

BULLETIN * ВЕСТНИК

**МЕЖДУНАРОДНОЙ
АКАДЕМИИ НАУК
ВЫСШЕЙ ШКОЛЫ**



№ 1 (15)

**OF THE INTERNATIONAL
HIGHER EDUCATION
ACADEMY OF SCIENCES**

2001

УДК 378

G. Fletcher,

Ed.D., president of the International Education Credential Evaluation Division of Globe Language Services, Inc., in New York; member of the IHEAS, Associate Professor, New York University

THE EVALUATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL CREDENTIALS IN THE UNITED STATES

The history and presentation of the theory and practice of ascertaining U.S. equivalents of international education in the United States.

History

From its inception as a nation, the United States has been a country of immigrants: "Give me your tired, your poor..." the Statue of Liberty proclaims to the world. However, not only the downtrodden have arrived to seek their fortunes in this vast country; many educated people have also arrived, searching for the freedom of scientific and creative expression. What happens to educated people from other countries when they arrive in the United States? Must they prove themselves by taking examinations or going back to school? Who determines the value, acceptance, or rejection of education completed outside the United States? In most, if not all, of the countries of the world, this is an official function of the government through a branch of the Ministry of Education. What happens in the United States, where there is no Ministry of Education? Surely this important function within society isn't accomplished by the private sector! This report will attempt to provide answers to the above questions, while explaining, in a historical context, the theory and practice of how equivalents are actually established and presented, and by whom.

Until 1970, the evaluation of international educational documents was carried out by two entities: 1) institutions of higher education for their own students, and 2) the U.S. Office of Education (USOE, now the U.S. Department of Education), within the federal government in Washington, D.C. USOE comparative education evaluators provided this service for free to schools, government agencies, and individuals for a number of years. These same government evaluators researched foreign educational systems, and the government in turn published their findings for the benefit of the U.S. academic community. In 1966, USOE research and publishing in this area was discontinued, and in 1970 the evaluation service was terminated. As a result, with the exception of schools evaluating their own international students, the entire applied international educational credential evaluation process was passed to the private sector. We will now take a look at the evolution of this field over the past 30 years.

Following the loss of professional guidance, research, and publishing from the U.S. government in the applied comparative education field, two not-for-profit membership organizations stepped forward to set ethical and professional standards and to support research and publishing in the profession: The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and The National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA), currently known as The Association of International Educators. These organizations developed international education branches and gave evaluators the forum to present their research and to learn comparative education through interaction with experts in the educational systems of different countries.

Country studies were contracted out by AACRAO and NAFSA to experienced evaluators, and books and workshop reports on major educational systems were published, with financial support from sources such as the International Communication Agency. These projects included the establishment of U.S. degree equivalents from other countries, credit hours, and grades, and were utilized by all legitimate evaluators, both within academic institutions and the private sector. These efforts continued through the 1990s, with fewer projects being funded year by year. As funding dried up in the 1990s, the private sector began to support internal research teams and to publish the results. How did the private sector attain this status? That is our next topic.

Immediately following the end of the USOE free evaluation service in 1970, private companies began to spring up to fill the vacuum. Most of the early evaluation services were incorporated as not-for-profit, non-tax-paying organizations. By the end of the century, this distinction was blurred as many tax-paying evaluation services were incorporated and joined the profession. There are now approximately 60 evaluation services operating in the United States, the majority of which are tax-paying organizations.

The entrepreneurs who created the first evaluation companies, as well as the evaluators, came from the admission offices of colleges and universities. In most instances, school personnel were contracted by evaluation companies to do the evaluations. This was the situation until the early 1980s, when evaluators began to be trained by the evaluation companies themselves. Although AACRAO and NAFSA provided professional and ethical standards during this period, conflicts of interest did appear. Many of the directors, members of the boards of directors, and evaluators in the private companies were also policy and decision makers in AACRAO and NAFSA and utilized their positions to exclusively promote their own businesses. As more services and evaluators entered the field and conflicts of interest were brought to light, AACRAO and NAFSA withdrew their exclusive support of select organizations and individuals, and by the early 1990s began to represent and allow the participation of all of their members.

In the early to mid-1980s, a group of evaluation services joined together to form an organization that would function much as a "guild" does in England. However, the organization did not establish and implement evaluation standards and expand to encompass the entire evaluation community, the latter apparently due to

The evaluation of international educational credentials in the United States

the establishment and maintenance of territorial divisions. This, coupled with the eventual exposure of a number of its members in the conflict of interest activities within AACRAO and NAFSA, and the creation in the late 1990s of a similar, more inclusive organization, have led it away from the guild concept to an association whose function has become the marketing of its members to society at large. The history of this organization has not been written, but it may be a typical case history of how a potentially service-oriented organization can become the victim of a hyper-competitive private sector atmosphere.

An interesting twist occurred in the latter half of the 1990s, when AACRAO opened its own international education evaluation service and began directly competing with some of its strongest supporters and members -- the private evaluation services and their evaluators -- many of whom have subsequently withdrawn from participation in AACRAO. Ethical questions have arisen once again, and an interesting debate is in progress. It appears that AACRAO, unless it changes course, will become simply another private evaluation service, and the altruistic mantle of professional leader will be transferred either to an already existing organization, such as NAFSA, which appears unlikely, or to a new, inclusive "applied comparative education society," which is currently being discussed by evaluation professionals. Stay tuned!

As we can now see, with the exception of schools evaluating their own students, the evaluation of international educational credentials in the United States, including establishing degree equivalents, credit hours, and grades, is totally in the hands of private enterprise. There is no accreditation agency, either public or private, that oversees the functioning or quality of the 60 or more private evaluation services. The marketplace alone determines whose work is accepted and whose isn't. Government agencies by law are not supposed to discriminate against any service that follows its guidelines in the evaluation of international educational credentials, unless a company makes provable mistakes. However, these guidelines primarily outline format and procedural requirements and do not define quality of work. The question arises, is the marketplace capable of recognizing qualified companies and evaluators?

The answer to the above question is a resounding "Yes!" It does not take a recipient of an evaluation long to know whether it is correct or not. Can the evaluated civil engineer build something that doesn't sink into the mud or fall down? Does the graduate student at the university have the evaluated academic background? Can the computer programmer program? One incorrect evaluation, after word gets around, can endanger an entire evaluation service, not to mention the schools and companies that accept international applicants based on the evaluations. We ask ourselves, what if the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) investigates an evaluation, requesting a second opinion from one of our competitors, for example, and discovers inaccuracies? One serious mistake and an evaluator's work is no longer trusted or accepted. Accreditation in a service industry of this type is based on one's reputation, which is built solely on the quality and presentation of its evaluations over time. Now that we know who does evaluations, let's take a look at how international educational credential evaluation is actually accomplished in the United States.

Methodology and application

The basic methodology begins with an understanding of what a particular educational background qualifies its holder for in the home country. What are the requirements, for example, to be a teacher in Germany? This is the broadest view of evaluation theory, comparing the educational requirements between the two countries to practice a profession or do a job. An evaluator will equate, in a very broad sense, the qualifications in one society to those in the United States. If the bachelor's degree is the requirement to teach in the United States, we will consider that the qualification to teach in Germany has a good chance of being the equivalent of a U.S. bachelor's degree. And this concept is applied to all occupations. (The EU has been mandated to deal with the practical application of this concept since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty.)

Conversely, approaching the question from the opposite direction, once we locate a profession's place in society, we will want to know the formal education required to qualify for that profession. Several factors will be immediately considered: number of years of required study and the age of the applicant are the first questions. The answer to these questions takes us all the way back to primary and secondary school, as well as the post-secondary years. Let's start from the beginning. A good example is the educational system in Russia, which, until recently, had a combined primary and secondary education total of 10 years, while in the United States the primary and secondary school total is 12 years. A close look at recent Russian primary and secondary education indicates a six-day week, versus a five-day week in the United States. The number of hours actually spent in school is approximately the same. We ask the question, does a secondary school diploma serve the same function in Russia as it does in the United States?

The next question to be considered is the student's age. For example, is a 16-year-old Russian secondary school graduate prepared to enter higher education in the United States, alongside 18-year-old students, even if we accept the Russian secondary school diploma as equivalent to a U.S. high school diploma? Some U.S. universities solve this dilemma by accepting the 10-year Russian diploma but requiring that the student be at least 18 years of age before enrolling. Generally speaking, however, secondary school diplomas from all countries are accepted as equivalent to U.S. high school diplomas. The concept that completion of secondary school in other countries basically prepares students for entry-level employment or higher education is the same in the United States. Therefore, the idea that an educational level in other countries represents the same level of its function in U.S. society is the determining factor. This practice applies to academic as well as vocational tracks.

At this point, you, the reader, may be saying, "This is all well and good, but what about curricula and course content?" At this level, it is apparent that secondary education in all countries contains a certain amount of mathematics, science, and general education. In our experience, most secondary school graduates from outside the United States consider their education to be more comprehensive than U.S. secondary education. This attitude appears to be due to the emphasis most foreign cultures place on science and mathematics, compared to the impressions a number of these individuals have of U.S. secondary education. These impressions

The evaluation of international educational credentials in the United States

may or may not be valid when one considers the immense regional, state, and local differences between secondary schools in the United States, as well as the additional general education requirements in U.S. post-secondary education (see following paragraph). At any rate, this great U.S. secondary education spectrum is certainly broad enough to include secondary education from around the world.

As we continue through the post-secondary level of education, the primary consideration for acceptance utilizing applied comparative education methodologies is not necessarily course content or the actual course work completed. In the professions such as education, medicine, and engineering, for example, the licensing boards will determine the amount and quality of required course work for certification purposes. The primary difference between U.S. post-secondary education and foreign education, as mentioned above, is the inclusion of two years of liberal arts and sciences, along with the major area of study, within a four- or five-year degree program in the United States. Once again, the most important consideration is what a degree prepares a person for in that society, coupled with the number of years of post-secondary education involved. In practice, foreign degrees must contain at least the same number of years of post-secondary study as their recommended U.S. equivalents.

However, in post-secondary education in most countries, a student specializes in an academic area from day one and only takes course work relating to the major field of study throughout the degree program. This is not the case until the master's degree level (following the bachelor's degree) in the United States. Indeed, many five-year post-secondary degrees in engineering and the natural sciences from other countries are recognized at the master's degree level in the major field of study in the United States. Therefore, foreign students in these instances are usually prepared in their specialty to enter a specific profession or continue academic studies upon arrival in the United States. On the other hand, their preparation in general education does not go beyond the secondary-school level completed in their home countries. In a perfect world, perhaps a foreign graduate in this situation would be required to study more general education before receiving a U.S. degree equivalent, much as a U.S. graduate may be required to complete more study in the major area in other countries. Be that as it may, and considering the fact that international educational credential evaluation is not an exact science, for all practical purposes, the United States recognizes and accepts foreign degrees and diplomas, regardless of the amount or type of general education completed.

We can now discuss the minimum required standards for foreign education to be accepted in the United States. Foreign education is acceptable if the educational institution in the foreign country is officially accredited (recognized) in that country to grant academic diplomas, degrees, and/or credit. This implies accreditation (recognition) by a ministry of education in most countries, and this accreditation must be verified by the evaluator. Accreditation of a school and its programs by a ministry of education is sufficient to allow a practical comparison and the establishment of a recommended U.S. equivalent. If an institution is not accredited in the home country, no evaluation is possible. The second requirement is that the document presented for evaluation be authentic and not false, which is also the responsibility of the evaluator to ascertain.

The next area of interest is the methodology of the in-depth, applied comparative analysis of a degree program. How is course work completed in a foreign system transferred into the U.S. system of academic years, semesters, credit hours, and grades? The British may take five to six courses for the entire bachelor's degree, while U.S. graduates typically complete forty to fifty courses, each with its own credit hours and grades. The Italians may or may not attend class, but they will take an examination for each course at the end of the academic year. Foreign transcripts must be explained by an evaluator in terms of a U.S. transcript equivalent. Is this possible? Over the years, methods and systems have evolved to render foreign transcripts into U.S. equivalents, including the names of courses, credit hours, and grades.

An academic year in a U.S. institution of higher education is generally a nine-month period from September through May. This year is divided into two semesters of fifteen to sixteen weeks (this paper will employ a fifteen-week semester for demonstration purposes). Additionally, it is possible to enroll in summer school in June and July for up to eight weeks. A course consists of a subject studied within a given semester. A grade in a course is the evaluation reported by the professor at the end of a semester for that course. There is no overall, combined semester or graduation examination that includes all courses taken; each course carries its own autonomous grade, which is determined solely by the professor. The average bachelor's degree is completed in four years with a minimum of 120 semester credits. An explanation of courses, credits, and grades is given below.

A course generally represents two to five credits (also called credit hours). For example, a regular full-time student might enroll in five three-credit courses for a total of 15 semester credits. A credit is typically defined as one class (theory)-hour per week for a 15-week semester, or a total of 15 hours in the classroom per credit. A three-credit course represents three classroom hours per week for 15 weeks, which equals 45 classroom hours per semester. In addition, approximately two hours of individual outside study (homework), such as reading, research, and writing reports, is expected for each hour spent in the classroom. Therefore, each semester credit hour represents three hours per week (one hour theory plus two hours homework) of a student's time for 15 weeks, for a total of 45 hours per credit. A student enrolled in 15 semester credit hours will be committed to a minimum of 45 hours per week for 15 weeks to complete a semester. A way to look at this point mathematically is that full-time students complete one credit per 45- to 50-hour week. Laboratory hours are usually valued at one credit for each three hours spent in the laboratory per week.

The above schematic is presented in order to explain that a formula can be applied to establish U.S. equivalents of course work completed in other systems. Regardless of classroom or homework hours per week, per semester, or per academic year abroad, a U.S. evaluator's task is to determine the U.S. equivalent based on the norm in the United States. In Egypt, for example, students enroll in 60 credits or more per year and cannot understand why they "only" receive 30 credits in the United States. Students from some countries may study up to eight hours per day in class, perhaps six days per week; they also question why they receive "only" 30 credits. U.S. educators, employers, etc. would not understand an evaluation pre-

sented otherwise, since U.S. students are limited in the number of credit hours they are allowed to enroll in per semester. Other than a student with extremely exceptional ability, it would be almost impossible to consistently enroll in 18 or more credit hours per semester and maintain a high grade point average.

This brings us to the last area of applied comparative education -- grades. In the United States, the grade scale is one to 100, with one to 59 failing and 60 to 100 passing. In some instances, one to 69 is failing and 70 to 100 passing.⁴ The higher the percentage, the better the grade. Letter grades also are used to place a student on the one to 100 scale. For example, one to 59 = failure and is represented by "F." The next level is 60 to 69, or "D" (below average); 70 to 79 = "C" (average); 80 to 89 = "B" (above average); and 90 to 100 = "A" (excellent). The overall average of a student's grades is called the grade point average (GPA). We now ask, is it possible for an evaluator to assign U.S. grade equivalents to foreign grades? In Venezuela, the grade scale is from one (lowest grade) to 20 (highest grade), with 13 usually the best grade actually awarded. In India, 35 percent is passing and 60 percent is excellent. How can these be understood within the U.S. framework?

As most educators, beginning with the teacher or professor, know, grading student's work contains a large element of subjectivity. In the United States, at least, the question exists, should the Bell curve be applied in each course, across age groups, levels of education, etc.? Are one year's students the same as another year's students? Without entering this polemic, suffice it to say that transferring foreign grades into U.S. equivalents is definitely not an exact science. However, through the years, informal tracking of foreign students through the U.S. system of education, based on their evaluations, has given some guidance. It is also known that, as opposed to U.S. higher education, which includes a very high percentage of the 18-24 year old population, most countries accept a very limited number into higher education.

Historically, the selection process for higher education in countries such as China and Russia, is notoriously difficult, and, generally speaking, only the better secondary school students with high entrance examination scores enter higher education. Therefore, if one places the grades of these students on a Bell curve in relation to the entire population, they would all be at the upper end, regardless of the grades they actually receive once enrolled in higher education. With this in mind, the benefit of any doubt is given to the foreign student, with the understanding also that grading in most countries is very strict. As a result, considering the selective entrance process into higher education and the high level of difficulty of most grading systems, successful students from these systems are accepted in the United States and are generally assigned grade equivalents from satisfactory (C) to excellent (A) on the U.S. scale. In France, for example, a student may fail a given segment (course) within the comprehensive examination but receive an overall passing grade on the examination, which includes the failed segment. Once again, benefit is given to the student, and the comprehensive examination grade as a minimum is awarded to all segments or courses within the examination. Moreover, if a student has successfully completed all required course work and graduated from a foreign university, no doubt this student has acceptable grades in terms of U.S. equivalents. The establishment of grade equivalents has thus evolved over time through trial

and error and the observance of success rates among transfer students, professionals, and others as they have integrated into American society.

SUMMARY

In summary, we can state that the United States is very generous in its acceptance of foreign education. We have seen that, beginning in 1970, the private sector, along with institutions of higher education, have assumed the responsibility of analyzing foreign educational credentials and establishing U.S. equivalents, with the understanding that applied comparative education is not an exact science. Thereafter, we concluded that the marketplace is capable of recognizing legitimate evaluations and the services that provide them. In terms of standards, we indicated that accredited educational programs from any country are given comparable consideration and assigned equivalents for use in the United States; indeed, educational background has become an integral part of many aspects of U.S. immigration policy. The concept of applied comparative education has been implemented in its broadest sense by first viewing education in its cultural context and comparing educational programs within foreign and U.S. societies. We have also seen how formulae have evolved over time to ascertain U.S. equivalents of foreign academic years, course work, credit hours, and grades by beginning with the broadest common overview of each educational system compared to the U.S. system, and thereafter finding a practical manner in which to present the equivalents.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, this brief introduction to the almost-science of applied comparative education will at least open the door of understanding to those interested in this field. Obviously, there is much room for additional research, not only of different systems of education throughout the world, but of the methodologies employed. The concepts herein presented are solely those of this practitioner. Any given evaluator in the United States will have developed his or her own theories and concepts, which may or may not agree with those in this paper. My heartfelt gratitude goes to Debra Averick for her astute insights into the English language, Yuri Aki-mov for his inspiration, Mario Caruso for his unparalleled expertise, and Steve Berkowitz, my partner, for keeping our business afloat while I'm writing about what we do. Certainly, a great deal could be added to this presentation by any number of experts in our field. Perhaps in the future we will compile an analysis of this profession from all those who have shaped it for the last 30 years; this would surely be a precious volume.

Д. Флетчер

СИСТЕМА ОЦЕНКИ ЗАРУБЕЖНЫХ ДОКУМЕНТОВ ОБ ОБРАЗОВАНИИ В США

В историческом ракурсе представлены теория и практика признания и установления эквивалентности в США зарубежных документов об образовании. В основном рассматривается система, сформировавшаяся в последние 30 лет, когда эти вопросы стали решаться в основном не на государственном уровне.
