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Professional Standards and Self-Regulation in Coaching and Consulting Associations

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ABSTRACT: Coaching and consulting form a large international field of practice, with an estimated 122,974 coach practitioners worldwide in 2025. In the six jurisdictions covered by a recent sector review, no statute was identified that reserves the title of coach or licenses the practice of coaching. Professional associations therefore carry much of the responsibility for defining competence, ethical conduct and client protection. This conceptual paper asks how associations can establish credible standards, ethical accountability and quality assurance when statutory regulation is limited or fragmented. Drawing on a structured review of association standards, sector reports and the literature on professions, information asymmetry and industry self-regulation, it distinguishes statutory licensing, individual credentialing, programme accreditation and association self-regulation, and examines ethics codes, competence and continuing development requirements, complaints and disciplinary procedures, and conflicts of interest. In the sources reviewed, standards are more developed for declared inputs than for verifiable outputs, and voluntary self-regulation is exposed to commercial interests, certification without effective control and limited independence. As its original contribution, the paper proposes the Credibility of Professional Self-Regulation (CPSR) framework, which assesses an association rather than its members on five dimensions: verifiability, observation of practice, enforcement, independence and outcome accountability. Each indicator is coded twice, once for the existence of a rule and once for the evidence that it is applied, so that missing evidence is distinguished from evidence of non-application. Six testable propositions and a comparative research design are specified. The framework is a proposal and has not been validated.

KEYWORDS: coaching; consulting; professional associations; self-regulation; professional standards; credentialing; accreditation; client protection; information asymmetry

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional coaching has grown into a measurable international occupation. The 2025 ICF Global Coaching Study, conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers, estimates 122,974 coach practitioners and annual revenue of USD 5.34 billion, an increase of 17% on the 2023 study (International Coaching Federation [ICF] & PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC], 2025, as reported in Natseva, 2026a). The boundaries of the occupation are porous. According to the same data, 60% of coach practitioners also offer training, 57% consulting, 55% facilitation and 49% mentoring. A client who engages a "coach" is therefore frequently engaging a person who moves between roles that carry different professional responsibilities.

Growth on this scale has not been matched by statutory regulation. A sector review covering Italy, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Bulgaria and the horizontal framework of the European Union identified no statutory regulation of coaching with a reserved title and a licence in any of them (Natseva, 2026a). The organisations that have signed the Global Code of Ethics state that the titles "coach", "mentor" and "supervisor" are not protected (Natseva, 2026b). In these jurisdictions, the task of defining minimum competence, ethical conduct and client protection has fallen largely on private professional associations, which compete with one another and whose standards bind only their members.

This raises a question of credibility rather than of existence. Associations publish codes of ethics, competence frameworks, credentials and complaints procedures. What clients, employers and regulators cannot easily tell is whether these instruments actually constrain practice. Consumer research reports that 78% of prospective coaching clients regard a credential as important or very important (ICF & PwC, 2022, as reported in Natseva, 2026a), yet a private training certificate, an association credential and a membership can look alike in public presentation. Demand for evidence of quality combined with an inability to verify it is the condition under which, according to the economics of information, signals lose their value (Akerlof, 1970; Spence, 1973).

This paper examines that problem through a structured conceptual review. It clarifies the distinctions between statutory licensing, individual credentialing, programme accreditation and association self-regulation; analyses how existing standards address ethics,

competence, continuing development, complaints, discipline and conflicts of interest, including the possibilities and limits of the standards of the International Association of Professional Therapists and Coaches (IAPTC®); and proposes a framework for assessing the credibility of an association's self-regulation, with testable propositions and a design for comparative research.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The paper addresses one principal research question:

RQ. How can professional associations establish credible standards, ethical accountability and quality assurance in coaching and consulting when statutory regulation is limited or fragmented?

Three subsidiary questions structure the analysis:

1. **RQ1.** How do statutory licensing, individual credentialing, programme accreditation and association self-regulation differ in what they attest, who operates them and what legal effect they carry?
2. **RQ2.** How do current association standards address ethics, competence, continuing professional development, complaints, discipline and conflicts of interest, and which of their requirements can a client verify?
3. **RQ3.** Which properties of an association, as distinct from the practitioners it certifies, determine whether its self-regulation is credible, and how could those properties be measured?

3. REVIEW METHODOLOGY

3.1 Type of study

This is a conceptual paper based on a structured, non-systematic review and document analysis (Bowen, 2009). No primary data were collected from practitioners, clients or associations, and no empirical findings are claimed. The framework and propositions in Sections 6 and 7 are proposals of this manuscript intended for later testing.

3.2 Selection of sources

Sources were selected in four groups. (a) Official documents of professional organisations: the credentialing and renewal requirements of the ICF and the individual and programme accreditation schemes of EMCC Global, consulted on the organisations' websites in October 2026; and the IAPTC® Global Professional Standards 2026 (see Section 3.4). (b) Sector reviews: the IAPTC® Professional Report 01/2026 (Natseva, 2026a) and the analytical review of coaching by Natseva (2026b). (c) Peer-reviewed research on coaching effectiveness, coach assessment and the professionalisation of coaching. (d) The theoretical literatures on professions, occupational regulation, information asymmetry and self-regulation. Legal provisions are cited from the official texts where these were consulted and otherwise as reported in group (b), which is indicated in the text.

3.3 Theoretical streams and logic of synthesis

Three theoretical streams were used: the sociology of professions (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001), the economics of information and occupational regulation (Akerlof, 1970; Kleiner, 2000; Spence, 1973; Stigler, 1971), and the regulatory literature on self-regulation and its credibility (Black, 2001; Gunningham & Rees, 1997; Ostrom, 1990). Standards were compared on dimensions derived from these streams: entry requirements, demonstrated competence, ongoing observation of practice, continuing development, role definition, complaints and discipline, conflicts of interest and outcome measurement. For each dimension, the analysis asked whether a requirement exists, whether it concerns an input or an output, and whether a client could verify it without access to the association's internal records.

3.4 Limitations of the sources and status of the evidence

Four limitations govern the use of sources. First, the market figures come from ICF studies based on self-report; in the 2025 study, 80% of valid responses came from ICF members (Natseva, 2026a). Second, the full text of the IAPTC® Global Professional Standards 2026 was not available to the author. The standards are therefore described only through the secondary account in Natseva (2026b, Section 12.2), and they have not been checked directly. Third, the sources by Natseva are not peer-reviewed journal articles, and their author is the President of IAPTC®; they are used as documented descriptions and literature reviews, not as independent evidence that the standards they describe are effective. Table 1 states the type of each. Fourth, a DOI or repository record is not treated as evidence of peer review.

Three kinds of statement are kept separate throughout: findings reported in peer-reviewed research; descriptions of what standards and documents require; and the author's own analytical proposals, which are identified as such.

Table 1. Type and status of the association-related sources used

Source	Type	Peer-reviewed	Use in this paper
IAPTC® (2026), Global Professional Standards 2026	Normative document of a professional association	No	Example of association standards; described through Natseva (2026b) only, not consulted directly
Natseva (2026a), IAPTC® Professional Report 01/2026	Institutional sector report of a professional association (also posted on SSRN)	No	Secondary source for market data and regulatory overview; source of the association's recommendations
Natseva (2026b), Coaching: Development, Practices, Professional Standards and Scientific Evidence	Analytical review in an institute report series (Zenodo)	No	Secondary source for standards, the Bulgarian legal context and the description of the IAPTC® standards

4. THEORETICAL AND LITERATURE BACKGROUND

4.1 The professionalisation of coaching and consulting

The professionalisation of coaching has proceeded mainly through private organisations. The European Mentoring and Coaching Council was founded in 1992 and now operates as EMCC Global; the International Coach Federation, now the International Coaching Federation, was founded in the United States in 1995; and the Association for Coaching was established in the United Kingdom in 2002 (Natseva, 2026b). These bodies created codes of ethics, competency models, individual credentials and accreditation of training programmes.

Grant and Cavanagh (2004) argued that coaching was moving toward professional status but still lacked barriers to entry, a shared body of knowledge and enforceable standards. Gray (2011) described a field on a "journey" toward professionalisation, with competing pathways rather than a single route. Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015) questioned whether competency frameworks, the dominant basis of accreditation, can capture coaching expertise, and proposed an approach to assessment based on capabilities rather than competencies alone. Management consulting has professionalised differently, with firm reputation and client contracts playing a larger role than individual credentials; the two fields meet in the many practitioners who offer both.

4.2 Professions and jurisdiction

Abbott (1988) treats professions as occupations that claim jurisdiction over a class of problems and defend that claim against competitors. Freidson (2001) describes professionalism as a "third logic" of organising work, distinct from market and bureaucracy, in which an occupation controls entry, training and the evaluation of practice. Coaching fits neither account comfortably. Its jurisdiction borders licensed professions such as psychotherapy and clinical psychology and unlicensed ones such as consulting and training, and control over entry is exercised by several associations, none of which can exclude non-members from practice.

4.3 Information asymmetry and signalling

Akerlof (1970) showed that when buyers cannot observe quality, prices cannot reward it and average quality can fall. Spence (1973) showed that credentials can correct this when they are costly for low-quality providers to obtain and observable to buyers. Coaching and consulting are credence services in this sense. A credential reduces information asymmetry only if it is difficult to obtain without the competence it signals and if the buyer can check it.

4.4 Licensing, certification and the risk of capture

The literature on occupational regulation distinguishes licensing, under which practice without state permission is unlawful, from certification, under which anyone may practise but only those meeting a standard may use a designation (Kleiner, 2000). Licensing offers the strongest protection against unqualified practice but can restrict competition without clear gains in quality (Kleiner, 2000). Regulation may also be shaped to serve the interests of the occupation it governs (Stigler, 1971). These insights apply to private associations as well: a credential scheme may operate as a quality signal, a barrier to competition or a source of revenue for its operator.

4.5 Self-regulation and its credibility

Self-regulation offers expertise, flexibility and low public cost. Its recurring weakness is credibility, because the same body writes, interprets and enforces the rules (Gunningham & Rees, 1997). Black (2001) describes regulation as "decentred" across state and non-state actors, which makes the design of non-state regulation a central question. Gunningham and Rees (1997) identify transparency, real sanctions and the background prospect of state intervention as conditions under which industry self-regulation becomes credible. Ostrom's (1990) design principles for self-governing institutions add clearly defined boundaries, monitoring by people accountable to members, graduated sanctions and accessible conflict resolution. Developed for common-pool resources, these principles describe the minimum architecture of any rule system that relies on its participants for enforcement.

5. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

5.1 Four instruments that are often confused

Statutory licensing, individual credentialing, programme accreditation and association self-regulation are frequently presented to clients as if they were equivalent. A further difficulty is that organisations use the same words for different things. The ICF uses "credential" for its individual designations (ACC, PCC, MCC) and "accreditation" for training programmes (ICF, n.d.-a). EMCC Global uses "accreditation" for both: EMCC Global Individual Accreditation (EIA) is an individual designation, while the EMCC Global Quality Award (EQA) is a five-year accreditation of training programmes (EMCC Global, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). The IAPTC® standards, as described in Natseva (2026b), use "recognition" for programmes and providers. This paper therefore uses functional terms, set out in Table 2.

Table 2. Four governance instruments in coaching and consulting

Instrument	What it attests	Who operates it	Legal significance	Examples in coaching
Statutory licensing	Legal permission to practise a reserved activity or use a reserved title	The state or a body with delegated public powers	Practice without a licence is unlawful	None identified for coaching in the jurisdictions reviewed; applies to adjacent professions such as psychotherapy
Individual credentialing or certification	That a named person met an organisation's training, practice and assessment requirements at a point in time	A professional organisation	None outside the organisation's system, unless a statute gives it effect	ICF credentials (ACC, PCC, MCC); EMCC Global Individual Accreditation (EIA)
Programme accreditation or recognition	That a training programme or provider was assessed against an organisation's standard; it attests nothing about an individual graduate	A professional organisation or quality body	None outside the organisation's system	ICF programme accreditation; EMCC Global Quality Award (EQA); IAPTC® programme recognition
Membership and association self-regulation	That a person belongs to an association, has accepted its code and is subject to its procedures	The association, for its own members	Contractual or membership-based only	Membership of ICF, EMCC Global, Association for Coaching, IAPTC® and national bodies

Two further points follow. First, the absence of a coaching-specific statute does not place coaching outside the law. Contract, consumer-protection, data-protection, advertising and tax law apply, and where an activity offered as coaching amounts in substance to a regulated activity such as psychotherapy, the requirements for that activity may apply regardless of the label (Natseva, 2026b). Second, private standards confer no public-law powers. An association can admit, credential, suspend or expel its members; it cannot license practice or prevent a non-member from practising.

5.2 The regulatory landscape

The account below follows the sector review by Natseva (2026a) and is limited to the jurisdictions it covers; the present author did not conduct independent legal research in each jurisdiction. Italy has the most developed arrangement among them. Law No. 4/2013 on professions not organised in professional orders allows professional associations to issue certificates of conformity to members, requires codes of conduct and disciplinary sanctions, and encourages conformity with technical standards; UNI 11601:2015 is a national technical standard for coaching services. This is legally recognised self-regulation rather than statutory regulation of the profession. In France, the review describes the regulation of training and its public funding (the national register of professional certifications and the Qualiopi mark) rather than of the profession. In the United States, the outer boundary of coaching is set by state licensing of adjacent professions. In Bulgaria, no coaching-specific statute was identified, and the occupation "coach" does not appear in the List of Professions for Vocational Education and Training, so a vocational qualification "coach" cannot be obtained under the Vocational Education and Training Act (Natseva, 2026b).

Some rules affecting coaching practice are arriving from outside the profession. Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 prohibits, from 2 February 2025, the placing on the market, putting into service or use of AI systems to infer the emotions of a natural person in the workplace and in education institutions, except for medical or safety reasons (Article 5(1)(f)). Infringements of the prohibitions are subject to fines of up to EUR 35 million or 7% of worldwide annual turnover, whichever is higher. A coach who used such a system

with employees in the European Union could fall within the prohibition irrespective of any association standard. Whether a particular tool is covered depends on the Regulation's definitions, in particular of emotion recognition based on biometric data.

5.3 Ethics codes and client protection

Ethics codes are the most visible instrument of self-regulation. The Global Code of Ethics, developed jointly by the Association for Coaching and EMCC and now in its 2025 version, is signed by a group of professional organisations and describes itself as guidance rather than a legally binding document (Natseva, 2026b). The ICF maintains a separate Code of Ethics, in force in its updated version since 1 April 2025 (Natseva, 2026b). They are distinct documents of distinct organisations.

The critical question about an ethics code is its enforcement. A code without a complaints mechanism is a declaration, and a mechanism whose outcomes are not reported cannot be assessed from outside. The sector review states that complaints procedures exist within the major membership organisations but that it identified no public aggregate data on complaints filed, examined or upheld (Natseva, 2026a). The present author found no such data in the documents reviewed for this paper. This does not establish that no association publishes them; it does indicate that such data are not readily available to a client.

The sector review also reports that it identified no requirement in the credentialing systems it examined that clients receive in writing, before work begins, a description of the service and its limits, confidentiality and its exceptions, fees and termination conditions, and the procedure that applies if the client's needs exceed the service (Natseva, 2026a). Informed consent of this kind is standard in regulated helping professions.

5.4 Competence and continuing professional development

Association standards are most developed on inputs. As of October 2026, the ICF requires at least 60, 125 or 200 hours of coach-specific education and at least 100, 500 or 2,500 hours of coaching experience for its ACC, PCC and MCC credentials, with minimums of 8, 25 and 35 clients and of 75, 450 and 2,250 paid hours respectively, together with 10 hours of mentor coaching (ICF, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Credentials are renewed every three years with 40 continuing coach education credits, of which 24 must be in core competencies, including 3 in coaching ethics; ACC holders must also complete 10 hours of mentor coaching (ICF, n.d.-c). The ICF has announced two changes that are not yet in force: from 1 January 2027, new mentor coaching hours for credential applicants must be completed with a mentor coach holding its Mentor Coach Specialization, and from 1 April 2027, the performance evaluation for the ACC and PCC portfolio paths will be replaced by an enhanced mentor coaching requirement, while MCC candidates retain the performance evaluation (ICF, 2026a, 2026b).

EMCC Global Individual Accreditation is awarded at four levels with minimum years of practice, client hours and numbers of clients (from one year, 50 client hours and five clients at Foundation level to seven years, 500 hours and 40 clients at Master Practitioner level), requires evidence of prior and ongoing one-to-one supervision and alignment with the Global Code of Ethics, and is valid for five years (EMCC Global, n.d.-a).

Three weaknesses stand out. First, the sources reviewed provide no evidence that a given number of training hours produces a given level of competence; the thresholds are conventions (Natseva, 2026a). Second, the two leading systems differ on ongoing supervision: EMCC Global requires evidence of ongoing supervision for individual accreditation, whereas the ICF renewal requirements consulted for this paper do not include ongoing supervision (EMCC Global, n.d.-a; ICF, n.d.-c). Two credentialed practitioners may therefore work under different levels of independent observation without the client knowing which applies. Third, renewal rests mainly on participation in development activities rather than on renewed assessment of competence. These features are consistent with Bachkirova and Lawton Smith's (2015) critique of competency-based assessment.

The evidence on coaching outcomes sets limits on what credentials can promise. A meta-analysis of 37 randomised controlled trials (39 samples, n = 2,528) estimated an effect of g = 0.59, found indications of significant publication bias, and reported larger effects for self-reported than for observed outcomes (de Haan & Nilsson, 2023). The working alliance between coach and client is associated with outcomes (Graßmann et al., 2020). Negative effects of coaching have been documented, but evidence on how often they occur remains limited (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019). The sector review identified no study comparing independently measured client outcomes for credentialed and non-credentialed practitioners (Natseva, 2026a), and the present author found none among the sources reviewed. The reported association between credentials and client satisfaction is correlational and does not show that credentials cause better outcomes.

5.5 Complaints, discipline and conflicts of interest

Disciplinary systems in coaching associations face three structural limits. Their jurisdiction extends only to members, so a practitioner who leaves or is expelled can continue to practise or join another body. Their sanctions are limited to membership consequences. And, as noted above, their outcomes are not readily available to the public in aggregate form.

Conflicts of interest arise at two levels. At practitioner level, the most common is role drift: an engagement begins as coaching, in which the client owns the decision, and becomes consulting, in which the practitioner provides the content of a recommendation, without any change in the agreement (Natseva, 2026a). Responsibilities, confidentiality obligations and potential liabilities differ between the two roles. At association level, the conflict is institutional. Associations often accredit the training programmes from

which their members come, and some are connected to training providers. Where standard-setting, training and certification share leadership, revenue or intellectual origin, disclosure of the connection is necessary but is not, by itself, a safeguard.

5.6 The IAPTC® standards: possibilities and limits

IAPTC® is an instructive case because its documents address several of the gaps identified above and because its institutional position illustrates the independence problem. Three documents must be kept apart: the standards, the sector report and the coaching review.

IAPTC® Global Professional Standards 2026 (as described in Natseva, 2026b). According to the review, the standards were adopted on 13 September 2026 and regulate the recognition of training programmes and providers by the association. Recognition confirms only that a programme was assessed against the IAPTC® standards as of the date of the decision, and may not be presented as state, university or academic accreditation, as a licence or as a right to practise (Section 41.1, as cited). Recognition is granted for three years, with a numbered decision stating scope, start date and end date (Section 41.3). Programmes must include observed practice using direct observation or direct evidence from the trainee's practice, not self-report alone (Sections 47.1 and 47.3). Supervision is mandatory where practice involves work at the level of identity, meaning, life history or trauma-adjacent material, and during the first twelve months of independent practice (Section 55.2). The standards describe themselves as an internal document of an association connected with the publisher (Section 1.2). The review states that its description concerns programme and provider recognition and that the certification of individual practitioners within the IAPTC® system was not examined. These provisions have not been checked against the original text, and their application in practice has not been assessed.

IAPTC® Professional Report 01/2026 (Natseva, 2026a). The sector report is a separate document. It reviews the market and the evidence, presents fifteen findings and sets out recommendations, including an eight-pillar Professional Quality Framework, a Client Quality Charter and a conceptual Professional Quality Index. Its recommendations include public verifiability of every certification, written informed consent before the first paid session, a baseline and closing assessment for every engagement, quarterly independent observation of practice and annual publication of aggregate complaints data. These are recommendations of a sector report. They should not be read as provisions of the standards unless the standards themselves contain them, which could not be checked for this paper.

Possibilities and limits. As described, the standards contain features that address weaknesses identified in Sections 5.3 and 5.4: an explicit statement that recognition is not a licence, time-limited and numbered recognition decisions, direct observation of practice in recognised programmes, and conditional mandatory supervision. Their limits are equally clear. IAPTC® states that it is not a governmental accrediting, licensing or regulatory body, holds no delegated statutory powers and issues no licences, and that its recognition and certification operate only within its own professional system (Natseva, 2026a). The report states that more than 3,000 professionals have been certified within that system since 2021 and that the association has not measured the outcomes of their work. The association also operates within an ecosystem that includes a training provider (Happy Life Academy®) and a research institute (the Happy Life Institute for Direct Change Science), which the report describes as separate structures with distinct functions (Natseva, 2026a). The review identifies Prof. Dr. Stoyana Natseva as founder and chief executive of Happy Life Academy®, founder of the Institute and President of IAPTC® (Natseva, 2026b). Whether these structures are independent in decision-making, and not only in legal form, cannot be judged from the documents.

5.7 Weaknesses of voluntary self-regulation

The analysis points to five weaknesses that may affect any association, not only one.

1. **Commercial interest.** Associations may earn revenue from membership, credentialing and programme accreditation, which creates an incentive to expand the number of credentials and accredited programmes that may conflict with the incentive to keep standards demanding (cf. Stigler, 1971).
2. **Certification without effective control.** Where credentials rest on documented hours and attendance, and renewal on participation, a credential can attest preparation without attesting current competence.
3. **Limited independence.** Where the same people or organisations design a method, teach it, set the standard and certify graduates, the credential does not provide an external judgement.
4. **Fragmentation and forum shopping.** Multiple associations with different requirements allow practitioners to choose a less demanding regime and allow sanctioned members to move between bodies.
5. **Unverifiable protection.** Without accessible data on complaints, sanctions and outcomes, outsiders cannot tell whether self-regulation regulates.

These weaknesses do not imply that self-regulation should be abandoned; in the jurisdictions reviewed it is the principal mechanism available. They imply that its credibility must be assessed rather than assumed.

6. ORIGINAL CONCEPTUAL CONTRIBUTION: THE CPSR FRAMEWORK

6.1 Purpose and unit of analysis

This section presents the Credibility of Professional Self-Regulation (CPSR) framework, proposed by the present manuscript. It assesses whether an association's claims about its members can be relied on by people outside it. Its unit of analysis is the association, not the practitioner. Existing standards specify what practitioners must do; the CPSR framework asks what an association can show about its own rules, their application and its independence. An association with demanding practitioner standards could score poorly if those standards cannot be verified or are not shown to be applied.

6.2 Dimensions, indicators and coding

The framework has five dimensions, each with three indicators (Table 3). Each indicator is coded twice, on separate scales, so that the existence of a rule and the evidence of its application are recorded independently.

Rule code (R). R0: no documented rule. R1: the rule is documented as a recommendation or option. R2: the rule is documented as a binding requirement.

Application-evidence code (A). A–: evidence of non-application (for example, published figures or a verification test contradicting the rule). A0: no evidence of application found after the standard search protocol (Section 8). A1: evidence reported by the association itself, such as aggregate statistics or an annual report. A2: independently verifiable evidence, such as a public record that passes a verification test or an external audit report. NA: the indicator cannot be assessed, with the reason recorded.

The separation between A0 and A– distinguishes the absence of evidence from evidence of absence. An A0 code is a statement about what could be found under a defined search, not a finding that the rule is not applied.

Several indicators concern information that cannot be disclosed at individual level, such as complaints, assessment results and supervision records. For these indicators, evidence is accepted in three forms that protect confidentiality: aggregate statistics without identifying data; anonymised samples reviewed by researchers under a data-sharing agreement; or attestation by an external auditor who has examined the records. The first form is coded A1, the second and third A2. No indicator requires the disclosure of individual identities.

Table 3. The CPSR framework: dimensions and indicators (proposed by this manuscript)

Dimension	Indicator	Example of A2 evidence
V. Verifiability	V1. Public register of individual credentials by name, level and validity	Register searchable by the public; verification test passed
	V2. Individual credentials distinguished from programme accreditation and membership in public presentation	Published rule; sample of members' public listings complies
	V3. Published, versioned standards with effective dates	Standards online with version history
P. Observation of practice	P1. Observed and assessed practice before credentialing	Published assessment protocol; external audit of assessments
	P2. Ongoing supervision or observation as a condition of renewal	Audit of renewal files under data-sharing agreement
	P3. Renewal includes assessed demonstration of competence, not participation alone	Published renewal protocol; audit of renewal decisions
E. Enforcement	E1. Complaints procedure accessible to clients, including clients of members who are not themselves members	Accessibility audit passed (Section 8)
	E2. Graduated sanctions with published criteria	Published sanctions policy; anonymised decisions
	E3. Periodic public reporting of complaints received, examined and upheld	Published aggregate figures, including zero
I. Independence	I1. Standard-setting, training and certification assigned to separate bodies with separate decision-makers	Governance documents; external review
	I2. Assessors independent of the candidate's trainers	Published assessment rules; audit of assessor allocation

	I3. Published conflict-of-interest policy and periodic external review	Policy and external review report published
O. Outcome accountability	O1. Written agreement required before work begins, covering service, role, limits, confidentiality, fees and referral	Required template; audit of a sample of agreements
	O2. Baseline and closing assessment required for client engagements	Requirement and audit results published
	O3. Research or audit linking credentials to independently measured client outcomes	Published study or audit report

Results are reported as profiles rather than as a single score. For each dimension, the profile shows the number of indicators coded R2 and, among them, the number with A1 or A2 evidence. The difference between binding rules and rules with evidence of application is the association's implementation gap on that dimension. A profile with strong verifiability and weak independence, for example, identifies a specific and addressable credibility problem. The coding scheme has not been piloted, and its reliability and validity remain to be established.

6.3 What the CPSR framework adds

The framework builds on existing work and does not claim its components as new. Table 4 sets out the relationship.

Table 4. The CPSR framework in relation to existing frameworks

Framework	Unit of analysis	What it specifies	What CPSR takes from it	What CPSR adds
ICF and EMCC Global requirements	Individual practitioner; training programme	Entry, experience, mentoring or supervision, renewal	Content of many P-dimension indicators	Assessment of the association's evidence that requirements are applied
IAPTC® Professional Quality Framework (Natseva, 2026a)	Practitioner (professional minimum)	Eight pillars, from education to responsible AI practice	Several indicators, e.g. public verifiability, written agreement, outcome assessment, complaints reporting	Application to associations, with a separate independence dimension
IAPTC® Professional Quality Index (Natseva, 2026a)	Practitioner quality; conceptual	Documentary, quantitative and demonstrative indicators across eight pillars	The distinction between documented and demonstrated quality	Separate rule and evidence codes; evidence-status categories (A–, A0, NA); confidentiality-preserving evidence rules
Conditions for credible self-regulation (Gunningham & Rees, 1997)	Industry self-regulatory scheme	Transparency, sanctions, background state intervention	E and V dimensions	Operational indicators specific to coaching and consulting associations
Design principles for self-governing institutions (Ostrom, 1990)	Self-governing institutions	Monitoring, graduated sanctions, conflict resolution	P and E dimensions	Translation into coded indicators and comparable profiles

The contribution is threefold. As an analytical framework, CPSR moves attention from practitioner requirements to the association's capacity to demonstrate that its requirements are applied, and treats independence as a dimension of credibility in its own right. As a research instrument, its separate rule and evidence codes allow the gap between declared and applied standards to be measured. As a comparative tool, it allows associations with different terminology and structures to be assessed on the same indicators. The recommendations in the IAPTC® Professional Report 01/2026 on registers, written agreements, outcome assessment and complaints

reporting are acknowledged as prior proposals of that report; the CPSR framework uses them as indicators and does not present them as its own.

7. TESTABLE PROPOSITIONS

The following propositions are hypotheses derived from the framework, not findings. For each, the measures, data, main confounders and the result that would count against it are stated.

P1. Implementation gap. Within associations, fewer than half of the binding rules (R2) will have evidence of application (A1 or A2), and the gap will be larger for the enforcement and outcome-accountability dimensions than for verifiability. *Measures:* R and A codes for all indicators. *Data:* documents and verification tests (Section 8). *Confounders:* association size, age and resources; associations that apply rules without documenting their application. *Against:* evidence of application for most binding rules in most associations, or no difference between dimensions.

P2. Registers and accurate presentation. Among practitioners who publicly claim a credential, the proportion whose claim can be confirmed will be higher for associations with a public register (V1 coded R2 with A2) than for associations without one. *Measures:* confirmation rate of credential claims in a random sample of public profiles. *Data:* public profiles; registers; written confirmation requests to associations without registers. *Confounders:* association size and age, the share of lapsed credentials, regional practices in self-presentation. *Against:* equal or lower confirmation rates where registers exist.

P3. Independence of assessment. Where assessors are independent of candidates' trainers (I2 coded R2 with A1 or A2), original assessment decisions will agree more closely with blind re-assessment of the same recorded sessions by an independent panel using a common rubric than where trainers assess their own candidates. Failure or deferral rates are not used as an indicator, because they may reflect candidate preparation, level or policy rather than independence. *Measures:* agreement between original and blind decisions (for example, an intraclass correlation or Cohen's kappa). *Data:* consented, anonymised recordings with original decisions. *Confounders:* differences in rubrics and credential levels (addressed by the common rubric and stratification), sample selection by associations. *Against:* no difference in agreement, or higher agreement where trainers assess their own candidates.

P4. Accessibility of complaints. Among associations supplying complaints data under common definitions, those with higher accessibility-audit scores (E1) will record more complaints received per 1,000 credential holders per year, without a higher proportion upheld. Associations that do not publish complaints data are not compared with those that do; data are requested from all associations through a standard request using common definitions (received, within jurisdiction, investigated, upheld, sanction imposed), and non-response is reported as a result in itself. *Confounders:* size and composition of the membership, mix of services, regional complaint cultures and legal environments. *Against:* no association between accessibility and complaint rates, or a higher proportion upheld where accessibility is higher.

P5. Written agreements and clarity. Clients of practitioners who are required to provide a written agreement (O1 coded R2 with A1 or A2) will report greater clarity about the service and fewer disputes about its scope than other clients. *Measures:* a client clarity scale to be developed and tested, reported disputes, and whether a written agreement was actually received. *Data:* clients recruited independently of the associations, for example through employers or research panels. *Confounders:* selection of practitioners into associations, practitioner experience and training, type of service, whether the engagement is self-funded or sponsored by an organisation, sector and region. *Against:* no difference after adjustment for these factors, or a difference explained entirely by whether an agreement was received regardless of the association's rule.

P6. Observation of practice and working alliance. Clients of practitioners in associations that require ongoing supervision (P2 coded R2 with A1 or A2) will report a stronger working alliance, measured with the Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989) or an adaptation validated for coaching, than clients of comparable practitioners in associations without that requirement. *Confounders:* practitioner experience and training level; supervision undertaken voluntarily regardless of the rule (measured directly as supervision hours); self-selection of more conscientious practitioners into associations requiring supervision; type of service. *Against:* no association after adjustment, or an association explained entirely by actual supervision hours irrespective of the association's rule.

8. PROPOSED EMPIRICAL EVALUATION

A three-stage comparative design is proposed. The study would require ethical approval and data-sharing agreements with participating associations.

Stage 1: Document coding. A purposive sample of at least ten associations active in coaching, mentoring and consulting would be selected to vary in size, region and governance model, including international and national bodies. A coding manual would define each indicator, the R and A codes, and a standard search protocol: the sources to be searched (the association's website, published reports, registers and governance documents), the search period and a written information request with a fixed response time. Two trained coders would code each association independently. Reliability would be assessed with Krippendorff's alpha, retaining indicators that reach an agreed threshold, conventionally 0.80 (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

Stage 2: Verification tests. To establish A-codes, observable tests would be applied: confirming a random sample of public credential claims against registers or through written requests (P2); an accessibility audit of complaints procedures, recording

whether a client of a member can find and use the procedure, through which channels and within what time (E1, P4); and requests, made as a prospective client, for the documents that standards require before work begins (O1). Associations would be invited to supply aggregate or anonymised evidence, or external audit attestations, for indicators involving confidential records.

Stage 3: Linking to practice and clients. Blind re-assessment of consented recordings would test P3. A survey of clients recruited independently of the associations would test P5 and P6, using multilevel models with clients nested in practitioners and practitioners in associations, controlling for the confounders listed in Section 7. Where an association changes a relevant rule, a before-and-after comparison would allow stronger inference than the cross-sectional design.

Sample size and statistical power. A sample of ten associations is sufficient for the comparative document analysis in Stages 1 and 2, where P1 and P2 are examined descriptively and, for P1, within associations. It is not sufficient for inferential tests of association-level predictors. In multilevel models, simulation studies show that 50 or fewer higher-level units can produce biased standard errors at that level (Maas & Hox, 2005), and models with few clusters require small-sample corrections and cautious interpretation (McNeish & Stapleton, 2016). With about ten associations, P3 and P4 should therefore be treated as comparative case analyses, not as tests of statistical significance at association level. For P5 and P6, three options are available: increasing the number of associations substantially by including national and regional bodies; using within-association contrasts where a rule applies to some practitioners and not others, or changes over time; or restricting inference to the practitioner and client levels. Before data collection, an a priori power analysis by simulation (for example with the simr package; Green & MacLeod, 2016) should be pre-registered. It would specify the expected effect sizes, informed by prior research, the intraclass correlations at each level and the numbers of associations, practitioners and clients. No such analysis has yet been carried out, and no assumed values are reported here.

The design has known limits: associations may decline to participate or to share data, client samples may be self-selected, and cross-sectional associations do not establish causation.

9. DISCUSSION

Three conclusions follow for the research question. First, the credibility of self-regulation depends less on the content of practitioner standards than on whether an association's claims can be checked from outside. Under information asymmetry, a demanding standard that cannot be verified does little for clients (Akerlof, 1970; Spence, 1973). Second, in the sources reviewed, standards are concentrated on inputs, while the safeguards that bear most directly on clients, namely observation of practice, enforcement, independence and outcome accountability, are uneven or not publicly demonstrated. Third, some binding rules affecting practice are arriving from outside the profession, notably through EU law on artificial intelligence. If associations wish to shape their regulatory environment, their self-regulation needs to become demonstrably credible, consistent with Gunningham and Rees's (1997) argument that self-regulation works best when backed by the prospect of public intervention.

The IAPTC® case illustrates both directions. Its standards, as described, contain features that address known gaps, and its sector report recommends further measures. At the same time, its position within an ecosystem that includes a training provider and a research institute with common leadership raises the independence question that the CPSR framework is designed to make visible. The same question applies, in different forms, to any association that accredits the programmes from which its members are drawn. For clients, the practical implication is that a credential should be read for what it attests and checked where it can be checked. For associations, publishing verifiable evidence of enforcement and independence may do more for credibility than raising hour requirements. For researchers, the most important gap remains the absence, in the sources reviewed, of studies linking credentials or association standards to independently measured client outcomes.

10. LIMITATIONS

This paper is conceptual and analyses documents rather than practice. The original text of the IAPTC® Global Professional Standards 2026 was not available, and its provisions are reported only through a secondary description. Several sources are non-peer-reviewed reports by the President of the association they describe, which limits their independence. The regulatory overview relies on a single sector review for six jurisdictions and does not generalise beyond them. The ICF and EMCC Global requirements are reported as published on their websites in October 2026 and may change. The CPSR framework has not been piloted; its indicators, codes and evidence rules require validation, including tests of reliability and of whether profiles relate to client outcomes. Finally, the author works at an institute founded by the President of IAPTC® and holds roles at Happy Life Academy®, a potential conflict of interest declared below.

11. CONCLUSION

In the jurisdictions reviewed, coaching and consulting associations are the principal source of professional standards. Their codes, credentials and procedures are necessary but not self-evidently credible. This paper has distinguished the instruments that are often confused, shown that in the sources reviewed standards are more developed for declared inputs than for verifiable outputs, and identified the specific weaknesses of voluntary self-regulation. The proposed CPSR framework shifts attention from what

associations require of practitioners to what associations can demonstrate about themselves, and its separate coding of rules and evidence makes the gap between the two measurable. Its propositions and research design offer a route for testing whether credible self-regulation, so defined, is associated with better outcomes for clients. Until that evidence exists, the question to ask of any credential is not only what it requires, but how anyone outside the association can know that the requirement is applied.

DECLARATIONS

Conflict of interest. The author works at the Happy Life Institute for Direct Change Science, founded by Stoyana Natseva, who is also President of IAPTC® and the author of several sources analysed in this article, including the IAPTC® Professional Report 01/2026. He serves as Director of Academic Development (Chief Academic Officer) and is a member of the Academic Council of Happy Life Academy®, and he completed the Academy's DBA programme, which is led by its founder, Stoyana Natseva.

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