

## **Danish business school uses heavily criticized American accreditor to circumvent Danish law**

The Danish business school Niels Brock is not hindered by their loss of Danish approval to offer higher education degrees. Instead, they have found an alternative way by using a severely criticized American accreditation institution. Doubts are now raised regarding the basis for the approval of the school

*Andrea Dragsdahl*

The business school Niels Brock uses a deeply criticized private American accreditor (ACICS) to offer higher education degrees and thereby circumvent Danish law.

No Danish authorities supervise the education, because it is offered through the American accreditor, whom Niels Brock pays to accredit, with other words approve, the degree.

»It seems as a hole in the law, if a Danish education institution can pay a private American accreditor to approve an education, they do not have permission to offer from Danish authorities,« says Peter Dahler-Larsen, who is the leader of The Center for Research on Evaluation, Measurement and Effects, CRÈME, at Copenhagen University.

The business school only has approval to offer short credential business degrees. But through the American accreditor ACICS, the school can offer an American Bachelor in Business Administration, where the students receive an American diploma issued by the school in Copenhagen. The students are now facing an insecure future, because there is a risk, that the Department of Education in the US will derecognize the accreditor.

»If you are looking to exploit students and the American accreditation system, you would choose ACICS. If you want to be acknowledged as an education institution with education of high quality, you would avoid them. That has been known for years,« says Paul Fain, news editor at the media outlet Inside Higher Ed, which specialize in news about higher education.

ACICS has been known and criticized for accrediting colleges build on »recruiting low-income and minority students to attend expensive programs of questionable quality,« as described in a report by the think tank Center for American Progress.

### **Saved by Trump**

In 2015, the Obama administration therefore initiated a thorough investigation of ACICS, which in 2016 led to ACICS being derecognized by the Department of Education as an accreditor.

Institutions accredited by ACICS received 18 months notice to find a new accreditor. But prior to the deadline on June 12 2018, a new president was inaugurated and Donald Trump's Minister of Education, Betsy DeVos, reestablished a temporary recognition in April.

It happened under heavy criticism from American experts in the education sector and from the Minister's own department, because the department found »numerous failures,« at ACICS, it is described in an internal staff report, writes Inside Higher Ed.

A final decision from the department is expected on September 28. If ACICS is derecognized, education institutions will receive another 18 months notice. Alternatively ACICS may also receive another temporary recognition of up to five years duration.

The American bachelor offered by Niels Brock is one of four higher education degrees offered by the school in Copenhagen. Additionally, the school offers degrees that are also accredited by ACICS in Vietnam and China.

At the degree in Copenhagen, students from Nepal have accounted for more than 80 percent of the students in 2015, 2016 and 2017. For the coming students in 2018 the students from Nepal represent around 50 percent, while the rest are primarily from Bangladesh and the Philippines. It appears in Niels Brock's own directory.

### **Questionable quality**

According to Danish and American experts it is very concerning, if doubt is raised concerning the authority, which has the responsibility to control and supervise an education.

»It may be a good education, but it can be opaque, what the quality of the education is, because there are so many accreditors in the US. It is therefore not a stamp of quality in itself to have an accreditor, and it may make it difficult for the students to know, what kind of product, they are buying,« says director in DEA, Stina Vrang Elias, who has been a member of the Danish accrediting council for eight years and is currently a member of the board in the Norwegian, NOKUT.

Leader of CRÈME at Copenhagen University, Peter Dahler-Larsen, also believes that the foreign accreditation raises a series of questions regarding the quality of the education. Unsuccessfully, he has unraveled the websites of Niels Brock and ACICS to seek information regarding the basis of the accreditation.

»When looking at ACICS' criteria and basis for accrediting educations, there are many questions and dead ends, which I miss answers and documentation for. They give the impression, that they spread the accreditations broadly and they have a cooking school in Peru and a business education in Kenya in their directory« he says.

Robert Kelchen who conducts research on the American education system at Seton Hall University and has a thorough knowledge about the many American accreditors, is also puzzled by Niels Brocks choice of accreditor.

»ACICS has a really bad reputation« says Robert Kelchen. »An approval from them is not a quality stamp«.

### **Critique from students**

Doubt regarding the value of Niels Brocks accreditation is raised after students at the school's higher education degrees have raised doubt regarding the quality of their education. As previously described in Information, especially the American bachelor degree, which is accredited by ACICS, has received critique from students and from the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA), who conducts guiding assessments of the school's higher educations.

In the meantime, CEO of Niels Brock Anya Eskildsen, firmly states, that quality is an important factor at the international degrees, and she emphasizes that the school has conducted several initiatives with the purpose of strengthening the quality of the education as well as the intake of students.

»We certainly don't find, that the educations we offer are of a low quality. On the contrary. We wish to give the students the best and most international diploma, and we do so by providing an American bachelor degree on Danish terms with Danish pedagogy and skilled professors,« says Anya Eskildsen during an interview with Information.

She states that their educations are accredited in either USA or Britain, and that they are also »approved by EVA«, the Danish Evaluation Institute. However, EVA underlines, that their guiding assessments are not to be considered as approvals.

The Nepalese students at the school are recruited by agents, who receive 10-15 percent of the tuition fee in commission from the school, which comes around to between 1.300 and 3.400 US dollars per student. So far, 660 students have been admitted to the American bachelor in Copenhagen. They pay between 50.000 and 54.000 US dollars in total for the four years of study. In other words, it is a two-digit million-dollar business.

Niels Brock has stated that their cooperation with agents are in full compliance with guidelines formed in 2015 by the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science. The school also states, that their agents have signed contracts with the school, and that it is important for Niels Brock, that the agents »promote Niels Brocks international educations as educations of high quality,«.

#### **Niels Brock: »Innovative and unique,«**

The case of Niels Brock's American accreditor goes back to 2008, where the VK-government passed a high school reform. The law was based on an agreement between the government, The Danish People's Party, The Social Democrats and the Danish Social-Liberal Party. The intention was to separate business academies as a separate sector.

»The Minister of Education will establish 10 business academies on 1. September 2018 or as soon as possible thereafter. The business academies must be operative by 1. January 2009. With the establishment of fewer business academies with an actual institutional foundation, the framework for strong education environments with the necessary academic weight and managerial capacity, is created,« it says in the law proposal from December 2007.

The reform, which was passed during former Minister of Education Bertel Haarder, resulted in business schools no longer being able to operate business academies.

»I remember that Niels Brock could no longer offer academic degrees, because they were in a difficult situation due to the reform, which took the business school's opportunities to run business academies. That is why they had to seek other options, and I remember they found a model, which made it possible for them,« says Bertel Haarder.

»I believe, that the business academies were separated in order for them to not absorb money and attention on the cost of basic education degrees,« he adds in a written response.

Bertel Haarder does not wish to comment on the American bachelor in Denmark, because it was initiated after his time as Minister of Education. However, it was in the transition period, where Niels Brock had to separate their educations, that they in 2011 found ACICS. That made it possible for them to keep offering post-secondary educations in China, shortly thereafter open in Vietnam and since 2015 offer a bachelor degree in Denmark.

»We only contacted ACICS, because we had lost the Danish accreditation. They became our solution, as we stood to lose the procurement of several of our educations« says CEO of Niels Brock Anya Eskildsen.

»I would call the model unique and innovative,« head of department Lars Askholm supplements.

### **Doubts regarding foundation**

While ACICS finds themselves in stormy weather in the US, doubts regarding the foundation of the accreditation is being raised in Denmark. ACICS states, that they require that Niels Brock is approved by relevant Danish authority to operate at the level ACICS provides accreditation for.

However, both the Danish Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, firmly states that Niels Brock does not have Danish approval to offer bachelor degrees. But President and CEO of ACICS Michelle Edwards, writes in an email that:

»I can assure you, that Niels Brock does have approval on file with us to operate as a postsecondary institution in Denmark and to offer the business program they are currently teaching.«

In the meantime, Niels Brock has provided Information documentation, that clearly states, that the school has made ACICS aware, that it does not have Danish authority's approval to offer higher education degrees. But according to CEO of Niels Brock Anya Eskildsen, it was crucial in the eyes of ACICS, that the school upon initiating contact with ACICS in 2011, offered a degree, where a high school diploma was required and where the education consisted of more than 300 hours. In the US, such degrees can be categorized as postsecondary, Dr. Kevin Kinser explains. He is the author of several books on American education accreditation and is the Department Head of Education Policy Studies at Penn State College of Education. In this way, the short credential degree offered by Niels Brock could be the foundation to acquire an accreditation as a higher education institution from ACICS. As they had received their institution accreditation, they could continue to apply for the accreditation for the bachelor degree, which they now offer in Copenhagen.

»This is a circumstance where the institution may be recognized as postsecondary from ACICS' perspective, but the degree it is awarding at that level has no status in country« Dr. Kevin Kinser writes in an email to Information.

In January 2018 the school made ACICS aware, that the education, which originally qualified them for the institution accreditation, was no longer in compliance with the rule of 300 hours. But Niels Brock was allowed to keep their status with ACICS.

CEO Michelle Edwards has confirmed, that they were made aware of the change, and writes that it was »approved by ACICS«.

»I appreciate all of the information you have questioned and we will be contacting the ministry directly since we've received conflicting information on the approval status of the institution and therefore have no comment until we are able to further review this matter,« she writes.

### **Letter from the minister**

In a previous email, Michelle Edwards refers to how ACICS through several years has received a signed letter from the Minister of Higher Education and Science. From the letter it appears, that the American bachelor is recognized as comparable to a Danish degree. However, to Information the Ministry underlines, that it is not to be understood as a Danish approval of the degree.

Minister of Higher Education and Science Tommy Ahlers writes in an email to Information that:

*»The letter describes the current state of the law, which applies to acknowledgement of private educations being accredited outside of Denmark. Specifically, Niels Brock's higher educations can only be acknowledged in Denmark according to Danish legislation on recognition of foreign qualifications, because they are American and British bachelor degrees.«*

Since the debate concerning ACICS began in 2015, Niels Brock has accepted six classes of students on the American bachelor. The school states, that they have accepted 660 students for the degree, but that there has been an average drop-out rate of about 12 percent. They also state, that the school accepts about 20 percent of the applicants. In 2018 Niels Brock accepted 74 students, they say.

Until September 28 the future of the education is uncertain, because that is when the Trump administration will give their final decision on the department's acknowledgement of ACICS as an accreditor. It would undermine the entire accreditation system to let ACICS keep their acknowledgement, says associate director for the department on higher education at the think tank Center for American Progress, Antoinette Flores.

»It would concern, but not surprise me, if they are allowed to continue. The Trump-administration has numerous times proven, that they prioritize institutions higher than students. But there is plenty of evidence, that ACICS is in no way in compliant,« she says to Information.

### **A high political issue**

CEO Anya Eskildsen explains, that Niels Brock has been in contact with ACICS, who has informed the school, that it is a very political issue, where ACICS feels they have been victims of a smear campaign. The school underlines in an email, that it has been important to them, that the accreditor was acknowledged by the department as well as the organization Council for Higher Education Accreditation, CHEA.

Niels Brock therefore informs, that »there was no actual alternative to the current accreditation« and refers to the fact, that there are seven relevant national institution accreditors, whereof »only two of the seven are acknowledged by both DoE (Department of Education, *ed.*) and CHEA«. One of those two only accredits distance learning, Niels Brock says.

In the meantime, American experts within the education sector have a hard time seeing, why Niels Brock are so focused on the acknowledges from CHEA.

»The CHEA recognition is not relevant because that is a voluntary association of accreditors with no authority whatsoever with the American government,« Robert Kelchen fra Seton Hall University writes.

»It's true that CHEA only recognizes two of the seven. But CHEA is a private, nonprofit membership and lobbying organization. The U.S. Department of Education officially recognizes all seven, and allows them to serve as the gatekeepers to federal aid programs,« editor at Inside Higher Ed, Paul Fain, writes.

Anya Eskildsen says, that Niels Brock is waiting for the decision on September 28 from the American authorities, but it has »shown, that it is suitable to have more than one accreditor,«. The school has therefore initiated the application process with two other foreign accreditors, in order for them to have a back-up plan, if it goes badly for ACICS. An alternative solution could also be, that the students are offered to finish their degrees at the British educations offered at Niels Brock in cooperation with De Montfort University, Anya Eskildsen says.