



How to Obtain Authentic International Academic Credentials

The single most important step in credential evaluation and international student admissions is ensuring the authenticity of educational credentials. In this article we share the practices and experiences of World Education Services (WES) in obtaining valid international academic credentials.

Since WES published "Forged Educational Credentials: A Sorry Tale" some 25 years ago, a great deal has changed. International student mobility has grown by leaps and bounds and now, through the advent of the Internet, we have much greater access to information on foreign educational systems, institutions and programs. Furthermore, electronic communication allows us to correspond quickly and efficiently with academic institutions anywhere in the world.

The Facts

The vast majority of international students who come to the United States do so at great expense. Their aim is to further their education and earn the skills and qualifications that will help them succeed professionally. It takes a great deal of grit and determination on the part of these students to meet all the eligibility requirements for admission to U.S. institutions of higher education.

Among the thousands of well-qualified foreign applicants to U.S. institutions, there exists a small minority who will attempt to gain admission by using fraudulent documents. By instituting rigorous documentation policies and enforcing them, institutions can select qualified candidates, minimize fraud and protect the integrity of their admissions process.

If students request them, today most institutions abroad are willing and able to send transcripts directly to U.S. institutions. Thanks to the widespread use of computers, institutions can prepare and transmit transcripts far more easily than ever before.

What Constitutes an Official Transcript?

In the United States, an official transcript is one that is received directly from the issuing institution. The mode of delivery may be by mail or by an approved electronic means. An official transcript must bear the appropriate signatures and seal of the institution that issued it. It is up to the receiver of the transcript to determine whether a document should be accepted as official for the purpose of admission to, or employment at, an institution of higher education. Moreover, documents which may have been in the hands of students are considered not official.

A Systematic Approach

The standard practice among U.S. institutions is to send official academic transcripts directly from one institution to another. The direct transmission of academic transcripts ensures that institutions

receive authentic documents. By adopting a similar method for receiving international academic credentials, institutions can help ensure the integrity of the documents they receive while also reducing the risk of mistakenly accepting altered or fraudulent documents.

In detecting fraudulent international credentials, common practice has relied mainly on the ability of international credential evaluators to scrutinize each document for obvious errors or discrepancies. This approach is not only unreliable but it is also impractical because institutions receiving a large and diverse volume of documents do not always have the necessary staff resources to closely inspect each and every credential. The only way we can effectively eliminate fraud is by adopting a new system that ensures that only authentic documents are received. Therefore, instead of trying to detect false documents after they have been submitted, we must prevent them from being submitted in the first place.

How to Recognize International Educational Credentials

Credentials are acceptable only when they are issued by authorized educational institutions. Before accepting a document as valid, the following questions must be addressed:

1. Does the institution exist?
2. Is it recognized or accredited in its home country?
3. Does the institution offer the program that is indicated on the document?
4. Does the candidate's educational chronology support the credential in question?

1. Determining the Existence of Institutions

Determining the existence of an academic institution is the first step in accepting a credential and the simplest way of detecting and eliminating documents obtained from degree mills. Only credentials issued by institutions that are listed in authoritative sources, such as the website of the ministry of education of the country in question, a contemporary edition of the [International Handbook of Universities](#) or the [Commonwealth Universities Yearbook](#) should be recognized.

Because non-university institutions are not usually included in the major reference publications one has to dig a bit deeper and check information published by the educational authorities of the country in question or in other publications published by third parties to verify their legitimacy.

Important Rule: *A catalog or brochure published by an institution itself can be a useful source for additional information, but should never be relied upon as the only source of information about the existence or status of a particular institution.*

2. Recognition of Institutions

Only credentials issued by recognized institutions may be used for admission or transfer credit in the United States. Institutions that receive international applicants must establish that the credentials that are submitted to them were obtained at duly recognized institutions in their countries of origin.

Every country has laws and regulations that govern the establishment and recognition of academic institutions within its jurisdiction. It is essential that credential evaluators be familiar with those regulations and how they are applied. While public (state) institutions are generally recognized, the status and recognition of private institutions can vary depending on the country. The following are examples that illustrate the rules that apply in different parts of the world.

- Private institutions are allowed to operate but cannot label themselves "university" (e.g. India).
- Private universities may be allowed to offer academic programs but without the authority to award recognized degrees (e.g. France).
- Institutions are physically located in one country but they are accredited in a third country (e.g. American University of Paris which has U.S. regional accreditation).
- Specific programs and degrees are recognized but the institutions themselves are not recognized (e.g. Mexico).
- Newly recognized institutions may have issued credentials before they were recognized (former communist countries in Eastern & Central Europe).

Online and distance university programs have become very prevalent in the past decade and enroll thousands of students worldwide in their programs. Because the Internet is unregulated, anyone can set up and market courses, programs and even entire online institutions. It is absolutely critical to track down and establish the status of online or distance education providers in their country of origin.

3. Programs of Study

It is important to establish whether a given course of study is offered at a particular institution by checking the major publications, such as the International Handbook of Universities or the Commonwealth Universities Yearbook. Many institutions maintain comprehensive websites that list and describe the programs they offer. It is important to use up-to-date reference materials because programs of study can change as institutions update old programs or add new ones.

4. Educational Chronology

The age of a student and the chronology of his or her educational background must be compatible with the credential under consideration. For instance, a student should have earned a high school diploma before being admitted into an undergraduate program and he or she should have earned a bachelor's degree before starting a graduate program.

Setting Up-to-Date Document Requirements

Today more and more institutions all over the world will send transcripts directly to institutions in the United States if students themselves request that they do so. This is a reflection of the increasing international mobility of students, the widespread use of computers and advances made in student record management all over the world. There are still countries that are not equipped to send transcripts on demand but their numbers continue to decline with the rapidly expanding use of information and communication technology in many countries

To ensure maximum and timely compliance, candidates must be given clear instructions on the documents that they must submit, how to submit them, and all the deadlines that apply. To avoid confusion, instructions for students must be written in language that they can understand easily using terminology that is familiar to them. For example, the term 'transcript' can mean a syllabus in some countries and what is called a 'transcript' in the United States is known in India as a 'mark sheet' or 'statement of marks'. To help them obtain the appropriate credentials, students must be given clear instructions together with a transcript request form that they can use to have their documents sent by their home institutions.

To view WES's document submission requirements by country, please visit <<http://www.wes.org/required/>>

How to Verify the Authenticity of Documents that were not Received Directly from an Institution

1. If an institution is unable to send transcripts directly, copies of the documents submitted by the student should be sent for verification to the institution that issued them.
2. Verification requests should be sent to the official address of the institution. Before sending a document for verification, it is important to check the address to ensure that it is the same as the one that appears in published sources and not rely solely on the address that is printed on the document itself.
3. Letters asking for verification should be addressed to the title of the officer who issued and signed the document (e.g. "Controller of Examinations," "Director of Studies" or "Registrar") and not to a particular individual.

Sending Documents for Verification

To expedite the verification of documents, the request and relevant documents should be sent by fax whenever possible. Replies by fax or e-mail are acceptable, provided that the name, e-mail address, or fax number of the sender can be traced back to the institution's website or in one of the published authoritative references

Acceptable Verifications of Authenticity

Documents must be verified as authentic by authorized officials at the institutions that issued them. Verifications issued by embassies, consulates, public notaries or other officials that are outside of the academic institution are not acceptable.

How Long Does Verification Take?

The time that it takes to obtain responses from institutions abroad varies by country and institution. Some institutions can take several weeks or even months to reply while others respond quickly, in a matter of days or weeks. The turnaround time has been decreasing steadily due to the widespread use of fax and email, but increasingly institutions require the payment of a verification fee. The payment can be difficult if the institution accepts only checks in the local currency drawn on a local bank. In any event, students must be advised to submit their applications early to allow for the necessary verification.

Verification Fees

Many institutions in different countries require the payment of a small fee in local currency before they verify a document. As it is impractical to issue checks for small amounts in different foreign currencies, students should be the ones to arrange to have their documents sent directly to the U.S. institution that they wish to attend.

Translations

Documents are most often issued in the official language of the country of origin. Translations vary greatly in quality, whether they are done in the United States or in the home country, even when they are done by professional translators. Unless issued in English directly by the academic institutions themselves, documents translated into English must be submitted together with the original language documents as issued by the institutions.

Documents in English

In many countries where English is not the primary language institutions will issue transcripts in English for students who are bound for the United States. Students from those countries should be required to have their official transcripts issued in English by the institutions that they attended. Not only is it more economical for the students to obtain their documents in English from their institutions, the translation is likely to be more accurate as well. Transcripts issued in English by institutions themselves are official and there is no need to request documents in the original language.

How to Detect Fraudulent Documents

Forgeries and Altered Documents

The most effective and reliable way of guarding against fraudulent documents is to adhere to strict document requirements and to insist on receiving credentials in the appropriate form directly from the institutions that issue them.

Documents received from applicants themselves must be closely scrutinized. If a document contains any of the red flags listed below it should not be accepted but sent back to the institution that issued it for verification:

- The grades are very high by the standards of a system where grades are typically clustered at the lower end.
- The format of the document is unusual for the institution or the system of education.
- The document contains inconsistent typeface.
- The document contains spelling errors.
- The document is marked as "confidential" and yet it is submitted by an applicant.
- The transcript or diploma is a colored photocopy.
- Lines, words, numbers, etc. appear crooked on the page.
- Lines, words, numbers, etc. are missing from the use of whiteout.
- The document is not signed and/or sealed.

These are obvious indicators that a document may not be authentic, but as counterfeiters now use sophisticated computers and printers, the documents that they produce can be quite flawless and difficult to detect. Only strict standards for the submission and receipt of academic credentials can help eliminate fraudulent documents.

Degree/Diploma Mills

If the first step in verifying the authenticity of an academic credential is to determine the existence and status of the issuing institution, documents from degree mills are, for the most part, easy to identify.

Degree mills are shady outfits that sell degrees and transcripts that are not backed up by appropriate study or examinations. Although they usually give themselves names that sound legitimate, degree mills tend to operate from mail drops usually staffed by a skeleton crew of just one or two people, and they are never found in any legitimate publication or website. They are quite prevalent on the Internet where they pose as distance-learning institutions. Many degree mills claim to be 'accredited' by one or more fictitious 'national,' 'international,' 'worldwide' or 'global' accrediting agencies. Some degree mill operators have been able to acquire URLs ending in <.edu> that they try to use as proof that they are legitimate academic institutions. **Under no circumstances should the URL suffix <.edu> be taken as a mark of accreditation or official recognition.**

Documents issued by 'universities' with addresses that are office suites or P.O. Box numbers, and whose existence cannot be verified in any authoritative independent publication, should be rejected out-of-hand. If there is any doubt, the document should be sent to the educational authorities in the home country asking them to verify the existence and status of the institution in question.

Establishing the existence and status of an institution must be the first step in accepting any educational document. If this is done diligently, documents from degree mills are easy to detect. The most comprehensive online listing of degree mills can be found at < <http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/unaccredited.html> >. However, it should be noted that while this list maintained by the Oregon Office of Degree Authorization is a very useful resource, it is by no means exhaustive; new degree mills are created on an almost daily basis. Therefore, the best way to identify a degree mill is by conducting the necessary research oneself.