

WHITE PAPER

Doctoral Credentials in Health Science:

European EQF Level 8 vs. North American Professional Doctorates

What US & Canadian Healthcare Leaders Need to Know

Published by

International Health Research Institute (IHRI)

Doctoral School | Malta, European Union | ihri.edu.eu

2026 Edition

Executive Summary

As the global healthcare workforce evolves, senior practitioners in the United States and Canada are seeking doctoral-level credentials that validate their leadership, research, and implementation expertise. The professional doctorate in health science has become the terminal qualification for this cohort — yet North American professionals often encounter only domestically accredited options.

This white paper addresses a straightforward question: is a Doctor of Health Science accredited at EQF/MQF Level 8 by a European government-authorised body equivalent to a US professional doctorate — and can it be recognised and used in the United States and Canada?

The answer is yes. This paper explains why, how the recognition pathway works in practice, and what makes a European-accredited DHSc a compelling option for ambitious healthcare leaders who want a globally recognised terminal credential without interrupting their career.

Key Finding

EQF Level 8 is the European equivalent of doctoral-level study. Degrees accredited at this level by MFHEA — Malta's government-authorised higher education authority, listed in the CHEA International Directory — are evaluated by NACES-member agencies (including WES) as equivalent to a US professional doctorate.

1. The Professional Doctorate Landscape in North America

1.1 What is a Doctor of Health Science?

The Doctor of Health Science (DHSc or DHS) has emerged over the past 25 years as the terminal professional degree for practising healthcare leaders. Unlike a research-focused PhD, the DHSc is practice-oriented: it develops applied research competencies, evidence-based leadership, quality improvement expertise, and the capacity to drive system-level transformation.

The DHSc is now offered by more than 60 accredited institutions across the United States, including George Washington University, Drexel University, Nova Southeastern University, and Bay Path University, typically as a fully online programme targeting mid-to-senior career professionals.

1.2 Who pursues a professional healthcare doctorate?

The target candidate is a seasoned healthcare professional — nurse executive, allied health director, physician assistant, public health leader, or health system administrator — who holds a master's degree and has accumulated substantial leadership experience. They are seeking a terminal credential to:

- Advance to C-suite or executive director positions
- Qualify for academic appointments in health science faculties

- Lead large-scale quality improvement and transformation projects
- Contribute original applied research to their field
- Differentiate themselves in competitive leadership markets

1.3 The market context

The demand signals are strong. Employment in medical and health services management is projected to grow 29% between 2023 and 2033 in the United States — nearly five times the average growth across all professions. The DHSc credential is increasingly positioned as the preferred qualification for those seeking to lead at this level, over and above the MBA, MHA, or clinical doctorate (DNP, DPT).

2. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

2.1 What is the EQF?

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is the official European Union meta-framework for all qualifications. Published by the European Commission and binding on all EU member states, it establishes eight reference levels that describe what a learner knows, understands, and is able to do — using learning outcomes rather than years of study as the defining measure.

Every EU country has mapped its national qualifications framework to the EQF, making it the most widely adopted cross-border qualification reference system in the world, covering 49 countries through the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

2.2 The Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) and its relationship to the EQF

Malta's national framework, the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF), has been formally referenced to the EQF by the Maltese government. MQF Level 8 is directly equivalent to EQF Level 8 — they are one and the same reference level in practice. Qualifications issued in Malta at MQF/EQF Level 8 carry the EQF Level 8 designation on the Europass Diploma Supplement, which is the standard document used for international recognition.

2.3 What does EQF Level 8 mean?

EQF Level 8 Learning Outcomes (European Commission Definition)

Knowledge: At the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields.

Skills: The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research or innovation, and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice.

Responsibility & Autonomy: Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research.

This is an unambiguous doctoral-level descriptor. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) explicitly categorises EQF Level 8 as equivalent to a PhD, DPhil, DSc, Doctorate, or Doctorat. Under the Bologna Process, doctoral degrees correspond to EQF Level 8 across all 49 signatory states.

3. MFHEA: The Accreditation Authority

The Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) is Malta's government-authorised agency for licensing and accrediting higher education institutions and programmes. Established by the revised Education Act that came into force on 1 January 2021, MFHEA operates as an independent public body under Maltese law.

MFHEA's mandate covers licensing of higher education institutions, programme accreditation, quality assurance, and recognition of qualifications against the Malta Qualifications Framework. All MFHEA-accredited programmes at MQF Level 8 carry the official MQF/EQF Level 8 designation.

3.1 MFHEA and the CHEA International Directory

For US-based healthcare professionals and their employers, the critical reference point is the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the United States' primary higher education quality assurance oversight body.

MFHEA is listed in the CHEA International Directory — the authoritative US reference for international quality assurance bodies. The CHEA International Directory contains over 550 government-authorised quality assurance and accreditation bodies from more than 170 countries. Listing in this directory is used by US credential evaluation agencies, employers, and immigration authorities to confirm that an international accreditor is legitimate and government-authorised.

MFHEA's CHEA listing can be verified at:

www.chea.org/international-directory/malta-further-and-higher-education-authority

4. Recognition in the United States and Canada

Understanding how an MFHEA-accredited MQF/EQF Level 8 degree is formally recognised in the US and Canada is the central practical question for prospective candidates. The process is well-established and straightforward.

4.1 The credential evaluation pathway

In the US and Canada, foreign academic credentials are evaluated by third-party credential evaluation agencies. The authoritative membership body for these agencies in the US is NACES (National Association of Credential Evaluation Services). Evaluations from NACES-member agencies are accepted by universities, professional licensing boards, USCIS (immigration), and employers across the United States.

World Education Services (WES) is the most widely recognised NACES member, with evaluations accepted by over 2,500 institutions and employers in the US and Canada. WES is also a founding member of ACESC (Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada), making WES evaluations the standard for Canadian purposes as well.

The credential evaluation process for an MFHEA-accredited MQF/EQF Level 8 degree follows this chain:

01	MFHEA accredits the institution and programme at MQF/EQF Level 8 under Maltese law
02	MFHEA is listed in the CHEA International Directory as Malta's government-authorised accreditation body
03	Candidate submits official transcripts and degree to a NACES-member agency (WES, ECE, etc.)
04	Evaluator verifies institution via the CHEA International Directory; confirms MQF/EQF Level 8 = doctoral level
05	Evaluation report issued confirming US equivalency as a professional doctoral degree
06	Candidate presents WES/NACES evaluation report to employers, universities, licensing boards, or USCIS as needed

4.2 Important distinctions

Prospective candidates should be aware of the following:

- The IHRI DHS does not lead to a warranted (licensed) profession or regulated occupation. It is an academic qualification. Candidates in regulated professions (nursing, medicine, physiotherapy) must consult their specific state or provincial licensing board regarding professional licensure requirements independently of this credential.
- The credential evaluation is an advisory report — it provides guidance to institutions, employers, and licensing boards. Individual organisations may apply their own policies to international credentials.
- For academic appointments at US universities, institutions typically conduct their own assessment of international credentials. An EQF Level 8 degree from an MFHEA-licensed institution is well-positioned for recognition in this context.

5. The IHRI Doctor of Health Science

The International Health Research Institute (IHRI) is a licensed Higher Education Institution in Malta, authorised by MFHEA under Licence No. 2025-004. IHRI operates a Doctoral School offering

the Doctor of Health Science (DHS) — a fully online, 100% English-language programme accredited at MQF/EQF Level 8.

5.1 Programme overview

Awarding body	International Health Research Institute (IHRI)
Regulatory authority	Malta Further & Higher Education Authority (MFHEA)
Licence number	2025-004
Qualification level	MQF/EQF Level 8 (Doctoral)
Programme title	Doctor of Health Science (DHS)
Mode of delivery	100% Online (synchronous & asynchronous)
Language	English
Duration	48–60 months (full-time or part-time)
Total learning hours	4,500 hours
Thesis requirement	50,000–60,000 word doctoral thesis + Viva Voce examination
Entry requirement	Master's degree (MQF/EQF Level 7) + 5 years mid-to-senior experience + IELTS 7.0
Tuition (non-EU)	€23,500 (installments available)
Headquarters	Birkirkara, Malta, European Union

5.2 Programme structure and modules

The IHRI DHS comprises five core modules totalling 4,500 learning hours, structured to take candidates from foundational doctoral competencies through to independent original research:

Module	Title	Hours	Assessment
D801	Transforming Services & Delivering Quality	750	6,000-word analytical essay
D802	Implementation Science	750	6,000-word essay
D803	Research Methods (Qualitative & Quantitative)	500	6,000-word assignment
D804	Literature Review & Research Proposal	500	Proposal (25%) + Literature Review (75%)
D805	Doctoral Thesis	2,000	50,000–60,000 word thesis + Viva Voce

5.3 Research focus areas

IHRI’s doctoral candidates align their thesis research with one of the institute’s strategic research nodes, providing access to an established community of practice and real-world implementation contexts:

- Rural Systems & Frontline Resilience
- Bio-Risk & Genomics
- Complex Systems & Space
- Agrifood & Environment

Candidates may also propose applied research in health data analytics, medical devices, healthcare administration, population health, or health policy — subject to supervisor expertise.

5.4 Delivery model

The programme is delivered entirely online, combining synchronous and asynchronous tutorials with self-directed doctoral study. Candidates maintain regular one-to-one contact with their supervisor (‘transformational tutorials’), alongside engagement in collaborative academic discourse spaces. Google Workspace for Education supports all digital learning activities.

This model is specifically engineered for working healthcare professionals who cannot step back from their roles. There is no campus residency requirement for the standard programme.

6. Direct Comparison: IHRI DHS vs. North American Online DHSc

The table below provides a direct comparison between the IHRI Doctor of Health Science and a representative North American online DHSc programme (composite based on publicly available information from US-accredited institutions):

Factor	IHRI DHS (Malta/EU)	North American Online DHSc
Credential level	MQF/EQF Level 8 (European Doctoral)	US Professional Doctorate
Accreditor	MFHEA (Government-authorised, Malta)	Regional/national US accreditor
Geographic recognition	EU (49 EHEA countries) + NACES evaluation for US/CA	United States & Canada primarily
International peers	Global cohort, European institution	Predominantly US cohort
Delivery	100% Online	100% Online
Duration	48–60 months	36–60 months
Thesis requirement	50,000–60,000 word thesis + Viva	Varies: applied project to dissertation

Factor	IHRI DHS (Malta/EU)	North American Online DHSc
Total learning hours	4,500	Typically 2,000–3,500
Entry requirement	Master’s + 5 yrs senior experience + IELTS	Master’s (experience varies)
Tuition (approx.)	€23,500 (~US\$25,000)	US\$30,000–\$60,000+
Language of instruction	English	English
US credential recognition	Via WES/NACES evaluation	Direct (no evaluation needed)
European recognition	Direct (MQF/EQF Level 8)	Via evaluation
CHEA directory listing	Yes (MFHEA)	Yes (US accreditor)

Table 1: Comparison of IHRI DHS and a representative North American online DHSc programme. Tuition figures are approximate and for guidance only.

7. Why North American Healthcare Leaders Choose a European Credential

7.1 Global recognition and portability

A degree accredited at EQF Level 8 is recognised across all 49 European Higher Education Area countries — giving holders a credential that travels globally in a way that a domestically accredited US degree does not. For healthcare leaders involved in international health governance, global health organisations (WHO, PAHO, UN agencies), or cross-border health system work, this has tangible value.

7.2 A distinct credential signal

In a market where dozens of US universities offer online DHSc programmes, a European-accredited doctorate offers genuine differentiation. ‘Doctor of Health Science, European Union (EQF Level 8)’ communicates international standing and academic rigour that stands out in a competitive leadership market.

7.3 Rigour commensurate with doctoral expectations

The IHRI DHS requires a 50,000–60,000 word thesis defended before an examination panel including external examiners — a requirement that mirrors the research doctorate tradition of European and UK universities. This is a more demanding final product than the applied capstone or research project required by many North American professional doctorates, and it is a credential signal that academic institutions, research bodies, and health governance organisations will recognise.

7.4 Competitive tuition

At €23,500 (approximately US\$25,000) for non-EU candidates, the IHRI DHS is substantially more affordable than comparable US programmes, which typically range from US\$30,000 to US\$60,000 in total tuition. For self-funded candidates, this is a material consideration.

7.5 Flexible, career-compatible structure

The fully online, part-time-eligible delivery model allows candidates to complete the degree without interrupting their careers — a non-negotiable requirement for the senior healthcare leaders this programme targets.

8. Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Will my IHRI DHS be recognised by US employers?

For most senior healthcare leadership roles (C-suite, health system director, academic appointment), employers assess doctoral credentials based on their legitimate accreditation and level — not solely on whether they are US-issued. A WES or NACES credential evaluation confirming doctoral equivalency provides employers with the formal equivalency documentation they need. We recommend candidates obtain a credential evaluation and include it with job applications. Some employers may have internal policies favouring US-accredited degrees; candidates should assess individual employer requirements.

Q: Will the degree count for professional licensing in my healthcare profession?

No. The IHRI DHS is an academic qualification and does not lead to a warranted profession or regulated occupation. If you require a credential for professional licensure (e.g., nursing, physical therapy, medicine), you must meet the specific requirements of your state or provincial licensing board. Those requirements are entirely separate from and unaffected by holding a doctoral academic degree.

Q: How do I get my degree recognised for use in the US or Canada?

Commission a credential evaluation from a NACES-member agency — we recommend WES (World Education Services) or ECE (Educational Credential Evaluators), both of which are widely accepted by universities, employers, and government bodies in the US and Canada. The evaluation will compare your IHRI DHS to US educational standards and issue a formal equivalency statement. IHRI can provide supporting documentation to assist with this process.

Q: Is MFHEA a legitimate accreditor? How do I verify this?

Yes. MFHEA is established by Maltese law (the revised Education Act, 2021) as the government-authorised higher education authority for Malta, an EU member state. It is listed in the CHEA International Directory, the United States' authoritative reference for international accreditation bodies. You can verify MFHEA's listing at: www.chea.org/international-directory/malta-further-and-higher-education-authority. You can also verify IHRI's institutional licence and accredited programmes directly on the MFHEA public database at: mfhea.mt/list-of-licensed-providers-and-accredited-programmes.

Q: What is the difference between the CHEA International Directory and CHEA recognition?

The CHEA International Directory lists government-authorised international quality assurance bodies for reference purposes — it is an informational tool used by credential evaluators, employers, and universities to verify the legitimacy of an international accreditor. CHEA recognition is a separate status for US-based accreditation organisations. MFHEA is appropriately listed in the

International Directory (as a non-US, government-authorised body) rather than holding CHEA recognition, which is reserved for US accreditors. This is the correct and expected status for any legitimate international higher education authority.

Q: Is the degree issued in English?

Yes. The IHRI DHS is delivered entirely in English. All modules, assessments, supervision, and the final thesis are conducted in English. The degree certificate and transcript are issued in English with the MQF/EQF Level 8 designation. A Europass Diploma Supplement — the EU standard document for international qualification recognition — is available to graduates.

Q: Can I complete this degree while working full-time?

Yes. The programme is designed specifically for senior healthcare professionals in active roles. The 100% online delivery, flexible scheduling of tutorials, and four-to-five year completion timeline allow candidates to integrate doctoral study with full-time professional responsibilities. There is no campus attendance requirement.

Conclusion

For North American healthcare leaders, the IHRI Doctor of Health Science represents a rigorous, credible, and internationally portable doctoral qualification. Accredited at MQF/EQF Level 8 by MFHEA — Malta’s government-authorised higher education authority, listed in the CHEA International Directory — the degree carries a clear and verifiable equivalency to doctoral-level credentials worldwide.

The recognition pathway in the US and Canada is well-established: a credential evaluation from a NACES-member agency such as WES will formally confirm the US doctoral equivalency of the qualification. The IHRI DHS is not a shortcut or an alternative-route credential — it is a full 4,500-hour doctoral programme requiring an original 50,000-word thesis defended before an examination panel.

What it offers, beyond academic rigour, is something increasingly scarce: a European doctoral credential — at a competitive price, delivered entirely online, from an EU member state institution operating under the Bologna Process — that allows US and Canadian healthcare leaders to hold a qualification that is genuinely global in its recognition.

Take the Next Step

Request a Capability Assessment: ihri.edu.eu/admissions-pathways

Verify accreditation: mfhea.mt/list-of-licensed-providers-and-accredited-programmes

Verify MFHEA in CHEA Directory:
chea.org/international-directory/malta-further-and-higher-education-authority

Enquiries: info@ihri.edu.eu

About IHRI

The International Health Research Institute (IHRI) is a licensed Higher Education Institution based in Birkirkara, Malta, European Union. IHRI operates a dual mandate: an accredited Doctoral School delivering the MQF/EQF Level 8 Doctor of Health Science, and a global applied research function through four strategic research nodes.

IHRI is licensed by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) under Licence No. 2025-004. The Institute is registered with the Ringgold ID 846991 and the ISNI Registry (0000 0005 2972 611X).

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