



COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF STANDARDS TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF CREDENTIAL EVALUATORS

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As a credential evaluator in the U.S., I understand the responsibility that rests in my decision-making and accountability to the institution, to ensure that each prospective student is intellectually prepared and officially ready to embark on the level of education he or she intends to pursue. The world is a small place with quickly evolving global connectivity platforms resulting in increased mobility of data and people. With a robust ecosystem hosting and sharing important data to approved stakeholders, the migration of people and process of integration can be smooth and risk-free. There is a dire need for this ecosystem- to bridge the gaps that arise during the transfer, transition and welcome of patrons who become consumers and contribute to the economic and social development of the areas to which they migrate. This transfer of knowledge and (human) resource is essential for each nation to thrive, adapt and advance.

Education is an integral part of transformation. To grow, we must know. No nation around the world can flourish without education, research, and informed action. People in decision making places within consulates, educational and research institutions, private sectors, homeland security, among others, must uphold the values of their organization and vet the intent, background and qualification of engaged patrons for mutual gratification and organizational and national security. Education is needed to develop future leaders, visionaries and inventors. Our society, globally, emphasizes the value in education and employers precisely hire and compensate employees for their qualifications. With education being the epicenter of most individuals lives and livelihood, the depth and breadth of its value cannot be undermined and underestimated. People (must) have the right to have access to their own credentials and utilize it for personal growth and development as needed. We as higher education professionals must be aware of the unfortunate limitations some individuals around the world face to access their own credentials due to reasons beyond their control. However, for students and institutions that can obtain and provide information, we must leverage this opportunity for a much greater cause which is Global Citizenship.

As part of my responsibility on this white paper, I must ‘develop a comprehensive list of standards that need to be established to address the needs of credential evaluators’ within the ecosystem. Thus, I am going to bring to light a few topics that I believe need careful consideration to give students and institutions the ability to request, authorize, process, send, and obtain authentic academic information, from the perspective of the institution receiving the credential. This list of standards is by no means exhaustive and topics listed below are subjectively selected solely based on experience and existing knowledge.

The recommended standards are as follows:

- I. Name convention
- II. Date of birth format
- III. Format and content of transmission
- IV. Grading scale at home institution
- V. When will the official document be available?
- VI. Recognition
- VII. Credential equivalency
- VIII. Accessibility to supplemental information

I will address each one in depth here below:

I. Name convention:

To authorize the request for an official document, the document owner must be identified. Name is the primary characteristic that would identify the document holder, followed by date of birth. The person requesting the document, should have to provide their name in a format that would be universally accepted and understood. This is particularly important since so many different name conventions exist around the world: single name (with no last or no first name), multiple names, “LNU” or “FNU” on some documents not others, special characters and symbols and unique spellings. Besides these, we can also expect other discrepancies because current name may be different from maiden or preferred names. We must identify a standard name convention and recommend all users to apply the same convention for consistency and utmost accuracy.

My recommendation would be to mirror the name standards maintained by SEVIS. Currently SEVIS (Student Exchange Visitor Information System), a program managed by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) in the U.S., mandates name standards for issuance of the I-20 (Certificate of Eligibility for non-immigrant status) required to obtain non-immigrant visa to enter the U.S. According to SEVIS, there are great benefits to maintaining these standards: Comply with the standards governing machine-readable travel documents, Convert foreign names into a standardized format, Search for individuals more reliably, Improve the accuracy of name matching with other government systems, Prevent the entry of unacceptable characters for names.ⁱ This standard will meet the data integrity checks to authorize access to request and release only the correct information for the said individual.

II. Date of birth format:

Another key identifier of the document owner is the date of birth. Around the world there are several different date formats that are generally accepted. To ensure the accuracy of the record, a standardized format for the date of birth information must be adapted. It would be ideal if the date and year were written numerically and the first three letters of the month in words in between the two numeric values separated by hyphens. For example, 06-FEB-1988 would be the preferred format as opposed to 02/06/1988 or 06/02/1988. Furthermore, we must also consider different calendar years in countries such as Nepal, China and Saudi Arabia among others. This may cause some discrepancy on biographical information as it appears on the academic credentials as they are issued in the home country. A calendar comparison chart must be made available by the ministry of higher education or a government entity to equate to the month and year on the Gregorian calendar- the most widely used calendar in the world.ⁱⁱ

III. Format and content of transmission:

It is critical that credential evaluators expect and receive the correct documentation within each country whether it is the transcript, statement of marks, marksheet, grade report, study plan, certificate or diploma. This is one of the most important aspects of an International Credential Evaluator’s job- to accept, authenticate and interpret a credential. ECE has published an excellent resource that specifies different credentials awarded within each country as a resource

for individuals seeking official external evaluations of their credentials.ⁱⁱⁱ By this means, we would also prepare evaluators to know what to expect. Another recommendation would be to obtain sample credentials from the ministry of higher education for all participating countries, and understand the key authenticating indicators such as issuing organization or department, stamps, seals, signatures, watermarks, etc. This is particularly essential since the transmission would be electronic and the authenticity cannot be verified by touch. A relevant note here would be to understand the educational level the acquired degree gives access to as well as the qualification required prior to obtaining the said degree at the home country. This would enable the evaluator to interpret the timeline and other nuances that may contradict the logical succession of events.

IV. Grading scale at home institution:

This information should be of utmost importance to a credential evaluator since typically a decision follows how this information is interpreted. The decision made could allow or deny access to further education. Understanding grading scales at all levels, within a specific country, can allow the evaluator to apply this information in a logical and comparative fashion to the grading scale in the country in which the evaluation is being conducted. The evaluator must take into consideration all information available and be prepared to evaluate a credential with limited information. An evaluator can expect to see transcripts with marks, points, percentages, ranks, credits, hours and more. How this information is construed at the home institution will enable the evaluator to interpret it fairly and accurately. One thing to keep in mind is that the evaluator must be consistent in his/her interpretation and evaluation of the foreign transcript. The grading scale comparison/conversion must be retained for future evaluations. It is also recommended to maintain an archive of different academic credentials from different countries to reference when in doubt.

V. When will the official document be available?

Something to consider in efforts to assist the evaluator and student, reduce frustration and increase quick turnaround, would be the timing of dissemination of official documents. Annual exams, bi-annual exams (terms), final exams, graduation dates, school start and end dates and public holidays are important dates to consider within each country when requesting documents. This knowledge will enable the evaluator to process further and make admission decisions with pending documents, and permit the student to apply ahead of time with the understanding that pending documents must be submitted when available. This shows trust and commitment towards the applicant on the part of the evaluator and a responsibility to honor the provision on the part of the student.

Credentials earned in the past must be readily accessible. Credentials being earned and in progress may be submitted later. The evaluator must also develop an internal process to track applicants with pending documents. Action must be taken if the required documents are not provided in the reasonable time frame. Evaluators must clearly specify what documents would be required now and/or later. (Refer to credential information required by country as suggested in

the ‘Format and content of transmission’ section.) Evaluators must also consider the student status such as freshman, transfer, visiting, graduate, etc. when requiring specific credentials.

VI. Recognition

My recommendation would be to allow in this ecosystem only credentials from approved or recognized institutions. This would eliminate the need for an evaluator to verify later if the credential received was from an approved institution or not. Furthermore, this ecosystem must contain and transmit only authentic, valid and legitimate credentials which would be evaluated and used as a basis to grant admission. Credentials obtained from unapproved institutions are not eligible for transfer credit at an approved institution and consequently limits access to higher education. Hence, including credentials obtained at unapproved institutions in the ecosystem would be meaningless. To verify the status of an institution, local official accrediting bodies or the ministry of education must be contacted to provide a list of approved/recognized and unapproved institutions within the country, to be maintained (or excluded) in this database.

VII. Credential equivalency

Another important decision an evaluator makes is determining what the credential obtained by the student and received through the ecosystem is equivalent to in the country the evaluation is being conducted. Evaluators should have access to information on all available credentials at all levels (secondary and post-secondary {vocational, college and university}) offered at the home country (where the qualification was earned) and what the qualification earned gives access to. This information must be compiled and pre-determined to match credentials at the country where the evaluation is being conducted, for standardizing the evaluation process and for consistency.

To avoid discrepancies in interpretation by institutions and evaluators within each country, it would be useful to have a ‘central resource center’ to maintain a universal equivalency table for each country. This resource should also be made accessible to all institutions and evaluators within the participating countries. The information housed in the ‘central resource center’ should be decided by unanimous agreement of all senior and experienced credential evaluators within each country. This would be an excellent opportunity for collaboration and give all the privilege to work together towards a common goal. This would also enable institutions to have a fair chance at providing input to what would be considered national standards. Once a credential is received from within the ecosystem, it would be up to the institution to comply or not comply with the national standard. This national standard of credential equivalency can also be taken into consideration when accepting credentials outside the ecosystem or crediting credentials beyond its pre-determined equivalency.

VIII. Accessibility to supplemental information

Often valuable information such as duration of study, title of degree obtained, date degree was awarded, grading scales (old and new), descriptions, attendance policy, enrollment type (full time or part time), academic calendar, lecture and lab hours, backlogs, comprehensive exams, internships, can be obtained from the diploma supplement, cover or back page of the transcript or

on the fine prints on supporting documents. Developers must ensure that when available, this information is also retained and transmitted in the ecosystem.

In conclusion, there are a lot of important parameters to consider before authorizing transmission of student data within this ecosystem. Data integrity would be the at the fore front. As I mentioned in my proposal, having access to authentic student data from around the world through this ecosystem will be extremely beneficial for all International Credential Evaluators and the greater university communities including the registrar's office who are responsible for transfer credit equivalency, graduate school who must ensure undergraduate degree equivalency and executive staff who are responsible for compliance at all levels. With the involvement of reputed organizations and partners such as ECE, TAICEP, NACES, AACRAO and NAFSA in the U.S. and several others globally, this ecosystem will be revolutionary around the world, helping individuals connect with their alma maters and access their credentials within the clicks of a just a few buttons. This will also enable smooth mobility and stress-free acclimation of people within new cultures as they embark on a new educational milestone for personal and social prosperity. Most importantly, this effort will contribute towards empowering and promoting the universal goals of camaraderie, inclusion and global citizenship.

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- ⁱ https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/SEVIS%20Name%20Standards_0.pdf
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.timeanddate.com/calendar/julian-gregorian-switch.html>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.ece.org/SiteMain/24/34>