QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EVALUATION AND RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN CREDENTIALS

ABSTRACT

Provincially mandated credential assessment services within Canada have collaborated to develop quality assurance principles and mechanisms for recognizing foreign educational credentials. The quality assurance framework specifies the standards and criteria for good practice in the assessment of foreign credentials. Provincially mandated assessment services that adhere to these quality assurance criteria are eligible for membership in The Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada (the Alliance). This quality assurance framework has the potential to be refined and expanded to include a broad range of organizations involved in foreign credential recognition.

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There are currently five provincially mandated assessment services that are members of the Alliance: The International Qualifications Assessment Service (Alberta, Saskatchewan and the North West Territories), the International Credential Evaluation Service (British Columbia), the Service des évaluations comparatives (Quebec), World Education Services (Ontario) and Academic Credentials Assessment Service (Manitoba). The Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials acts as Secretariat to the Alliance, supporting and facilitating the work of the Alliance and the collaboration of these member services.

The Alliance was developed in recognition of the fundamental importance of promoting – within and across Canada – transparent, fair and credible foreign credential assessment practices. The main policy objectives of the Alliance are to:

- Give assurance to clients and organizations that use credential assessments (e.g., employers, professional licensing bodies, regulatory bodies, immigration officers, and educational institutions) that assessment services that are members of the Alliance follow quality criteria and standards;
- Ensure fair and equitable treatment for all clients;
- Improve the portability of credential assessments and facilitate the recognition of quality services across Canada;
- Promote the consistent application of fair and credible assessment standards across Canada; and
- Provide guidance in the establishment of new services within Canada.

On an international level, the Alliance quality assurance framework is consistent with, and reinforces, international norms of good practice that have been developed in other jurisdictions. Most notably, the Alliance assessment standards are closely aligned with the "Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications," which was developed by the European Network of Information Centres (ENICs) and adopted as a Recommendation by the Committee of the UNESCO/COE Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region.

Several key principles guide the Alliance's assessment standards, including:

- Assessment should be performed without any form of racial, religious, political, or sexual discrimination.
- Holders of foreign qualifications should have adequate access, upon request, to an assessment of their foreign qualifications.
- The procedures and criteria used in the assessment of foreign credentials should be clear, rational, and reliable. The recommended methodology aims to make assessment procedures consistent and clear and to ensure all applicants receive a fair consideration of their application.
- Procedures for the evaluation of foreign credentials should be periodically reviewed with a view to increasing clarity and eliminating, when possible, requirements leading to undue complications in the procedure.
- The general approach to foreign credentials and how they are compared to a particular system should take into account the diversity of educational traditions in the world.
- The same basic methodology should apply whether the statement is for:
  - general employment purposes
  - entry into secondary and postsecondary institutions
  - entry into a regulated occupation.
- Assessment criteria for the evaluation of foreign credentials have been elaborated with a view to increasing consistency and with the objective of treating similar cases in a reasonably similar manner across Canada. It is recognized nevertheless that a margin of flexibility in making decisions is essential and that decisions may vary according to the provincial/territorial system of education.

In addition to these principles, the Alliance abides by several guidelines related to assessment procedures and criteria.

General procedures

The evaluation of a foreign credential should:

a. situate the credential within the framework of the education system to which it belongs, taking into account its relative place and function compared to other credentials in the same system;

b. identify the level and type of credential that is most comparable to the foreign credential in the system of the country where recognition is sought, while taking into account the purpose for which recognition is sought;

c. determine whether similarities between foreign and domestic credentials are sufficient for recognition.

The evaluation should take into account past practices in similar cases in order to ensure consistency in recognition practice. Past practice should be recorded in an inventory and used as a guideline for making consistent decisions. Substantial changes of practice should be justified and recorded. It is important to note that assessment decisions are based on the information available to the assessment service at the time the assessment is performed. Further information may result in the modification of the assessment decision.

Processing time and delay

The Alliance's guidelines recommend that the time normally required to process evaluations be specified. The total time is determined once all relevant information has been provided by applicants and/or educational institutions. In cases of substantial delay, the assessment service should inform applicants of the reasons for the delay and, if possible, the time required to review the credential.

Information requirements

The assessment process should provide standardized information on the procedures and criteria for the evaluation of foreign credentials. This information should automatically be given to all applicants and to persons making preliminary inquiries about the evaluation of credentials, including the following:

a. the required documentation and requirements related to the authentication and translation of documents

b. the role of professional associations and educational institutions in the recognition process

c. the status of the assessment statement

d. the approximate time needed to process an application

e. the fees charged

f. the process for appealing decisions

The responsibility for providing information is shared by the assessment service, the applicant, and the educational institutions where the qualifications in question were earned. The assessment service is responsible for providing the applicant with complete information regarding its requirements for credential assessment, as well as for maintaining a system of information on educational systems. The applicant is responsible for providing documents and information required for the assessment, while educational institutions are responsible for providing information about credentials earned at the institutions and other relevant information, such as course content, program structure, etc.

Fees

The Alliance's guidelines note that the fee for the evaluation of foreign credentials should be kept as low as possible. When possible, special measures for persons with limited income and other disadvantaged groups should be considered so that no applicant is prevented from seeking assessment or recognition of his or her foreign credentials because of the cost involved.

Translation

The guidelines recommend that translation be limited to key documents, and that original documents, including the titles of foreign qualifications, should be provided in the original language.

Document requirements

Original and official documents or certified copies of documents are normally required for evaluation. If photocopies are accepted, this should be clearly indicated on the assessment certificate. Moreover, the evaluation requires documents that clearly indicate successful completion of an academic year; educational documents that indicate failed or unsuccessful completion of an academic year or program should not be considered.

Provision has been made for some exceptional cases, such as for refugees and others who are unable to document their qualifications for good reasons. In these cases, sworn statements before a legal authority may be accepted in lieu of full documentation.

The guidelines recommend that all submitted documents be examined for evidence of tampering or misrepresentation and that original documents and certified proofs of academic achievements be examined by evaluation officers to verify their authenticity. The presence of fraudulent or altered documents are grounds for refusal to issue an evaluation report. A verification by the issuing institution or authority in the country of origin should be conducted if it is suspected that documents have been altered or falsified. If it is found that documents have been falsified, it is recommended that no further evaluation be carried out.

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Status of institutions and programs

In view of the wide diversity of educational institutions, the assessment guidelines recommend that the status of a credential not be established without taking into account the status of the program and institution where the credential was earned. Moreover, credit should only be considered for education attained through recognized institutions. A recognized institution is one that has been formally recognized by a country's competent authorities and/or that is widely accepted by other institutions and agencies inside or outside a country. Finally, a credential should be recognized only if the related program is also recognized by a competent authority. Recognition of an educational institution does not guarantee the recognition of all credentials issued by that institution.

Purpose and outcome of assessment

The assessment guidelines note that a credential earned from an educational institution should have an evaluation outcome consistent with the same credential earned at the same educational institutions at the same point in time.

Moreover, credential evaluation should take into account the purpose for which recognition is sought, and the evaluation statement should clearly indicate the purpose for which the statement is valid. Depending on practice, the outcome of the evaluation of a foreign credential may take the form of a statement to the applicant that will provide:

a. advice for general employment purposes

b. advice to an educational institution for admission into its programs

c. advice to a regulatory body for entry into a trade or a profession

Level of study

The assessment of a given credential should be based entirely on the normal entry and completion requirements for that credential. In addition, the assessment of a given credential should be based on the entry and completion requirements in place when that credential was completed. The evaluation outcome should not vary because of any previous studies taken by the individual whose credential is being evaluated, and each credential presented by an individual should be assessed separately. Moreover, credentials at the same level in different programs should not be "added" together to equate a credential at a higher level of study. Finally, the evaluation should be based on the credentials presented for evaluation and should not cite the completion of prerequisite credentials if those prerequisite credentials are not presented for the evaluation.

Assessment criteria

With respect to assessment criteria, the guidelines suggest that a variety of criteria be applied to determine the level and type of educational programs, including:

a. entrance requirements (e.g. What are the normal admission requirements for entrance to the program? What is the level of studies in the home country?)

b. full-time duration of study program (e.g. What is the normal full-time duration of the program?)

c. structure of program (e.g. How is the program structured? What type of program is it, such as vocational, academic, etc.?)

d. contents of the program (e.g. In what discipline of studies? What courses? How many hours of studies?)

e. purpose of degree (e.g. For what purpose was the program completed? Was it for a professional qualification or prerequisites to further studies?)

f. bridges to traditional degree (e.g. What access does the program give to other programs in the home country?)

Duration of study program

The guidelines also cover the assessment of a program's duration. In general, each academic year of study, as recognized by the official designated authority in the country of origin, should not be granted more than one academic year of recognition. However, this year-to-year comparison may be overruled by other factors, such as education outcomes, or the structure and content of the educational program.

Appeal

Upon request, the assessment service should inform the applicant of the basis for the decision reached, the possibilities for him or her to appeal the decision if applicable, and the time limits that should be observed.

In addition to following these principles of good practice, Alliance members must also adhere to specific administrative and operational quality assurance criteria. Under these criteria, a credential assessment service must have a:

- Documentation Centre that gives access to a broad range of historical and up-to-date information on educational systems and credentials in other countries;
- File Management System that permits easy access to information while ensuring the protection of client's confidential information;
- Human Resource Model that ensures that the assessment staff conducting the foreign credential evaluation are properly trained and participate in on-going professional development opportunities.

Taken together, these principles and criteria are designed to ensure the highest level of quality and transparency in the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials. All provincially mandated assessment services in Canada have demonstrated their compliance with these principles and are members of the Alliance. Although this is certainly a major step forward in promoting foreign credential recognition in Canada, there is still much to be done.

Alliance members recognize that this quality assurance framework is a 'work in progress' and has the potential to be refined and expanded to include a much more inclusive and diverse range of organizations. More specifically, employers, regulatory bodies and educational institutions are all involved in the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials. Many of these groups either implicitly or explicitly follow some or all of the principles of good practice identified in the Alliance quality assurance framework.

The ultimate value of the quality assurance framework lies in the interpretation and application of best practice principles among all the bodies involved in foreign credential recognition. There needs to be increased transparency, dialogue and collaboration on quality assurance principles and practices. Indeed, to have a tangible and real impact on immigrants, quality assurance principles need to be inclusive and relevant to all parties involved in foreign credential recognition, including immigrants, employers, regulatory bodies and educational institutions.

Over the next few years, Alliance members will be undertaking a number of initiatives to promote quality assurance principles at a pan-Canadian level across a range of organizations involved in foreign credential recognition. With the support of Human Resources and Social Development Canada and the assistance of the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, the Alliance plans to establish strategic partnerships with other organizations conducting credential evaluations; to promote awareness of quality assurance criteria; and to collaborate with organizations across Canada to facilitate the further development and acceptance of good practice principles in the recognition of foreign credentials.

Further information about the Alliance and the quality assurance framework can be obtained from the Alliance website at www.canalliance.org.

Notes

* Portions of this article are based on information on the website of the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC). CICIC's permission to reproduce this material is appreciated.