

Equivalences of Degrees?

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If we speak precisely, we must admit that internationally there are *no* equivalences of certificates, diplomas and degrees. Yet much time, effort, and money have already been spent on pioneer efforts to establish comparabilities, and further outlays are expected. If there can be no genuine equivalences — and most knowledgeable persons agree on this matter — why are we trying to create them? The obvious answer: the increasing mobility of students, teachers, scientists and specialists between countries and the consequent pressing need to evaluate in some way their educational backgrounds.

Since the problems of appraising accurately other systems of education are stupendous and will be with us as long as the world is committed to international education, I would like here to take a fresh look at our objectives in trying to “equate” academic credentials and to consider some possible alternative proposals.

I shall not, therefore, take space to review the complexities in attempting to define “equivalences.” I assume that the reader is more or less *au courant* with these factors. Excellent analyses have been set forth in UNESCO’s Document 71 EX/3, “Comparability

and Equivalence of Matriculation Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees,"¹ and Chapter V of the 1964 *Year Book of Education*, "The Problem of the Equivalence of Degrees and Diplomas,"² prepared by Jean Murat, Professeur à la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Strasbourg. In these presentations the many issues are well categorized: from recognition of the uniqueness of national systems and policies of education through the vast array of differences in student selection, curriculum content, duration of courses, levels and depths of subject matter, methods of assessment, and matters of individual differences in the learning and teaching process, the bi-lateral and multi-lateral agreements of governments, and the semantic pitfalls regarding terms and titles.

I do not wish, either, to cover familiar ground regarding the projects already undertaken toward the establishing of equivalences: those notably prosecuted by the Franco-German Conference of Rectors, Council of Cultural Co-operation (Council of Europe), International Association of Universities, International Association of University Professors and Lecturers, the Study Group of Western European Professors of Mathematics, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, South East Asian Treaty Organization, and others. Such projects are well documented likewise in the UNESCO report and the Murat essay mentioned above. These endeavors have been fruitful and should provide us with directives in future trail-blazing.

With more than 300,000 students on the move between nations,³ (many of them submitting several credentials in application to "foreign" institutions), the number of documents to be reviewed annually reaches staggering proportions. Taking into account, also, the thousands of credentials presented in "foreign" countries for employment and licensing purposes, it does not take computers to tell us that literally millions of academic documents must be inspected every year by evaluators around the world whose professional job it is to appraise "foreign" study. Thus, interpretation of credentials and judging of educational content goes ceaselessly forward on an enormous global scale. Have we ever asked *those who do the job* exactly what *interpretative data* they need?

To involve the reader vicariously in the process of credential evaluation, I am inviting him to do a bit of role-playing. Let him imaginatively feel the dilemmas of an evaluator of foreign academic credentials by assuming the role of an admissions officer at an institution, or a licensing agent who must appraise the "foreigner's" educational background for employment or professional status. Then let him switch roles: to that of a student, or of a career individual

applying for a position or seeking professional accreditation, whose current finances and future life hang in the balance as his credentials are judged by an evaluator whose word becomes law.

It is quite easy to feel intensely these identifications by reading an excerpt from an open letter to a newspaper which tells of the plight of a husband and wife caught in the web of "ignorance" which frequently surrounds education internationally.

In 1961, when I arrived in Sarawak (a British Crown Colony at the time, but now part of Malaysia) under the auspices of the Methodist Church, I was refused as a teacher in the Sarawak school system because my American degree from Ohio Wesleyan University was not recognized by the British. Finally, because a Methodist secondary school greatly needed an English teacher and because its British principal insisted the school's need outweighed this particular question in accreditation, I did teach for over two years in the town of Sibu.

Now my husband (a former Peace Corps volunteer who served in Sarawak), in the middle of his Master of Science program in agricultural engineering at Ohio State University and a graduate with a Bachelor of Science in civil engineering from the University of California at Davis, has applied for an engineer's position in Sarawak and has been informed that his degree "from the University of California at Davis is not currently recognized by the Institute of Engineering (Malaysia)."

We do not wish to arouse interest in our personal situation but to awaken the American public to the lack of regard for our educational system which we have encountered abroad. Moreover, our own country is sadly lacking in information about the educational systems of other countries. For instance, after my return to the United States in 1964, and after further study at the University of California at Davis, my experience of teaching in Sarawak was considered, by Californian secondary schools, unequivocal to teaching in America, although I explained I had been preparing students of Forms 4 and 5 (similar to grades 10 and 11 in our system) for the Senior Cambridge Oversea Examination.

The provincialism which I have faced on both sides of the Pacific and which my husband is now facing is just one indication of the glaring ignorance, even among educators and administrators, of education in countries other than our own. If personnel, as well as economic aid in the form of money, is to flow internationally, surely international cooperation is required in examining the educational systems which are supposedly preparing the youth of today for our modern world, which is no longer a world of isolationists. Free exchange of personnel among nations can never exist without international knowledge and evaluation of educational systems the world over.

Kay Teatsorth Lyons, Columbus, Ohio⁴.

The eloquence of this human predicament, occurring with variations in countless other cases almost daily, should summon

us to broader and deeper endeavors internationally to close this ignorance gap. To do this we must, of course, move on *two* fronts: on the one, we must help evaluators around the world gain greater *professional competence* (this means training!); on the other, we must provide all those who evaluate academic credentials with *sufficient data of the right kind*. I do not use here the editorial "we" as a literary device. It is used to indicate the fact that we need each other internationally to solve these problems; only international corporate endeavor can bring satisfactory results.

In the matter of guiding evaluators in professional competence, we must recognize first that since the role of evaluator of foreign credentials is fairly new, the persons holding these positions have had no specialized academic training for their task. Those in the United States, for the most part, hold university degrees and bring many diversified skills to their roles, but they have come from other professional fields and for the job at hand they are self-taught and self-propelled. I do not know whether the first part of that statement would reflect the background of evaluators in other parts of the world — I dare say in many cases it would — but I am confident that the latter part of the statement represents a global truth.

It would seem logical, therefore, that in each country and among countries, the many agencies which have a stake in international education should undertake specific programs designed to help credential evaluators become more professional in their skills. It is safe to say that though this may be going on in varying degrees, it is not being done on a scale, or at a depth, commensurate with the needs. In indicating here a few activities along these lines which are being carried on in the United States, persons in other countries may see similarities in activity patterns in their cultures. My purpose in this brief exposition is not to hold up exemplary patterns but to point up our further needs.

For twenty years the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (an agency more than fifty years old) has held workshops on the evaluating of foreign credentials where experienced evaluators and neophytes have come together to teach and learn. For the last five years the Association has had a professional section devoted to International Education, which has five committees: 1) Administration of Foreign Student Admissions, 2) Foreign Credential Evaluation, 3) Research and Development, 4) Selection, Admission and Placement of Foreign Students, 5) Study Abroad by U.S. Students. Our national and regional meetings confront all these areas of concern. For example, the four-day schedule

of the annual A.A.C.R.A.O. conference to be held in May 1968 will have the following program for the constituents in international education:

A. *Information Exchanges*

1. "Credit for Programs for Americans Abroad"
2. "Centralized Credential Examinations for Foreign Students"
3. "Graduate Admissions and Placement of Foreign Students"
4. "The Sponsored Foreign Student"

B. *Professional Presentations*

1. "Western and Eastern Canadian Education"
2. "Mexican Education"
3. "Latin American Education" (two separate workshops)
4. "Terminology and Methodology — Research on Foreign Students"
5. "A Research Report — Foreign Student Admissions"
6. "Agency for International Development (U.S. Department of State) Project"
7. "The International Student and the Junior College"

C. *General Session or Professional Presentation*

1. "Fostering the Educational Impact of Foreign Students on Campus and in the Community"
2. "Role of Government and Private Agencies in International Education"

D. *Consultation Services*

(Two question-box sessions with up to five consultants at each session)

Our National Association of Foreign Student Affairs (established about twenty years) has a very active section devoted to the many aspects of foreign student admissions. It has also a busy Field Service Program which sends experienced officers from one institution to another where help has been requested in admissions, in evaluating credentials, in teaching English as a second language, in community liaison, in advising, and in administering foreign student affairs.

The College Entrance Examination Board, the Institute of International Education, American Friends of the Middle East, African-American Institute, Asia Foundation, and the East-West Center of the University of Hawaii, cooperate with the two agencies above in staging projects and workshops designed to increase the professional knowledge of those working in international education.

While those of us related to these activities are pleased with such efforts and strive valiantly to make them ever more productive, we are not unmindful of our deficiencies. What we urgently need at this moment in our professional development is *communication with*

similar agencies, Ministries of Education and examining bodies in other countries.

It would be advantageous if we could bring to our professional meetings representatives of foreign Ministries of Education and Examining Boards to interpret their educational systems and explain the national testing and grading of their students. It would be enriching if professors of comparative education could come from other nations and give us educational backdrops for the credentials we review, for as William Brickman of the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education points out, "An educational system is the product of historical, political, economic, cultural, social, religious and sundry other traditions and factors."⁵

We would profit greatly if we could send abroad our most experienced U.S. evaluators to gain greater insight into the schooling of students in other countries and to discover at first hand the levels of achievement represented by foreign credentials so that this information might be shared later through our own professional channels. The few in our constituency who have had the privilege of foreign contacts attest to the fact that when problems can be faced *bi-nationally* with honesty and objectivity, mutual respect can be deepened, misinformation corrected, academic procedures and standards clarified, and many differences resolved. Although opinions are not always changed, a new bi-focal view is established, and what formerly appeared only as "prejudice" or "discrimination" may sometimes be discovered as value judgments based firmly on prevailing scholastic standards.

It takes money to move persons between nations, but should we continue to operate solely within our national limits, which admittedly is "the blind leading the blind"? It would seem as if we might dispel some of our ignorance if we could create authentic situations in which educational representatives could meet together to explain and defend their systems. I will come back to this point in a different context after considering the matter of the type of data we supply to our credential evaluators.

In trying to think through the kind of educational data we need to exchange between countries, let us first take into account the various factors we appraise when we "evaluate" a credential. Only in this light can our needs come sharply to focus. I am obliged, of course, to cite U.S. criteria but I hazard the guess that the following list is fairly similar around the world. I am using criteria excerpted from a paper prepared by William H. Strain, Associate Registrar for Admissions at Indiana University and Chairman of the Council on Evaluation of Foreign Student Credentials, which was

requested for the UNESCO comparative study of methods of equating degrees.⁹

In attempting to determine the ability of the individual applicant, American admissions officers normally require and evaluate the following sorts of information:

- (1) The accreditation and reputation of the institution in which the applicant was prepared.
- (2) The type and intensity of the program he has completed, especially in his major field (or in prerequisites for the kind of study he proposes). A specific degree or certificate is usually required as evidence he has completed the prerequisite level or course of study.
- (3) His grades and grade average — this may be analyzed in various ways, e.g., rank in class or other group, over-all average, average in major field, grades in key subjects, etc.
- (4) His standing on certain required tests. These may be aptitude tests or subject tests or highly specialized aptitude and personality tests for special purposes.
- (5) The names and reputations of professors under whom the applicant has studied and recommendations from such persons.
- (6) Interviews.

These same types of information insofar as they are available are required *whether the applicant is American or foreign*.

Since each U.S. college and university is autonomous (even those state-supported), each institution has admission and degree requirements which are *sui generis*. Therefore decision-making in each situation is unique. For this reason, it would be impossible for any professional or government agency in the United States or abroad to bind an American institution to *external* value judgments on the record a student presents. The greatest service which could be rendered U.S. evaluators would be to give them *sufficient data in categories 1 through 4* to enable them to operate individually. Could not this genuinely be said for most evaluators in other parts of the world?

The school or university evaluator in the United States has two varying points of reference for any credential he appraises: on the one hand, the student's *academic objective*; on the other, the *levels of achievement* represented by the credential. The student's academic objective *automatically determines* how much of the work presented can be used toward fulfilling the requirements for the

student's chosen goal. The same credential has different applicability, and therefore interpretation, according to the academic objective. In some cases, much of the past record can apply toward further study; in many cases, (especially when the student changes from one field to another) only a small part becomes useful as prerequisite to the new diploma or degree. Thus, in the pragmatic process of a student's transfer from one institution to another (and more often than not, from one goal to another), "equivalences" of certificates, diplomas and degrees, however painstakingly developed, become irrelevant in the light of the variables of a particular academic objective and the standards of a given institution.

In the matter of professional licensing, it would seem that stated equivalences of documents might serve some useful purpose, but here again, differences in standards from one situation to another tend always to invalidate fixed comparabilities. (For instance, each of the fifty states in the United States has its own unique set of requirements for professional teaching credentials. Perhaps Mrs. Lyons might find that in Ohio or a state other than California her teaching in Sibiu might be honored.)

So, in whatever role the U.S. evaluator performs his task, as admissions officer or licensing agent, he find himself not so much needing static "equivalences" for guidelines but *enough interpretative data to let him make his own decisions.*

Not in a spirit of defending, but in a spirit of sharing, let me cite briefly some U.S. attempts to collect and publish educational data to dispel our ignorance, in the hope that other nations will inform us of what *they* are doing to understand our educational system, so that we can ultimately move together in *concerted* effort. Again, I am enumerating our endeavors to point up our needs.

Most of the 1,755 U.S. colleges and universities admitting foreign students make some attempt to collect resource materials on educational systems of other countries. Small institutions lean heavily on big ones. Admissions offices in institutions with large foreign student enrollments have amassed quite impressive libraries of reference works, reports of Ministries of Education, statements of foreign examining bodies, and catalogues of schools and universities around the world. Experienced evaluators keep card files of special information on foreign programs, the quality and standards of institutions, and a host of bits and pieces of pertinent facts.

The U.S. Office of Education for several decades has maintained a staff of comparative education specialists and has supplied institutions with books and monographs on education abroad. Its free advisory service, which may be discontinued, has been widely

used by U.S. institutions seeking information on credential interpretation.

The Institute of International Education, American Friends of the Middle East, African-American Institute, and other agencies provide information on foreign educational systems compiled at their overseas counseling centers.

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers has in the last ten years published a World Education Series which now includes thirty-two booklets⁷; of these, seventeen are country studies written by members of the Association. In 1955 the Association called together a number of professional and government agencies and the Council on Evaluation of Foreign Student Credentials was established. At present seven professional associations hold membership in the Council and six agencies and organizations are observers.⁸ The Council's function is to pool the insights and experiences of professional groups for the creation of "Placement Recommendations" to accompany the World Education Series booklets and the bulletins of the U.S. Office of Education. Such recommendations are intended only as guidelines; they carry no weight of final authority.

Rather than prepare our own educational materials on other countries (we do it only because of lack of adequate publications), we would prefer to have other nations prepare for us reports on their systems, but *we need urgently to tell them the sorts of interpretative data we must have*. Here again, we need face-to-face encounters to share our problems and disclose our lacks.

As a means of summary, I am using the privilege of quoting from a letter of William Strain to H. M. R. Keyes, Secretary General of the International Association of Universities. In this letter Mr. Strain sought to clarify the U.S. point of view with regard to the establishing of "equivalences" of credentials.

Most U.S. educators, I am sure, believe that education in this country has been greatly advanced by the freedom of each educator and each institution to make independent decisions regarding the content and requirements for higher education degrees (also in regard to requirements and standards for admission to higher education). The current acceleration in the development of new knowledge makes such freedom of independent action (one may even say of academic competition) even more imperative for the near future than it has been in the past. The higher and more specialized a study, the more necessary it is that individuals and institutions be in a position to move forward whenever and wherever they see light, without being confined by agreements and arbitrary standards.

From our point of view any effort to establish an Inter-

national Convention or a Recommendation on the equivalence of certificates, diplomas and degrees could only result in reducing the freedom of decision with which educators and institutions will approach the future. The fluidity of movement and initiative in higher education must be kept at the top possible level in order to continue the rapid advancement which has been going on in the last two decades.

It seems to us therefore that higher education not only in the United States but throughout the rest of the world will be advanced more rapidly by encouraging diversity than by standardization of course content. It will be advanced more rapidly by allowing flexibility than by insisting on rigidity in the evaluation of certificates, diplomas and degrees. U.S. educators are therefore reluctant to participate in any movement that is intended to lead toward standardization (and therefore rigidity) of programs of study and of the evaluating of resulting certificates and degrees.

Since many evaluators abroad, and all those in the United States, must steer their own evaluating courses using their own sextants, could not some international agency structure a series of international encounters where evaluators could meet with education specialists, Ministry of Education officials, and representatives from examining bodies? Here we could map better strategies for training our personnel and for exchanging resource materials. Here we could determine the necessary interpretative data for the charts by which we must steer our solitary courses.

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