faculty considering pursuing ACEN accreditation are encouraged to review these offerings. Further, the ACEN provides in-person conferences and workshops to assist currently accredited programs or those seeking ACEN accreditation. Finally, every program seeking ACEN accreditation, regardless of location, is assigned a Candidacy mentor to assist in the process.

Conclusions

Accreditation is a vital mechanism for identifying and upholding the quality and integrity of nursing education internationally. Through clearly defined standards related to administration, faculty, students, curriculum, and outcomes, accreditation provides assurance to students, employers, and the public that nursing programs meet established benchmarks for excellence. International accreditation further extends these benefits by promoting global consistency in nursing education while respecting country-specific requirements and contexts. Although the accreditation process presents challenges, including faculty time, cost, and the need for continuous compliance, its value lies in fostering a culture of reflection, accountability, and ongoing improvement. The efforts of organizations such as the Accreditation Commission for Education in

Nursing demonstrate how global accreditation standards can support high-quality nursing education across diverse settings. Ultimately, accreditation strengthens the nursing profession by preparing competent graduates, advancing educational quality, and contributing to improved patient care and safety worldwide.

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