

The Status of HME Accreditation in the Slovak Republic

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Although accreditation of institutions of higher education has been practiced for decades in the US, the concept is still in its infancy in the Slovak Republic, having emerged in the wake of 1989s "Velvet Revolution." Prior to the split with Czech Republic, Slovak universities and institutions of higher education were managed and controlled by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education. In 1990, however, Slovakia's Parliament enacted the "University Law," which prescribed a new oversight role for the Ministry and created a Commission for Accreditation (CA). As a result, Slovak universities have undergone rapid and vigorous change in the 1990s as an accreditation system has taken shape.

As part of its workplan, the Slovakia-Scranton, Pennsylvania health management education (HME) partnership has begun to study, compare and contrast educational standards, competencies and knowledge needed to be professionally competent as a health care manager. Partnership activities have focused on accreditation, certification and credentialing. For example, Slovak partner representatives served as observers during an Accrediting Commission on Education for Health Services Administration (ACEHSA) accreditation site visit at the University of Scranton last year, and additional discussions were held with the chair of ACEHSA to further analyze and discuss accreditation procedures.

On the US side of the partnership, this effort has involved working with the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE), the Association of University Programs in Health Administration (AUPHA) and ACEHSA. The Slovak partners--the Health Management School in Bratislava, Trnava University in Trnava, and the University of Matej Bel in Banska Bystrica--elected to work with the Ministry of Education to reevaluate and develop Slovak standards and competencies for health management education, and review existing accreditation processes and standards.

Because health management is a new field in the Slovak Republic, accreditation has had a noticeable impact on how the subject is taught. For example, health management schools currently are moving toward standardizing curricula and tightening requirements for faculty. Accreditation also is important because it triggers a greater funding allocation to universities for student tuition--a critical factor in student recruitment in a nation where education is provided by the state.

Accreditation processes in the Slovak Republic and in the US share many similarities but exhibit distinct differences as well. The Slovak University Law provides a mechanism for supporting and controlling the quality of education through the CA, while allowing greater latitude, autonomy and flexibility as compared to the previous Slovak system. The commission's objectives are to review and evaluate independently the quality of education, and scientific and artistic performances of schools in the Slovak Republic. Slovak accreditation represents a complex process, focusing on a school within the university rather than on the entire university system. The quality of faculty and the quality of undergraduate and postgraduate educational processes are emphasized.

Across the Atlantic, ACEHSA carries out specialized accreditation in the US by focusing on a particular health management program within an accredited university. Some of the fundamental differences between the Slovak CA and ACEHSA include purposes, focus, length of accreditation, control functions, unit of accreditation, type of standards, commissioner appointment process and financing mechanisms. The Slovak commission is a government agency with commissioners appointed by the Ministry of Education, while ACEHSA is comprised of independent health care organizations who appoint their own commissioners. Slovak accreditation occurs every one to two years, while ACEHSA accreditation occurs every three to seven years.

While the American process is based on a voluntary, peer-reviewed system promoting quality and outcomes, the Slovak process emanates out of the Ministry of Education and is mandatory for all institutions of higher education. The US system utilizes accrediting bodies to assess both schools and universities, while the Slovak Republic has designed a system to accredit only schools within universities. But both systems give consideration to broader institutional characteristics, such as student services, financial conditions and administrative strengths, with an ultimate goal of ensuring high-quality education for future generations of health management students.

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