

## Celebrating IEM: Interview with Jasmin Saidi-Kuehnert

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**Topics:** [International Enrollment Management](#)

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### ***IEM Spotlight, Vol. 13, Issue 2 - August 2016***

Editorial committee member Stephanie Ingvaldson recently interviewed Jasmin Saidi-Kuehnert, the President and CEO of Academic Credentials Evaluation Institute, Inc. Jasmin has had a long and illustrious career in the field of international credential evaluations and currently serves as the president of the Association of International Credential Evaluators (AICE). Previously, she has served as the organization's chair, as well as the chair of the International Credential Evaluation Committee on the AACRAO Special Task Force (2013–2014).

#### **How did you get into the IEM field?**

Family, studying abroad, and great mentors is the short answer to this question! But for the longer version, you might say that international education is in my blood. It really goes back to my early days. I was born into a family where studying abroad was encouraged, and I was fortunate to complete my secondary education in the United Kingdom and my higher education in the United States. In the United Kingdom, I attended a boarding school with such a strong international student population that each year we celebrated United Nations Day. I made long-lasting friendships with classmates who were from every continent on the planet, and helped open my eyes, mind, and heart to their cultures. I knew then and there that I wanted a career that would keep me engaged and involved with people from around the world. I even knew at a young age that I wanted to study political science and international relations in college, which is exactly what I pursued when I came to the States.

My mother, Nora Saidi, is someone to whom I owe an immense debt of gratitude for being the first to give me a taste of the world of international education. My first "job" was when I was 10 years old; I helped organize my mother's library of U.S. college catalogs when she was the executive director at **AMIDEAST** in Tehran, Iran. Later, during the gap year I took between high school and college, I worked at her own company, **EDWAM Services Institute**, a university placement service also in Tehran. I learned a great deal about the U.S. education system in those months, and it is no surprise that after I graduated from college it was again my mother who nudged me into attending a gathering hosted by Inez Sepmeyer, who in my opinion was a pioneer in the field of international credential evaluation. You can imagine, at age 19, going to a function with my parent wasn't something any teenager thought was cool! Reluctantly, I went with her, but to my surprise, I left the event with not one but three job offers. One from a law office, another from a real estate office, and the third was from Inez herself. She invited me to work on a trial basis at her credential evaluation company as a research assistant. Within a week, one of the senior evaluators—an aspiring actor—was offered a job on a soap opera. He immediately resigned and I was asked if I wanted to become an evaluator. I had no idea what an evaluator was or did, but I said yes, and over time, with Inez as my mentor, I progressed to senior evaluator level. And, when she resigned, I replaced her as the company's executive director. What I learned about credential evaluation, I owe to Inez. It was this experience that fueled my desire to found my own company, the Academic Credentials Evaluation Institute, Inc., in 1994.



### **What resources have been most valuable to you as a professional in the IEM field?**

My membership with NAFSA has provided me with wonderful opportunities, from being a presenter and trainer to sharing my experience and knowledge of international education credentials with other members. When I was a fledgling international credential evaluator, it was my participation in a number of workshops that were known as Projects for International Education Research (PIER) that truly honed my research and analytical skills. The PIER workshops included actual visits to specific countries where we did research on their education systems, prepared reports, and recommended U.S. educational equivalences for the different credentials, which were then published and made available to NAFSA members and anyone involved in international education. Another valuable outcome of the PIER workshop experience was the long-lasting friendships I made with colleagues, some of whom I continue to collaborate with on projects. Unfortunately, the country site visits and workshop projects have since been discontinued.

### **Looking back, what would you say have been the most important takeaways for you from the field?**

Again, for me, the PIER workshops were instrumental in my growth and development as an international credential evaluator. The sheer acts of visiting the country, touring the schools and universities, meeting with Ministry of Education representatives, and having a visceral experience was deeply valuable and unforgettable. There's nothing like being on site and seeing something firsthand. Especially today, with our rapidly advancing technologies where virtual reality is being embraced so indiscriminately, the actual tactile experience of being on location still trumps everything else. The country workshop is a feature that has been sadly erased from the professional development programs of IEM, and I can only hope that with the ever-increasing mobility of students, NAFSA will consider resurrecting them, perhaps in collaboration with other professional associations engaged in international education.

### **What, in your opinion, are some of the challenges facing IEM today?**

Our field is at the mercy of shifts in the political climate of our own country and those of others, but one thing is for certain: the dynamic nature of education systems requires us to always keep abreast of changes and have access to reliable information. It is also important to have access to a robust library or resources of historic material. In our field, in particular for those working at institutions, it is imperative that we keep the IEM profession relevant and not marginalized.

### **You have had a very successful career in the field. What are some experiences or items that have helped you stay current in the IEM field?**

Research, research, research. I never stop researching and staying up to date, and in turn, I share my findings with colleagues through conference presentations, webinars, blogs, white papers, and publications. The key is to not become inert, but remain active and engaged. To use television as an analogy, international education is a series that never runs out of material.

### **What advice would you give professionals who are new to the field or considering joining?**

If you're completely new to the field, or curious, find out about internships or perhaps offer yourself as an intern on a part-time basis. Find a mentor and be open and receptive to learn. Mentoring is something that I find most rewarding, and as a former mentee, it is my way of paying it forward.

If you have just entered the field, attend as many professional conferences related to our field as possible. If your institution's budget for conference attendance is prohibitive, look for alternative means for training and professional development; for example, participate in online webinars and training programs, subscribe to online newsletters related to international education, and stay abreast of local and world events that tend to influence our field. Finally, build a network and stay connected with peers in the IEM field. I'm also a member of the [Association of International Credential Evaluators](#) (AICE), which provides great resources to both newcomers and old timers in IEM, at both credential evaluation companies and academic institutions.

### **Lastly, many IEM professionals comment that they did not expect to land in the field of international education after graduating from school. Did you experience any particular moments in your profession or personal life that made you realize you were in the right field?**

I may be an anomaly, but I knew from early on that I wanted to be in a field that was international, with a focus on education. Perhaps the moral to this story is: listen to your mothers and go to their boring gatherings because you never know what great opportunities await you!

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