



Validity of degrees issued by private higher education 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 and in some cases the same institution may even offer 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 under the Federal Act of September 30, 2011, on the Funding and Coordination of the Higher Education Sector (HEdA, SR 414.20) attests to the fact that the public authorities have conducted an external quality inspection, may recognise the institutions but do not provide them with public subsidies.

4. The accreditation system for the Swiss higher education sector (tertiary level A according to ISCED-97 classification) is regulated as follows:

- The HEdA came into effect on 1 January 2015. With HEdA, the designations “university“, “university of applied sciences” or “university of teacher education” and derived designations such as “university college” or “UAS college” can only be used by public or private institutions that have been institutionally accredited by the Swiss Accreditation Council. This also applies to designations in languages other than Swiss national languages. Other designations such as “academy”, “school”, “institute”, etc. remain unreserved and do not require accreditation. In case where institutions do not fall within the scope of HEdA, it is up to the cantons to prepare corresponding guidelines and establish additional rules and recognition procedures for these institutions. The degrees of tier-one universities, universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education” are protected under corresponding legislation.
- 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, universities of applied sciences and universities of teacher education) work together within the Swiss Conference of Higher Education Institutions to coordinate the public higher education

sector. The Cantons are given considerable freedom with regard the private universities located on their territory that do not fall within the scope of the HEdA. Some Cantons have established procedures that enable private institutions to obtain authorisation to use a given name. This means that a different legal basis (cantonal legislation) may apply depending on the canton.

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, Research and Innovation (SERI).

6. Private institutions based in Switzerland that are not accredited under the HEdA 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. 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 VPET sector as well as within the HEI sector (albeit limited to titles awarded by the two federal institutes of technology – ETH Zurich and EPF Lausanne). However, there are no federal legislative provisions prohibiting the private use of titles (i.e. for non-professional use).