

Evaluating International Credentials: Problems of Transfer Credit

Part II

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[Editor's Note: Part I of this article, which appeared in the Winter '88 issue of World Education News & Reviews, focused on the theoretical aspects of and conflicts which can arise from the evaluation of foreign transfer credit. The second and concluding installment is concerned with the practical issues of determining quality of performance and the amounts of work, in terms of U.S. credits, successfully completed.]

In order to assess foreign education for transfer credit properly, the credential evaluator must understand institutional practices. There are three separate evaluations which can be made in this assessment: course credit value; grading; and the establishment of equivalencies.

Course Credit Value

Defining a semester hour is integral to a proper evaluation. A semester hour is defined as one 50-minute period of lecture or recitation for a duration of 15 weeks, totaling 750 minutes a term per credit. Laboratory and practicum work is often quantified as two, three, or four such 50-minute hours for each credit.

When dealing with systems which provide this information, decision-making is relatively easy. Exceptions or difficulties may arise when a system provides many classroom hours per week which would result in a great deal of credit if the straight arithmetic

formula is applied. Generally, this is due to a quantification of student study responsibility different from that used in the United States. In giving orientation to new students, we often tell them that for each hour of lecture or recitation spent in class, approximately two hours of preparation are necessary. Thus, a student in the United States who takes 15 credits is expected to spend about 30 hours per week in preparation for a total time commitment of 45 hours per week.

In systems where the hours noted on academic documents appear excessive, it probably is true that much less time outside of class is required. Whether because library collections are limited or books are unavailable in the language of instruction, there usually is an explanation for the additional classroom hours spent each week. One way to deal with this is always to apply your institution's maximum term credit load for the highest number of credits allowed and never exceed this for any given semester's transfer credit. Also apply the average semester credit load (usually the total number of credits required for a bachelor's degree divided by eight--the number of semesters in which a full-time student "normally" obtains a degree). Thus, for a 120-credit bachelor's degree program, the average semester load would be 15 credits while for a 128-credit program, it would be 16 credits. By using these two guidelines, the number of total credits granted will be rational for your own institution.

For example, a student from a Taiwanese university presents

SPECIAL REPORT

a transcript which indicates 24 credits completed in a semester. If you apply your institution's maximum semester credit hours, let us say 18, you would allow only 18 of the 24 credits in transfer. Whether you discount eight credits, or apply a percentage factor to each credit, depends on your institution's policies. The application of a percentage factor should not be determined by a single semester's credits but rather upon a calculation based on the total credits required for the degree in your institution, divided by the number of credits the foreign institution requires. Again, using Taiwan, in a four year bachelor's program, 160 credits may be required for the degree, while U.S. institution "A" requires 120. $120/160 = 75\%$. Thus, .75 becomes the number by which the Taiwanese credits are multiplied in order to arrive at "U.S.-like" credits. The 24 credits discussed above, when multiplied by the .75 factor, reduce to 18 semester credits. If your institution has a maximum semester credit load of 17, you would have to consider denying one additional credit.

The process is complicated further when either the number of hours indicated for each course is undifferentiated as to lecture and recitation on the one hand, and laboratory or practicum on the other; or worse, when no hours are given. In the first case, it would be wise to obtain a copy of the syllabus for the courses which usually have laboratory or practica and to determine whether "preparation time"--usually study periods not normally credited in the United States--are included. In the absence of these data, a good guess, within the context of the institutional guidelines above, is the best that you can do.

The real trouble comes when you obtain a "transcript" which does not contain any indication of hours. This is often true, for example, with the British system. When this occurs, the "average year" concept frequently is applied. Here the assumption is made that a full-time student is a full-time student, regardless of the educational system. This is in keeping with the earlier discussion of applying maxima to semester credits based upon institutional standards. If a transcript is received with a notation of five courses being taken for an academic

year, this approach would result in the assigning of six semester hours to each course, as a full year would be 30 semester hours. As it is possible that the courses in the foreign system are weighted, such as one meeting twice as frequently as another, this might not be completely accurate. Still, without a syllabus review--a valuable but often impractical, time-consuming process for most admissions officers--this is the best one can do. If an error occurs, to the students' disadvantage, you will be notified soon enough.

Grading

Once we have established what is transferable in terms of academic level (as discussed in Part I) and a decision has been made as to how many credits it is worth, the next issue to wrestle with is whether the quality of performance is sufficiently high to be eligible for transfer. At the undergraduate level, most U.S. institutions require a grade of "C" (or its foreign equivalent) in order to be transferable.

Three issues come into play here. The first is the determination of whether there is a "D" equivalent grade in a particular educational system. Quality concerns beyond this are more related to admissions decision-making rather than to eligibility for the transference of credit. In the U.S. system a "C" may be defined as a quality level minimally required to obtain a degree, but not the lowest passing grade. When viewing foreign systems, we frequently find that the lowest passing grade is also the minimum grade average required to graduate--there are no lower passing grades. An attempt to determine the "C" equivalent by ascertaining grade distribution may not be valid, therefore, as many foreign educational systems do not use the upper end of the grade scale, except in rare circumstances. It is believed that the intent of the U.S. system is that the "C" represents the grade average required to meet the standards for graduation. Therefore, this criterion should be applied to foreign systems, both for the determination of eligibility for transfer of credit and for the calculation of a grade point average. You should not be troubled by the fact that a system does not have a "D" equivalent.

On occasion, we will see documents from a gradeless system. Great Britain, for example, may retain grades internally, but rarely publishes them in external documents. Applying the definition for a "C" equivalent grade noted above, all courses listed may be considered as having been completed at the appropriate quality standard for transfer credit consideration. The only time quality can be seen is at the end of the program when the degree or diploma may have a quality statement. Interim results simply do not carry quality indications.

The last grade-related issue is interim versus final results. Here the Indian model comes to mind, and again, systemic intent applies. Grades received on yearly mark sheets are official and represent the level of performance for those courses taken during that academic period. Final degree results may be different from the interim grades: it is these yearly results which relate performance to specific courses.

Establishing Equivalencies

The last major issue is the determination of course equivalencies. Very often, U.S. courses are accepted for course-equivalent credit based on faith as much as on any other criterion. Courses which sound like those offered at your institution are granted course-equivalent credit based on the title alone. Certainly this is done when admissions or registrar offices perform the transfer credit evaluation. Even when faculty assign course-equivalent credit, and students meet face-to-face with the advisor, the discussion frequently is pro forma in nature.

The review of foreign documents for course-equivalent credit rarely is done on this basis. Often, faculty members freeze when faced with foreign documents. What advice can you, as a foreign credential analyst, give? How can you assist in, or perhaps even perform, this type of evaluation?

If we could obtain complete syllabi and examination papers for each course taken by a student, and if we had all the time in the world, we, faculty or administrator, could evaluate for course equivalency with greater certainty.

However, these documents, in English, usually are not available, and we certainly would not have the time to wade through them even if they were. Yet, this would be optimum, and we really ought to have these documents--especially the more readily available syllabi--in the file.

On occasion, evaluators face situations where students cannot obtain their syllabi, but can get them for earlier (or even later) years. Are these acceptable? The only way to respond intelligently is to determine whether there have been changes in the educational system (relatively easy to learn) or in the specific curriculum (more difficult to learn). Without this information, you can only make educated guesses.

In the face of the uncertainty noted above, two possibilities exist, both of which are rife with potential inequity. The first, and more common, is the interview. Faculty and administrators involved in this process can learn a great deal about foreign educational systems and specific curricula by discussing matters with students. However, very often the ability of students to sell themselves and their educational background--usually a function of their proficiency in English--is the determining factor, not the substance of their prior academic experience. If you can separate fact from "used car salesmanship", this method of certification can work very well.

While there is a hesitancy even to mention the other process, for the sake of completeness it must be done. All too frequently, institutions apply the "time gap syndrome." This involves withholding transfer credit until a student has passed the "next level" course with an appropriate grade. Such a process discriminates against students in two ways: it disadvantages students who have not recently completed their prior education, requiring them to have unusually retentive memories in order to recall coursework taken years ago; and it requires students to take courses--the "next level"--in which they have no current interest, thus prolonging their education (by taking extra coursework) in an attempt to shorten it (by obtaining transfer credit).

Clearly, there is no easy answer, but the review of syllabi coupled with student interviews would serve all parties best. As a fallback, the assignment of elective credit, at least initially, would allow the student to commence study with a fairly good idea of the length of time required to obtain the degree. Specific course equivalent evaluations, then, could be limited to those subjects for which evaluations must be completed -- major or minor, or general education requirements.

The complexities of the foreign transfer evaluation process are obvious and are exacerbated by inability, at times, to come up with a rational response to a problem. You must be clear about what it is you are certifying--what students know or where they learned it, or a combination of both. While using equality of treatment as a yardstick, you have to maintain a position of flexibility, especially in situations where there are no applicable guidelines available. Be willing to try some new ways of dealing with the problems.

However, as the bottom line in transfer evaluation is its academic nature, always involve faculty in the decision-making process. You can gain the confidence of faculty by such inclusion, enhanced by having an academically valid reason for every decision you make. A good way to look at the process is to divide it into two distinct areas: administrative decision-making (academic level, quality level, number of credits) and academic decision-making (course equivalencies, waivers of requirements). By mediating these processes through institutional policies and practices and by maintaining a flexible stance with respect to potential anomalies, both your institution and its student body will be well served.

(Editor's Note: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of World Education Services, Inc.)