

INTERNATIONAL CREDENTIALING OF TERTIARY EDUCATION PRINCIPLES, QUESTIONS & CONCERNS

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Each year, millions of educational credentials issued by educational institutions in one country are submitted to officials in another country as part of the process for obtaining immigration, employment, professional licensure, admission to an advanced educational program, or other benefits for which educational qualifications are a prerequisite. The process by which these educational credentials are reviewed by decision makers is referred to generically as *evaluation*.

The international recognition accorded to tertiary (postsecondary) educational credentials and to the qualifications they represent is based upon a combination of facts and perceptions. Those entrusted with the responsibility for making official recognition decisions have an ethical obligation, both to the society they serve and to the individuals whose credentials are being evaluated, to maximize the factual bases for their decisions and to minimize the perceptual bases.

This article presents my view of the principles of international educational credential evaluation, and then asks some questions about tertiary education in the 21st century and shares some concerns.

Basic Principles of International Educational Credential Evaluation

- I. *In every geographic area, the range of human intellectual ability, from the very bright to the very dull, can be described by the standard bell-shaped curve of normal distribution.*

If we cannot accept this principle, then there is no basis for the acceptance of educational credentials between any two geographic areas, whether they be as similar as Berlin and Munich or as different as Bangladesh and Mozambique.

- II. *One year of full-time academic study at one educational institution is the equivalent of one year of full-time academic study at another educational institution at the same level of education.*

One year of full-time academic study at the University of London is the equivalent of one year of full-time study at the University of New Delhi or the University of Cairo or the University of Beijing or the University of Buenos Aires or the University of Kentucky. If this is not true, then there is no objective basis for comparing educational achievement, whether the two educational institutions are located in the same country or in different countries.

III. *There are significant differences between primary and secondary education, and between secondary and tertiary education.*

For example: Physics may be studied at all levels of education. Wherever it is studied, physics includes mechanics, heat, sound, electricity, magnetism, and light. The study of physics differs from one level of education to another because differences in the educational and experiential background of the students result in differences in the depth and breadth of the information that is covered.

Because the same subject can be taught at different levels of education, and can be described at each level with the same or similar terminology, it is not possible to determine the level of an individual course solely by reading a course description or syllabus.

IV. *Satisfactory completion of a given degree program may lead to employment within a specific field or profession, but receipt of a degree does not necessarily confirm eligibility for professional licensure in another jurisdiction.*

In some countries, a professional license and an academic degree are the same credential. There is no distinction. In other countries, however, the two qualifications are distinct. There the process of professional licensure is administered by a governmental agency, not by an educational institution, and a licensure examination may be required.

The qualifications required for professional licensure, and the level and quantity of education they represent, differ from country to country. Thus it is not illogical to say that an applicant from one country has the equivalent of a university degree in another country but is not yet qualified to practice the relevant profession.

V. *Bilateral and Multilateral Agreements Are Not Universally Binding*

In some countries, tertiary education is totally controlled by an agency of the national government. The government can enter into bilateral and multilateral agreements, and tertiary educational institutions must abide by them.

In other countries, the national government does not have complete control over tertiary education. Complete or partial control is exercised by regional governments (for example: *Land* in Germany; *province* in Canada and Pakistan; *state* in India and the United States; *state* and *territory* in Australia).

In the United States, for example, the federal (national) government has no direct authority over education at any level. As a result, the United States can not be an official participant in any international agreement concerning the comparability of educational qualifications.

In some countries, tertiary educational institutions are completely autonomous. They set their own requirements for admission and for graduation, and they determine for themselves when and under what circumstances those requirements can be waived. In many instances, the various academic subdivisions of an educational institution have the authority to make decisions that might or might not be consistent with decisions made by other subdivisions of the same institution.

Similarly, in many countries professional licensing agencies are not governed by national legislation. They are governed by regional or local legislation and/or by regulations issued under their own authority. Therefore they have the authority to make their own determinations concerning the eligibility for professional licensure of an applicant who was educated in another jurisdiction.

Professional licensure requirements are probably more variable in the United States than in any other country. For example, an architect educated in Wisconsin does not qualify for licensure in California unless an extra course on earthquakes has been completed. An architect educated in California does not qualify for licensure in Wisconsin unless an extra course on the effects of cold weather and heavy snow loads on roofs has been completed. Illinois requires secondary school social studies teachers to have completed a course on the History of Illinois. Wisconsin requires them to have completed courses on Cooperatives and on the Conservation of Natural Resources.

VI. Experienced reasonable persons can reach differing conclusions concerning the nature of an educational program and concerning the equivalence or lack thereof between two educational programs.

This is perhaps the most important principle of all. Just as three physicians can diagnose the same patient differently, and recommend different types of treatment, so can three experienced conscientious international educational credential evaluators differ in judgment concerning the comparability of educational qualifications.

Questions About Tertiary Education in the 21st Century

A. *What is the purpose of university education?*

When the ancient universities were established (Alexandria in Egypt, Bologna in what is now Italy, Mustansiriyah in what is now Iraq, Taxila in what is now India), the purpose of university education was clear. It was to pass on to future generations the accumulated wisdom of society.

In the Middle Ages, the traditional university curriculum, the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic), was expanded by the addition of the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). Over the centuries other discrete subjects were added, mostly of a theoretical nature such as theology, literature, and history.

In the 1860s, the Morrill Land Grant Act transferred valuable tracts of land owned by the federal government of the United States to state governments in exchange for university instruction in agriculture, home science, and the mechanical arts. This marks the addition of applied professional (some called it vocational) training to university curricula. Most other countries have followed this example, with perhaps the last being England, which made engineering a university-based subject one hundred years later.

Universities now had a dual purpose: to pass on the accumulated wisdom of society, and to train students for technical occupations.

In the 19th Century, German educators developed a different philosophy of tertiary education. For them, the purpose of a university was to advance the frontiers of human knowledge through research and publication.

In the United States and in many other countries, including Germany, the purpose of a university is now a blend of these three missions: pass on knowledge, train professional workers, and advance the frontiers of human knowledge. Some educational systems have added a fourth mission: community or public service.

What is the purpose of a university in the 21st century? There's no clear answer. It depends upon whom you ask.

Argentina: In 2001, the government offered extra funds to universities that encourage students to take courses the government recommends, and threatened to cut funds to universities that do not. The intention is to reward universities that help fulfill the country's practical needs. ¹

Association of African Universities: Higher education institutions must become more responsive to local development needs. The mission of universities is to produce job creators, not job seekers. ²

Australia: The goal is not to meet a range of social, economic, and cultural purposes. The goal is to be an enterprise, a quasi-business organization, serving itself. ³

Australia: The top universities, together one of Australia's largest export earners, fear their share of the world market for students is slipping because of bad publicity in Asia. ⁴

Bulgaria: The goal of higher education is the training of highly qualified specialists and the promotion of scientific and cultural progress. Higher education is the provider of tomorrow's leaders and politicians, and therefore plays a pivotal part in developing a well-functioning society. ²

England: Higher education is an international business, an industry in a cut-throat market, and universities cannot afford to become parochial. ⁴

England: Higher education needs to respond to employer demand for more and better trained technicians and professionals, to develop key skills that are relevant and in demand for a 21st Century workforce. ³

England: Education should be accessible to all who desire it for their own sense of personal achievement, irrespective of the prospects for immediate payback in the world of work. ³

England: The education of the people should be limited to the requirements of their occupations and should not extend beyond what relates to their work. ³

France: Universities are evolving from theoretical teaching programs to degrees based more on the needs of professional life, and to increasing and improving student mobility into and out of the country. ³

Japan: Companies are pressing universities to undertake more of the applied research and professional education of graduates formerly undertaken by companies. ⁵

Japan: The Ministry of Education believes that the universities are not competitive enough internationally in research or in attracting overseas students. As a result, the best Japanese university graduates enroll in graduate degree programs in other countries. ⁵

Lithuania: Higher education institutions are changing curricula to meet the needs of the new market economy and the globalization of the Lithuanian economy. ⁷

Malaysia: As part of its campaign to become a world-class center for education, the government wants to provide a more competitive environment. ⁴

National Unions of Students in Europe: Higher education is a public good and, as such, institutions act in the public interest. Their ultimate purpose is to foster social responsibility and civic involvement and thus drive social development. ⁶

Palestine: The purpose of higher education is to meet the scientific and technical needs of the economy and society. ²

Scotland: The purpose of higher education is to promote entrepreneurship among, staff, students, and graduates. ³

Scotland: Higher education needs to be devoted to socio-economic and techno-cultural modernization. ⁴

Senegal: Universities have a moral obligation to ameliorate society's problems. ²

South Africa: Universities have a societal function, to provide significant and substantial experiences of engaging with diversity issues as preparation for civic engagement and social responsibility. ⁴

United States: Higher education serves five purposes: individual student development, advancement of human capability in society at large, expansion of educational justice, transmission and advancement of learning and wisdom, and the critical evaluation of society to foster society's self-renewal.²

If we accept these position statements, tertiary education should train people in the skills needed by the national economy; conduct scientific research and promote scientific progress; promote cultural progress and social development; ameliorate society's problems: train civic leaders; foster individual personal achievement; act as an enterprise and get its share of the international market; improve student mobility into and out of the country; transmit and advance knowledge; and critically evaluate society.

Are these really appropriate purposes for tertiary education? Are they compatible? Can tertiary education fulfill all of these objectives? Who decides which ones are most important?

B. *Is education a product or a process?*

England: Students should be members of an academic community, not customers.¹

National Unions of Students in Europe: Students are not consumers of a marketable education service, but equal partners in the higher education community and a force for change.⁶

New Zealand: The government stresses the importance of nurturing a knowledge society and the universities' key role in bringing it about.⁹

Russia: Student assessment reflects not only their knowledge but also their ability to display key competencies that have been built into the curriculum: to chair a meeting, to work in a team, to manage a project.⁵

United States: There is a significant increase in the number of persons who obtain a General Educational Development (GED) Certificate (by examination) instead of a high school diploma. But the examination is no substitute for four years of high school. High school education is more important than the documentation.⁸

World Trade Organization: Higher education is a commercial product, to be bought and sold like any other commodity. The import and export of higher education should be free of unnecessary restrictions.²

Can education be both a product to be sold and bought and a process to be experienced and completed? Are these two divergent aspects compatible? Who decides which is more important?

C. *Why do universities seek to have an international dimension?*

Åland Islands, Denmark, Faroe Islands, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, & Sweden: Universities should collaborate more closely and create joint centers of excellence in research and researcher training to attract more students.⁵

Australia: Up to 2,500 qualified Australian students were not admitted to information technology programs because of inadequate government support. Two-thirds of the students enrolled in information technology programs were full-fee paying students from overseas.³

Czech Republic: Universities should attract more corporate sponsors so graduates can move directly into positions of public or corporate prominence.⁵

England: Universities should compete internationally.⁵

England: China is the fastest growing market for UK university recruitment.¹

India: Universities need to fill the gap between supply and demand that foreign universities are cashing in on for marketing their courses, and to reduce the diversion of bright students to substandard foreign universities.⁵

When one compares the reasons why universities seek to have an international dimension with the purposes of tertiary education, there is little compatibility. Money and prestige appear to be the dominant reasons. Who decides whether or not a university should recruit and enroll international students? Who decides why?

Concerns About Tertiary Education in the 21st Century

1. *There is no clear philosophical mission for tertiary educational institutions.* Should they train those with the best academic and intellectual skills, or use their programs to expand the percentage of the population educated at the postsecondary level? Should they conduct teaching and research in fields of study requested by the public, or identified as important by the government, or which will make a profit? Who should decide?
2. *There is almost universal agreement on the need for quality control, but no clear definition of what constitutes quality tertiary education.*
3. *There is no clear identification of the public to be served.* Should tertiary educational institutions serve people residing in their own geographic area, or citizens of their own country, or citizens of other countries?
4. *Because of these deficiencies, tertiary education is now in a state of competitive marketing.*

The Open University in England now operates staffed offices in the United States and in most European countries. Other British universities operate in Hong Kong,

Israel, Malaysia, Singapore, and other countries. Australian universities operate in Malaysia and Singapore. U.S. universities operate in Germany and Poland. U.S.-patterned (but not U.S. regionally accredited) institutions have flooded the globe.

5. *Because of these deficiencies, tertiary education is now in a state of **caveat emptor** (buyer beware).* Intellectual honesty on the part of tertiary educational institutions cannot be assumed.
 - a. A university in the United States will, for a fee, post on its own grade report courses taken at an institution outside of the United States that can not be used in its own degree programs but which can then be more easily transferred to other universities which are not aware of the distinction.
 - b. A university in the United States will, for a fee, post on its own grade report a non-credit in-service program for teachers, listing it as a graduate (postgraduate) course so the teachers can qualify for salary increases, without noting that this course cannot be used for any degree program at the university.
 - c. A university in the United Kingdom offers on-site a postgraduate degree program that requires for admission a first class or high second class bachelor's degree and at least two years of work experience, and that requires for graduation completion of ten courses and a dissertation. It also offers via distance learning a postgraduate degree program in the same academic field that has no educational and no employment requirements for admission, and that requires for graduation completion of ten courses but no dissertation. The university claims that the two sets of students complete the same academic program and receive the same degree.
 - d. A tertiary educational institution in the Netherlands offers a four-year program of study for citizens of the Netherlands, who complete 42 credits per year. It also offers a two-year program of study in the same academic field for citizens of the United States, who complete 75 credits per year. The institution claims that the two sets of students complete the same academic program and receive the same degree.
 - e. A university in Australia offers an on-site degree program to citizens of Australia. It also offers a distance learning degree program in the same field of study to citizens of Singapore. The program offered in Singapore requires different courses and leads to a degree with a different name. The University claims that the two degrees are the same in essence and should be treated as though they are the same in fact.
 - f. A private company in Hong Kong (not an educational institution) teaches in Chinese courses it has licensed from a private company in Singapore (not an educational institution) which holds a franchise from a university in England. Students who complete the appropriate courses in Hong Kong receive a degree from a university in Wales.

When a tertiary educational institution receives official degree-granting recognition from those who have authority over tertiary education in the country in which the institution operates, it receives that recognition for degree programs it offers to citizens of that country.

When an officially recognized degree-granting institution chooses to offer degree programs to citizens of another country, on-site or via distance learning, it is reasonable to expect that the names of those degree programs, the components of those degree programs, and the credentials confirming completion of those degree programs will be identical to those offered to citizens of the institution's own country. When that is not the case, it is reasonable for an international educational credential evaluator to withhold acceptance of those degrees and the components thereof.

Conclusion

Tertiary education throughout the world is in greater turmoil now than at any time since the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Those who are providers of tertiary education are being subjected to philosophical, administrative, and financial pressures from an increasing number of directions. Those who clearly define their mission, their goals, their degree programs, and their quality standards will have a better chance to have their degrees officially recognized internationally.

¹ **London Times Higher Educational Supplement [THES]**, 20 April 2001.

² **International Higher Education**, Boston College Center for International Higher Education, Spring 2001.

³ **THES**, 27 October 2000.

⁴ **THES**, 19 September 1997.

⁵ **THES**, 1 December 2000.

⁶ **THES**, 11 May 2001.

⁷ **International Higher Education**, Summer 2001.

⁸ **Milwaukee Journal Sentinel**, 8 July 2001.

⁹ **THES**, 22 June 2001.