



WORLD EDUCATION SERVICES

BEST PRACTICES:

Strategies and Processes to Obtain Authentic International Educational Credentials

June 2017

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01 | ABOUT BEST PRACTICES GUIDE

1.1 Background

Immigration has been identified as an essential strategy to address both current and future labour market shortages in Canada. It is predicted that due to declining birthrates and an aging population, immigration will account for all net labour force growth within the next decade and all population growth within the next two decades. Between the years 2004 and 2006 almost 32,000 immigrants, aged 18 to 64, arriving in the province of Ontario indicated that they intended to work in a regulated profession or trade (2007-2008 Annual Report, Office of the Fairness Commissioner).

When seeking entry to a profession or employment in Ontario, internationally trained professionals may face multiple challenges. One of the most serious challenges to labour market success, as identified by immigrants themselves, is a lack of recognition of the academic credentials earned outside of Canada. International credential recognition is a very complex process that depends on many factors, often combining credential evaluation with other processes such as language, competency and skills assessments.

1.2 Challenges

In Ontario there are currently 40 professional regulatory bodies, a number of industry associations, 28 community colleges, and 21 universities. Each of these institutions and organizations has their own distinct role and bearing on international credential recognition and evaluation. It can be very challenging for newcomers to understand and navigate these complex systems.

As most of the institutions and organizations responsible for international credential recognition largely function independently of one another, credential evaluation and credential recognition are usually internal processes occurring within the organization. The lack of consistency in credential evaluation processes can be confusing for internationally trained professionals, and can lead to duplicate requests for the same documentation.

Moreover, as each organization relies on their own standards and methodology, which are often not made available to outside groups, there is a potential for the processes to be perceived as being biased and unfair.

1.3 Opportunities

important to recognize differences resulting from specific mandates and responsibilities placed upon Ontario regulatory bodies. Therefore, harmonization in selected areas may be a more effective strategy. Harmonization of credential evaluation does not need to apply to all aspects of the evaluation process. It could begin with the standardization of some elements of the process, such as authentication and/or verification of documents.

The “Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Credential Evaluation” report published by the Alliance of Credential Evaluation Agencies (2008) recommends harmonizing documentation requirements and verification processes across assessment agencies “to improve the portability of assessments and provide for a less confusing and more transparent evaluation process”. In a report by the Office of the Fairness Commissioner (OFC) (2009), “Study of Qualification Assessment Agencies”, the need to streamline overlapping processes and harmonize documentation requirements and practices by working collaboratively across assessment bodies is also identified. A

more consistent documentation verification system could help immigrants understand and navigate these credential recognition processes with more clarity and ease.

1.4 Solutions

World Education Services (WES) and a team of Ontario regulatory bodies have worked to identify and address opportunities for common solutions related to documentation practices. In January 2009, WES and the project-working group (PWG) surveyed Ontario regulators about these issues. Findings indicated that opportunities for similar solutions exist in the areas of terminology and definitions, documentation practices, credential verification procedures, and documentation collection efforts. From this, the Standard Documentation Practices Working Group was created to develop strategies to address the need for consistent documentation practices. Focusing on this goal and with the aim of building Best Practice Model(s), the Project Working Group has developed a “Terminology Glossary” and a “Best Documentation Practices Guide”. Use of common terminology is essential in ensuring that all involved in credential evaluation understand each other and interpret criteria set by the Best Practice Model(s) in a consistent manner. Further, common use of terminology will make it easier for immigrants to understand credential assessment procedures.

The portability of an international credential increases with the degree to which the credential in question can be authenticated. If all institutions and organizations involved in credential evaluation agreed on common documentation standards, it would create an environment for a more consistent authentication process, which in turn could result in improved portability of credential evaluations.

1.5 Best Documentation Practices Guide Principles

Much effort has been devoted already towards building best practice principles in credential recognition in Canada and internationally. Some of the guidelines that have been developed already are:

- **Recommendations on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications** (UNESCO, Lisbon Recognition Convention), **General Guiding Principles for Good Practice in the Assessment of Foreign Credentials** (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials),
- **Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications** (Forum of Labour Market Ministers),
- **Study of Qualifications Assessment Agencies**. (Office of the Fairness Commissioner)
- **Regulators’ Guide for Promoting Access to Professions by International Candidates** (Ontario Regulators for Access Consortium),

Different in scope and intent, these documents draw on common principles, which outline the need for improved assessment and recognition of international qualifications. The Best Documentation Practices Guide supports these principles through setting fair, objective and transparent documentation requirement criteria and suggesting alternative processes where documents are unavailable.

More specifically, The Best Documentation Practices Guide is built upon guidelines that:

- Are consistent with the concepts of transparency, objectivity, fairness, accountability and collaboration and support “Guidelines for Fair Registration Practices Reports” (Office of the Fairness Commissioner, June 2008) and The Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications (Forum of Labour Market Ministers, 2009)

- Aim to improve credential evaluation process efficiency
- Enhance the integrity of the credential recognition system
- Improve portability of international credentials in Ontario and across Canada
- Create opportunities for future collaboration among stakeholders

1.6 The Purpose of the Best Documentation Practices Guide

The purpose of this guide is to create a Best Documentation Practice Model to help those evaluating credentials ensure that their organizations or institutions documentation practices are transparent, objective, fair and consistent. The strategies and processes described in the guide apply to documents being received from any source; however the particular focus is on international credentials (i.e. credentials issued by non-Canadian institutions).

The Best Documentation Practices Guide will:

- Describe how to obtain authentic documents
- Suggest documentation requirements criteria
- Provide definitions to the terms used in documentation practices
- Suggest alternatives to situations where required documents are not available

First and foremost, the intention of this Best Documentation Practices Guide is to advise on processes related to credential authentication and on any other documentation related processes. This guide does not intend to cover all areas of credential evaluation processes and methodologies.

It is important to note that these guidelines were developed with the original intent of informing Ontario regulators about common terminology and documentation practices. However, inconsistencies and confusion with documentation practices and terminology abound in the field of international credential assessment and we believe this will be a useful reference for sharing and promoting consistent practices and the use of common terminology across Canada. Having reliable and consistent documentation practices based on authentic documents helps promote portability of documents and reduces the need for individuals to have documents sent and verified numerous times to different organizations and institutions.

This guide promotes the notion of using official documents as a most reliable vehicle of evidence regarding an individual's educational achievements (For a definition of "official document" refer to Annex 1). However, creators of the guide recognize that different evaluation needs and situations may call for different approaches. As such, the guide reviews the different types of documents and the degrees of reliability attributed to these different document types. Credential evaluators using this guide can incorporate what is feasible for their situation keeping in mind that "while the need to establish authenticity of documents as a part of the assessment procedure is very real, this need should nonetheless be balanced against the burdens placed upon applicants. The basic rules of procedure should assume that most applicants are honest, but they should give the competent recognition authorities the opportunity to require stronger evidence of authenticity whenever they suspect that documents may be forged" (The Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee, 2001).

02 | CREDENTIAL AUTHENTICATION PROCESS

Before examining the credential authentication process, a brief overview of the entire credential evaluation process is important. The credential evaluation process includes four very important and distinctive procedures. It should be noted that Steps 2 and 3 could generally be carried out simultaneously. These four procedures are:

Step 1: Application Review establishes whether the key information needed to begin the evaluation has been supplied.

Step 2: Credential Authentication is concerned with identifying how to obtain required documents, and how to verify these documents for authenticity.

Step 3: Recognition of Institution aims to establish whether the institution that issued the credential is recognized by the relevant authority or institution in the issuing country.

Step 4: Comparative Analysis of the documents once they are determined to be genuine. Credential evaluators assess the credentials and issue statements on their comparability in terms of domestic educational or professional standards.

Academic credentials are considered authentic when they are issued by legal entities that are authorized to issue academic credentials and/or conduct examinations and/or teaching. Therefore the process of establishing credential authenticity is twofold. First, it must be confirmed that the academic credential in question was issued by an entity authorized to issue academic credentials (recognition of institution process, Step 3). Second, it must be confirmed that the credential in question originates from the issuing authority, has not been altered or tampered with, and that the supporting documents are genuine (document authentication process, Step 2).

As the intention of this guide is to advise on best documentation practices only, the focus of this guide is on Step 2 of the credential evaluation process: procedures related to Credential Authentication as well as any other documentation related processes. As Step 2 and 3 are interrelated, the concepts of verification of the Recognition of Institutions are sketched out in **Section 07**. However, this description is very brief and does not discuss all aspects of the Recognition of Institution process.

Fraudulent documents can seriously threaten the credibility of an organization or institution that accepts them. Recent advancements in technology have made fraudulent documents easier to access and harder to detect. While this is a concern, it should not result in policies that create unnecessary barriers for those who possess authentic academic credentials. Recent statistics indicate that the number of fraudulent documents is fairly small as compared to the overall number of people who hold genuine academic credentials. One of the goals of having consistent documentation practices is to prevent fraudulent documents from entering the system, while at the same time ensuring fair access, portability and usability of international credentials. This task is possible through a systemic proactive academic authentication process. This and other credential authentication methodologies are examined in more detail in the next section.

03 | APPROACHES TO CREDENTIAL AUTHENTICATION PROCESS

A common approach to the authentication process is to scrutinize documents for any warning signals such as noticeable inconsistencies, lack of safety features, awkward or forced lettering, misspellings, etc. This can be a very time consuming approach and has become impractical and less effective as technology has made the production of fraudulent documents fast, easy and inexpensive. This reactive approach aims to detect fraudulent documents that have already entered the system rather than preventing these documents from entering in the first place.

Furthermore, this approach is rather subjective, as it is not based upon clearly defined criteria. In the absence of clearly defined criteria, there is a possibility that inconsistent decisions could be made. For example, there have been cases where, because of inconsistencies and misspellings in documents, they have been deemed “suspicious”. Later, such inconsistencies and misspellings were explained by a human error on the part of the issuing institution, and “suspicions” were dismissed. It is therefore important to create a consistent, objective and transparent authentication process that builds upon criterion that can be easily communicated to all parties involved in the process.

Another known approach to credential authentication is concerned with comparing the original documents in question against samples in a database. In reality, building and maintaining such a database is a complex and time-consuming process. There are tens of thousands of academic institutions around the world and most follow their own distinct formats for issuing degrees. If a universal database were created, it would require samples of every credential format used today and in the past from every institution around the globe. In addition, a record of any changes to format, names, signatures of signing officers and corresponding dates would be necessary. Clearly this is unrealistic and moreover, even with this type of database, some fraudulent credentials would still be impossible to detect due to advanced printing technology.

Rather than trying to detect fraudulent documents, which is a very difficult task, adopting a credential authentication process that ensures that only authentic documents are entering the system, is a more effective solution. It is important that the criteria upon which such an authentication process is built is clearly defined and can be easily communicated to all involved in the process.

The standard practice among North American institutions is to send official academic transcripts directly from one institution to another in a “**sealed envelope**”. The direct transmission of academic transcripts ensures that institutions receive authentic documents. This methodology aims to proactively combat fraudulent documents from entering the system and is built upon objective criteria, modes of transmission and the presence of a “**sealed envelope**”; all criteria that are easily quantified, interpreted, shared and applied. A “**sealed envelope**” must bear the institutions logo and/or seal, date and appropriate signing authority signature. (This approach is elaborated on in Sections **4.2**, **4.3**, and **4.7**)

By adopting a consistent method for receiving authentic international academic credentials, recipients can help ensure the integrity of the documents they receive while also reducing the risk of mistakenly accepting altered or fraudulent documents. Moreover, by adopting this method, institutions and organizations receiving documents are treating domestic and international documents fairly and are authenticating all documents in a consistent manner.

As a reflection of the onus on individual applicants to have their academic documents sent to multiple institutions and organizations, and in keeping with the need to obtain authentic academic documents, many academic institutions have entered into Electronic Transcript Exchange agreements and developed appropriate infrastructures. This is considered a good practice and is discussed in more detail in **Section 4.8**.

04 | FIVE LEVELS OF DOCUMENT AUTHENTICITY

4.1 Document's Authenticity and Portability

The portability of an international credential increases with the degree to which the credential in question can be authenticated. When an individual's credentials are highly reliable in terms of authenticity, their credential will be more acceptable, and therefore, more portable within and across jurisdictions. On the other hand, when issues of authenticity arise with credentials, their acceptability is eroded and the capacity to use those credentials diminishes.

So, when different institutions and organizations assessing academic credentials have varying documentation standards, portability of academic credentials becomes difficult and can be onerous on the individual. However, if all institutions and organizations involved in credential evaluation hold common documentation standards, it creates an environment for a more consistent authentication process, which in turn results in improved portability and recognition of international academic credentials.

Common standards for receiving authentic documents ensures that only highly reliable academic credentials enter the system, and therefore sharing authentic documents and evaluations becomes possible. With this in place, the need for individuals to have their academic documentation sent to different institutions, and often in different ways, is eliminated. This can greatly reduce costs and time associated with obtaining documentation from abroad (Lowe, WES, 2009).

In order to understand what constitutes an authentic document and describe methods for receiving authentic documents, it is important to first review the different types of documents that are commonly used in evaluation, and the degree of reliability attributed to different document types.

For illustration purposes, consider a continuum or a scale against which the methods of determining document authenticity could be measured, referred to here as the Document Authenticity Continuum (see **Figure 1**). The right extreme of the continuum represents the most reliable type of documents used in the Credential Authentication process, and the left extreme represents the least reliable documents upon which the Credential Authentication process can be based. Sections 4.2-4.6 describe each type of document on the **Document Authenticity Continuum** in accordance with the degree of reliability that the documents in question can be deemed authentic, as well as special considerations for each document type.

Figure 1 | Document Authenticity Continuum



4.2 Verified Document

A **Verified Document** is a document that has had its authenticity confirmed through direct contact with the issuing authority and/or centralized agency authorized to verify academic credentials. Authorized officials at the institutions that issued the academic credential must verify documents as authentic.

Academic documents that are authenticated through the Verified Document process are deemed the most reliable and therefore, on the Document Authenticity Continuum are placed at the extreme right (**Figure 1**).

Considerations for Verifying Documents:

While obtaining a verified document is the most reliable way to ensure authenticity, verification can be a lengthy, costly, and labour intensive process. Some organizations and institutions might choose to respond to document verification request only if they have authorization from the individual. Moreover, increasingly, institutions are asking for a verification fee payment often to be made to a financial institution outside of Canada in local currencies (i.e. Indian rupees, Chinese Yuan). This and other external factors may slow down the document authentication process, resulting in unnecessary delays.

Official academic transcripts are easier to obtain and are the next most reliable document used to verify the authenticity of academic credentials. What constitutes an official academic transcript and methods by which it can be received are discussed in more detail in **section 4.3**.

In some cases, official academic transcripts might not be available. That could happen, for example, when:

- Institutions issue academic documents only once and do not follow the North American practice of sending official academic transcripts from one institution to another.
- The institution no longer exists.
- The institution is unable to provide such records.

In most cases, if official academic documents cannot be obtained, the documents submitted by the individual can be sent to the institution that issued them to be verified for authenticity.

Another possible scenario is when transcripts, presumably received directly from the issuing institution, do not meet all the criteria of an official document. It is also possible that the documents received directly provide information that is not consistent with other information already on record. In all such situations, to ensure authenticity, documents should be verified directly with the issuing institution or official body.

Verifications issued by embassies, consulates, or public notaries should not be accepted. This is because the process of certification or notarization by such entities is not a process of authentication. **Section 4.5** discusses certified or notarized documents in more detail.

Certified or notarized copies should not be confused with Apostille documents. **Apostille** is a legal means to have legal documents mutually recognized in other countries as determined by Hague convention. (Canada has not yet signed this convention). For example, government authorities in countries such as Russia and Ukraine have established procedures to legalize academic documents for individuals who travel to live or work abroad. Ministries of education in these countries are responsible for verification and authentication of educational documents. Once documents are verified, the ministry assigns a registration number that is also entered on the Apostille stamp attached to a document in question. This ensures that the documents have been entered into the federal registry and legalized.

A few countries such as China, Pakistan, and Cuba have set up Ministry-authorized offices that verify and send academic documentation on behalf of academic institutions. It can be requested that verification reports or verified academic credentials be sent directly abroad. Documents received from such ministries or ministry authorized offices are issued in a consistent and standard format, making the authentication process an easier task to complete.

It is therefore important that institutions and organizations in Canada assessing international academic credentials be familiar with varied global practices and take these into consideration when developing and applying their own policies and practices.

The following information is useful when communicating with the academic institutions abroad¹:

- When sending documents for verification, check the address to which you send your request against the address that appears in published sources and do not rely solely on the address that is provided on the document itself.
- Letters asking for verification should be addressed to the title of the officer who issued and signed the document and not to a particular individual. So, the letter should be addressed for example to “Controller of Examinations”, “Registrar”, etc.
- To expedite the verification process, the request could be sent by fax and email whenever possible.
- Authorized officials within the issuing institutions must only verify documents from that same institution. Verifications issued outside of the academic institutions should not be accepted (for example, verifications by embassies, consulates, public notaries). Verification replies by fax and email can be accepted, provided that the name, email address, or fax number of the sender can be traced back to the institution’s website or published sources, such as the International Handbook of Universities, the Commonwealth Universities Yearbook.
- Many institutions in different countries require the payment of a fee in local currency before they verify a document. The payment can be difficult if the institution accepts only cheques in the local currency drawn on a local bank. This is a good reason to require individual applicants to make their own arrangements for document transmittal.
- 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.
- Some institutions are known not to release information about their former students to another institution unless provided with the student’s consent to disclose records or information (for example, UK, Australia, USA, New Zealand). This is another good reason to require individual applicants to make their own arrangements for document transmittal.

4.3 Official Documents

An **Official Document** is the one that has been received in a sealed envelope directly from the issuing award authority and has never been in possession of anyone other than the institution that issued it.

The Credential Authentication process is most reliable when the academic document is issued by a designated authority, has not been altered and has been transmitted securely to the intended

¹Text adapted from WENR article “How to Obtain Authentic Academic Credentials”

recipient. Receiving institutions and organizations can consider the document official when these conditions have been met.

On the document authenticity continuum (**Figure 1**), we would place an official document to the left of a verified document, and to the right of an original document. Next to a verified document, an official document is the best guarantee that the document in question has not been in the possession of anyone except for the institution that issued it and the institution that received it.

Considerations for Handling Official Documents:

The practice of issuing official academic documents may vary from one institution to another. For example, many academic institutions in India do not follow the practice of issuing official transcripts or re-issuing mark sheets if they were issued once already. The alternative is to request the individual to make photocopies of his or her original mark sheets and to have the photocopies attested to by the Controller of Examinations or Registrar and then sent directly by the issuing institution to the organization or institution in Canada in an envelope bearing the institution's seal or stamp, and with the appropriate signatures across the sealed envelope flap.

At times, issuing institutions will place documents in an envelope, seal it with the institutional seal, but rather than mail it overseas, hand the sealed envelope to the individual ordering them, or their designated person. This practice is considered an appropriate means of transmission as long as all indicators of the sealed envelope are present. In some very rare instances, institutions will refuse to mail documents overseas due to financial constraints or due to other internal policies. Credential assessment agencies and institutions should be aware of such circumstances.

To determine whether an official document is authentic or not, the organization or institution will have to define:

- whether or not the document originates from the designated authority (whether or not the document has been tampered with), and
- whether or not it arrived in a sealed envelope (whether or not there has been third party access to it).

Such criteria are easily interpreted and applied. To help in the decision, the following questions can be asked:

- Was the document mailed directly from the appropriate office (see **Section 4.2** and **7.2**) in a sealed institutional envelope?
- Is the format of the document consistent with others received from the same institution?
- Is there an appropriate official signature and institutional seal?
- Was the document mailed using an institutional postage meter (as opposed to a postage stamp)?
- Is the document recently dated?
- Is the document consistent with other documents on file, with the applicant's academic background?

If the document was forwarded in a sealed envelope through an intermediary such as the individual whose records are in question, it is the receiving institution that ultimately determines whether the document is official or not. This does not mean that the receiving institution has the authority to decide by itself that a transcript issued by another institution is or is not official. However, this means that the receiving institution may use discretion whether "to accept" the official character of the document or to authenticate the document by verifying its identity and authenticity with the sending institution (ARUCC, 2003).

4.4 Original Documents

An **Original Document** is a document that was issued to an individual by the issuing institution.

The difference between an original and official document is in the mode of transmission. An official document has been transmitted directly from the issuing institution to the receiving institution. An original document was transmitted to an individual and handled by him or her first before it has reached the receiving institution.

Therefore, an Original Document is a more reliable document in terms of determining document authenticity than a regular, certified or notarized photocopy but is less reliable than an official document received directly from the issuing institution. As such, on the document authenticity continuum, we will place the original document to the right of the certified/notarized photocopy but to the left of the official document (**Figure 1**).

Considerations for Handling Original Documents

- To authenticate an original document, an institution or organization will have to scrutinize the document in question to see if any signs of tampering are present. This is not only a very time consuming approach, it is rather subjective as well.
- While there are a number of guidelines which institutions or organizations could use in determining whether an original document is authentic or not, there is no clearly defined criteria that differentiates a true original document from a fraudulent one. In the absence of objective and clearly defined criteria, the assessment may vary from one person evaluating academic credentials to another, leading to inconsistent decisions.
- The above does not mean that the authentication of original documents is not possible. This simply means that the original is less reliable in terms of authenticity than the verified or official document. Evaluations completed on the basis of original documents may not be as portable as evaluations completed on the basis of official or verified documents, because the authentication process is not as reliable as one based on verified or official documents.

4.5 Copied Documents: Certified Copies and Notarized Copies

Copies made by notaries (**Notarized Copies**) or other authorized persons, and certified true copies are still considered copies. A **Certified (true) Copy** is a photocopy of the original document attested to by an authorized person (i.e. authorized personnel at the embassy, department of interior affairs, etc.). A **Notarized copy** is a photocopy of an original document deemed to be a true copy of the original attested to by a notary public.

Certified and notarized copies fall to the left of the original document on the document authenticity continuum but to the right of the regular photocopy as these documents are less reliable in determining authenticity than original documents, but more reliable than a regular photocopy (**Figure 1**).

Considerations for Handling Certified and Notarized Documents:

- The process of certification or notarization is not a process of authentication. In both cases, the attestation is made to the fact that the copy is identical to the original document from which it is made and not to the fact that the original document itself is authentic.
- In most cases, public notaries and other authorized personnel are not trained to authenticate

academic documents. In many cases they are not familiar with international educational systems or academic credentials originating from these systems of education.

- It is important to recognize that every country has laws and regulations that govern the process of certification or notarization. For example, Apostille is a legal way to have legal documents mutually recognized in other countries as determined by Hague convention (see **Section 4.2**). So, in some cases, documents that are legally notarized or apostilled by the appropriate ministry or other designated government office can be as reliable as verified or official academic documents.

4.6 Copied Documents: Photocopies

A **Copied Document** is one that has been copied by someone other than the authorities at the academic institution or the verifying official.

Establishing authenticity of a copied document is harder than establishing that of the original document. Thus the copied document falls on the left of the document authenticity continuum, as it is less reliable than the original document in terms of determining document authenticity (**Figure 1**).

Considerations for Handling Photocopied Documents:

- Without comparing the copied document to the original document from which the photocopy was made it is impossible to determine whether the copied document is identical to the original document.
- Before confirming the authenticity of the copied document, it will be necessary to establish the authenticity of the original document from which the copy was made.

4.7 What Constitutes an Authentic Credential?

An academic credential is authentic when it is issued by a legal entity that is authorized to issue academic credentials and/or conduct examinations and/or teaching. Therefore the process of establishing academic credential authenticity is concerned with confirming that the credential in question was issued by an entity authorized to issue academic credentials (Recognition of Institution process), and secondly, that the credential in question originates from the issuing authority (Document Authentication Process). Recognition of Institutions is discussed in more detail in **Section 7.2**.

The Document Authentication Process describes how official and verified documents are the two types of documents that can be used with the highest reliability to determine authenticity (**Figure 1**). Therefore, the best approaches to ensure credential authenticity are either through the verification process or through obtaining official documents.

Section 4.3 outlined the process of establishing whether a document in question can be considered an official document. This process is concerned with identifying whether the document was received directly from the designated authority and whether it arrived in a sealed envelope. Considering this, and assuming that the most reliable document is an official or verified document, the Document Authentication Processes should be built upon similar criteria (mode of transmission or presence of sealed envelope). This ensures that documentation criteria that can be easily quantified, interpreted and communicated to all involved and also prevents fraudulent documents from entering the system.

The process of receiving official or verified documents is similar to the practice among North American institutions for sharing and receiving official academic transcripts directly. Furthermore, other organizations and institutions (i.e. Canadian regulators) are accustomed to these practices already.

Credentials supported by photocopies or original documents can also be authenticated but to a lesser degree, unless they are authenticated through a verification process. Evaluations completed on the basis of photocopies and original documents can be valuable for some purposes. However, the use of these reports is limited, and not as valuable in situations requiring the highest reliability of credential authenticity, or to enable document and credential portability from one institution or jurisdiction to another.

4.8 Electronic Transcript Exchange

Electronic Transcript Exchange is a secure process allowing participating institutions and organizations to exchange authentic electronic transcripts and academic documents through a secure network. When agreed upon protocols are in place, a system of Electronic Transcript Exchange can offer the following benefits:

- Faster delivery of academic transcripts
- Reduction in administrative expenses
- Easier tracking of incoming documents
- Reduction in paper use
- Reduction in the number of fraudulent documents in the system

The credential authentication process that is followed by the Electronic Transcript Exchange system is no different from the authentication processes outlined in **sections 02** and **03**. The authentication process remains concerned with the same two aspects: identifying whether transcripts were received directly from the issuing institutions or not (mode of transmission), and whether documents have been handled by anyone other than the institution that issued them (presence of sealed envelope). Of course, since documents are exchanged electronically, there is no “sealed envelope” per se. Authorized senders and recipients are validated before a transcript is exchanged; all documents are encrypted and securely transferred electronically; and transmission protocols between institutions and organizations are designed to safeguard exchanged data.

Since only authorized partners who have established common standards and developed an infrastructure can use an Electronic Transcript Exchange, official transcripts created through such a process are available to participating organizations only. Any document transmitted electronically (i.e. via e-mail) outside of the Electronic Transcript Exchange, or equivalent system, would be considered unofficial.

More recently, academic institutions have started providing transcript services allowing their students to print student-copy transcripts through university portals. These transcripts are transmitted outside of the Electronic Transcript Exchange and are not official.

05 | OTHER DOCUMENTS

5.1 Translations, Certified and Notarized Translations

Whether or not a translation is required will depend on the language that educational documents are written in, as well as the foreign language expertise available within an organization or institution assessing credentials.

It is very important to note that **evaluations should never be based solely on translations of documents**. In all cases, either official documents or copies of the documents in the original language along with their translations should be requested.

In situations where foreign language expertise is not available or limited it is especially important to establish protocols for external translations. Clear protocols help ensure that translations of the official transcripts or of the documents are accurate and meet the requirements of the receiving institution or organization so that they can complete a fair assessment. Inaccurate translations have been known to lead to unnecessary confusion and barriers in credential evaluation. It is therefore imperative that reliable and professional translators complete translations. Some of the problems, which have arisen as a result of inaccurate translations include:

- **Interpretive translation.** The translation implies a certain level of education, which does not necessarily accurately reflect the level of study completed. Any interpretation of a credential in terms of educational level is the responsibility of a credential evaluator, not the translator.
- **Addition/Omission of information.** The translator omits important information included in the original documents from the translation or adds information not included in the original document to the translation. To avoid this, a word-by-word translation of the text as it appears on the original document should be requested. The translator should not be the one deciding what should or should not be in the translation.
- **Typing errors.** Errors were made when producing the translated copy. This can lead to unnecessary confusion and potential barriers in credential evaluation.

The definition of, or what is considered, a certified or notarized translation may differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In Canada, this generally means that the translation is made by a translator officially trained to translate documents from one specific language to another specific language and who is also legally authorized to attest to the fact that the content of the translation is true to the content of the original document.

5.2 Professional and Registration Certificates

When credential evaluation is prepared for the purpose of admitting someone to a particular profession, proof of professional registration or other documents verifying that the individual is qualified to practice the same profession in the country of education should be requested. The most commonly requested documents are Licensure or Registration Certificates and Statements of Professional Standing.

Licence and/or Certificate of Registration is a document used by some trades and professions to signify that the licence-holder meets competency and other requirements and is entitled to practise. Although generally used within a regulatory system prohibiting practice without a licence, there are occupations for which licensing is voluntary. Licences may also be granted to services and facilities (as in a licensed daycare facility).

It is important to recognize that some jurisdictions have no central authority governing specific professions. In these instances alternate provisions should be made. For example, some countries do not issue licensure certificates. Instead academic degrees or diplomas serve this function. It is therefore essential to become familiar with the practices in other jurisdictions and take them into consideration when developing documentation related policies.

A **Statement of Professional Standing** is a letter from a licensing institution, such as a regulatory body or ministry, confirming registration status and whether (and if so, for what reason) the individual in question has the right to practice a profession and whether they have ever been suspended. This statement provides recipient institutions and organizations with information regarding the individual's past professional experience (i.e. it lists past suspensions or other disciplinary actions against the individual). To ensure the highest reliability for Statement of Professional Standing it should be requested that the letter:

- Come directly from the licensing authority, ministry, or department
- Be an original and signed by the appropriate official
- Be current

5.3 Syllabus

A **Syllabus** is a written description of a program of study and its courses. Most credential evaluators will specifically require the number of academic instruction hours (lecture hours) and practical or clinical instruction hours students' received in each course. A Syllabus is also used to help establish whether entry-to-practice requirements were taught. Information found in most syllabi includes:

- Course goals and objectives that state which of the skills, competencies and knowledge students are expected to acquire by the end of the course.
- A description of the topics to be addressed in the course.
- A description of instructional approaches that will be used during the course, such as lectures, laboratory or clinical activities, group projects, etc.
- Course materials: required texts, suggested readings lists, and any other requisites.
- Assignments and evaluations: a description of how evaluation is to be applied in the course.

Increasingly, institutions publish detailed syllabi on their websites making them easily accessible to students and other users. However, for some countries or institutions publishing syllabi is not a common practice. Some institutions offer syllabi for currently taught programs only, thus, acquiring one from a past program can be challenging.

The requirements for how a syllabus should be submitted and for the amount of detail they should provide may differ from organization to organization. By comparing a non-official syllabus to an authentic detailed academic transcript, ensuring consistency of details on both documents, an evaluator can establish the reliability of the syllabus in question. Thus, the reliability of the syllabus does not need to be at the same level as the reliability, in terms of authenticity, as an academic transcript submitted for evaluation. In most cases where a detailed official or verified academic transcript is present, a photocopied or non-official copy of the syllabus should be sufficient. On the other hand, in cases where the official academic transcript lacks information, such as detailed course titles, breakdowns of clinical vs. theoretical hours, etc., a more reliable (i.e. sent directly by the issuing institution) syllabus should be requested.

In all cases, whether the syllabus was received directly from the issuing institution or not, it should:

- Be assessed for reliability in terms of authenticity;
- Be compared to other documents on file for consistency;
- Correspond to the time the program in question was completed;
- Be accompanied by a translation from a reliable translation agency, if issued in a language other than English or French.

5.4 Proof of Identity Documents

One aspect of the authentication process is concerned with confirming that the individual who submitted credentials for evaluation is in fact the same person whose name appears on the documents. This aspect is a distinct procedure on its own and is usually covered by policies, which are often specific to each individual organization. It is therefore, not covered by this guide.

It is important to note, however, that since identity fraud is a growing concern, it is extremely important that each organization develops its own guidelines and reviews them regularly. There have been instances where an identity has been assumed, and academic documents, while themselves authentic, did not belong to the holder of these documents. A failure to establish that the person whose name appears on the documents is in fact the same individual who submitted the credentials for evaluation can easily undermine public confidence in the credibility and professionalism of the organization.

When reviewing international credentials, consideration should always be given to whether the age of a student and the chronology of his or her educational background are 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.

Proof of Identity is a document that may be used to verify aspects of a person's personal identity, such as name, date and place of birth. Often only government-issued documentation is accepted such as a birth certificate, or passport.

A Birth Certificate (or equivalent), a Canadian or foreign passport, are the most commonly requested proof of identity documents. A marriage certificate, a change of name certificate, or a court order that changed the name should be requested in instances where names on documents do not match.

5.5 Additional Documents

Each organization involved in credential assessment and recognition has their own distinct role and bearing on these processes. As such, requirements for documents not mentioned in prior sections will be informed by the specific role or responsibility placed upon each individual organization. Each organization should have their own distinct and transparent policies that cover those procedures not covered by this guide.

Depending on the role a specific organization plays in the credential recognition process, the following additional documents could be required:

- Criminal Record Check
- Proof of English or French Language Proficiency
- Documents proving wage-earning experience in the field of expertise

Generally, the methods used for authenticating academic documents described in this guide would be similar for other documents.

06 | SETTING UP-TO-DATE DOCUMENT REQUIREMENTS

6.1 Establishing What is Required

The first step in the credential evaluation process is reviewing the application. In this step, the credential evaluator determines the key information needed to evaluate the credentials and identifies the individual context within which the credential in question was obtained. The credential evaluator compiles and compares the essential demographic information and academic history of the applicant in order to piece together the timeline, accuracy and completeness of the file. For example, does the age of the applicant coincide with the level of education obtained or is the sequence of credentials accurate (Bachelor's followed by Master's) in the country's educational context?

Following this, the credential evaluator examines the academic documents submitted for evaluation in order to identify whether these documents support the applicant's personal and educational history and whether all information is present. If information or documents are missing, the credential evaluator will normally contact the applicant and request missing documents or additional details. Each academic document submitted for evaluation must be verified for authenticity.

Essential demographic and academic information about the applicant should include at least the following elements:

- Applicant's name (current and previous)
- Date and country of birth
- List of academic institutions attended (including institution name and location)
- Dates of enrolment and attendance at each academic institution attended
- Names of all credentials awarded to the applicant

The final determination of what extra documents (if any) are required in each individual case is done in accordance with the applicant's educational history, the characteristics of the educational system and the specific purpose for which the evaluation is completed. However, to ensure maximum compliance and timeliness of the evaluation process, applicants must be provided, prior to the application process, with clear instructions on what documents to submit, how to submit them, and of any applicable deadlines. It is therefore essential to develop a set of rules, or **Documentation Requirements**, aimed to guide applicants through the document submission process and to serve as a benchmark that credential evaluators can use in deciding what documents are needed to complete the credential authentication process.

6.2 Setting Documentation Requirements

Earlier it was discussed that the number of fraudulent documents is fairly small as compared to the overall number of people who hold genuine credentials. So, when developing documentation requirements the focus should be on creating a fair, objective and transparent system that:

- Is built upon criteria that can be easily quantified, interpreted and communicated
- Is easily understood
- Does not result in policies that create unnecessary barriers to those who possess authentic

international credentials

- Ensures fair access to a profession/employment/educational opportunities
- Protects the integrity of the assessing organization

It was also identified that the criteria for meeting these conditions are the modes of transmission and the presence of a sealed envelope. These are the criteria that, in most cases, should inform documentation requirements.

The best guarantee that the documents submitted for evaluation have not been tampered with and are indeed genuine is in cases where there has been no third-party access to the official document. Most educational institutions around the globe maintain the academic data that normally appears in academic transcripts issued by North American academic institutions. In some countries more than others, this academic data could be more difficult to access, retrieve or provide to other users. Therefore, in some cases arranging for documents to be sent might require significant time, follow-up and effort.

As a general rule, organizations and institutions assessing international credentials in Canada should require the following types of documents:

- Award certificate (degree, diploma, certificate)
- Official academic transcript indicating all courses taken and grades earned for all programs of post-secondary study
- Precise, word-for-word English or French translations for all foreign language documents

Most Award Certificates — documents signifying the awarding of a particular certificate, diploma, degree or other formal academic qualifications - indicate the following:

- who issued the award (i.e.. institution or agency name)
- the name and title of the institution's signing authority or responsible officer
- the name of the qualification awarded
- the field of study
- the date of the award
- the name of the award recipient

Rarely do these documents provide full information on all the subjects taken or periods of study needed to complete an evaluation.

An Academic Transcript (or a comparable academic record) provides more detailed information than award certificate information, including all courses taken and grades earned, appropriate benchmarks as well as dates and periods of study. In most cases, it is a much more useful document than an award certificate, and it often confirms the conferral date and the official name of the final award. In cases where qualifications are incomplete, the transcript becomes the sole basis for an evaluation, as individuals who have had to interrupt their studies are not awarded a certificate to indicate program completion. Another benefit of the academic transcript (or equivalent) is that it is usually possible to obtain as an official copy. In the case of award certificates, since they are issued to the bearer of the qualification in question directly, they are not official documents unless verified and sent directly by the recognized authority to the intended recipient. Nevertheless, an award certificate should still be requested, as it is easily obtainable and might provide information otherwise not found on the academic transcript (for example, issuing authority, credential name, etc.).

In addition to award certificates and academic transcripts, a credential evaluator might request other types of documentation such as course syllabi. Syllabi are normally requested when important details such as course titles are not indicated on the official transcript or when more information about course content is needed in order to determine a credential's academic equivalency.

In some countries, it is the responsibility of the Ministry-authorized offices to verify documentation on behalf of institutions and students (i.e. China, Russia, Ukraine and Pakistan). It is therefore important to frequently research the documentation practices of each individual country and to develop documentation requirements consistent with the country-of-origin practices.

The documentation provided should be in the original language and translations of academic documents should never be accepted in place of original language documents. It should be noted that in many countries where English is not a primary language of academic institutions, they may issue transcripts in English for students who are coming to Canada (i.e. Egypt).

6.3 Communication of Documentation Requirements to Individuals

The language that is used when writing Documentation Requirement policies should be relevant to the educational system and familiar to the applicant. Documentation requirements should be written using plain language and be easily understood by individuals who will be following them. For example, academic transcripts are called “mark sheets” in India and are issued, in most instances, by the university, which is the examining authority. As such, it is the only authority that may issue documents in India and therefore documentation requirements should consistently request mark sheets to be sent directly from the institution that conducted the examination.

Sample: Documentation Requirements for Academic Credentials from India

Country of Education: India

Level: Higher Education

What documents are required?

- Clear, legible photocopies of all final or provisional degree certificates issued by the institutions attended (i.e. *Bachelor, Master, Master of Philosophy, Postgraduate Diploma and Ph.D.*).
- Individual mark sheets issued by the university or the institution that conducted the examination for all post-secondary programs of study.

How to submit required documents?

- **Photocopies of degree certificates** to be submitted by the **applicant**.
- **Individual marks sheets** must be attested/verified by the Controller of Examinations or Registrar and then **sent directly by the institutions that conducted the examination** in an envelope bearing the institution's seal or stamp and/or an appropriate signature across the sealed flap.

Additional information:

- Please note that college-issued mark sheets will not be accepted unless they are from an autonomous college.
- If elective courses are not listed on the mark sheet, please provide a syllabus or some other type of official documentation for the course.

- For programs with a compulsory internship component, (i.e. Nursing, Medicine, Dentistry, Physical Therapy, Veterinarian Medicine) clear, legible **photocopies of internship completion** to be submitted **by applicant**.
- Some academic institutions can take several weeks to provide transcripts so applicants may want to request their transcript at the earliest possible moment.
- All documents are subject to verification.

Documentation requirements should clearly identify the types of documents required for evaluation and the method by which these documents should be submitted. This includes identifying who is responsible for issuing official documents (i.e. secondary institution, ministries of education, higher education institution, or examination body). Wherever possible, the contact information and website for the organizations and institutions responsible for document transmission should be provided.

To ensure that the rules around Documentation Requirements are up-to-date, it is important to review or audit related policies regularly. Any changes to documentation requirements should be recorded and appropriate amendments made to all relevant communication materials.

07 | RECOGNITION OF INSTITUTIONS

This section introduces the concept of the Recognition of Institutions.² However, this description is very brief and does not discuss all aspects of the recognition of institution process. Resources related to credential evaluation methodology, some of which are listed in **Appendix 1**, provide more detailed information about the process.

Academic credentials are authentic when they are issued by legal entities that are authorized to issue academic credentials and/or conduct examinations and/or teaching. Therefore the process of establishing credential authenticity is concerned with confirming that the credential in question was issued by an entity authorized to issue academic credentials (recognition of institution process), and secondly, that the credential in question originates from the issuing authority (credential authentication process). Before accepting a document as valid, the following questions must be addressed:

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

7.1 Determining the Existence of Institutions

Determining the existence of an academic institution is the first step in accepting a credential. 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. The **enic-naric.net website**, a joint initiative of the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES provides details on the recognized institutions of 53 countries and contains a wealth of information related to current issues in international and professional mobility, as well as on procedures for the recognition of international qualifications. The **UNESCO portal on Higher Education Institutions** is another useful source for information regarding educational systems on 33 countries listed.

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 other publications published by third parties to verify their legitimacy.

A catalogue 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.

7.2 Recognition of Institutions

Every country has laws and regulations that govern the establishment and recognition of academic institutions within their jurisdiction. It is essential that credential evaluators be familiar with those

²Text adapted from WENR article “How to Obtain Authentic Academic Credentials”

regulations and how they are applied. While public (state/government funded) institutions are generally recognized, the status and recognition of private institutions can vary from country to 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” (i.e. India)
- Private universities may be allowed to offer academic programs but without the authority to award recognized degrees (i.e. France)
- Institutions are physically located in one country but they are accredited in a third country (i.e. American University of Paris which has U.S. regional accreditation).
- Specific programs and degrees are recognized, but the institutions themselves are not recognized (i.e. Mexico).
- Newly recognized institutions may have issued credentials before they were recognized (i.e. 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.

7.3 Recognition of 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 Year book. 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.

Additional considerations may include but are not limited to the following questions:

- Is the institution or program recognized or accredited, or both? (Though these two terms are often used interchangeably, there is a distinction between the two)³
- Does the country in question have a system of educational quality assurance mechanism? If yes, who is the authority responsible for quality assurance?
- Was the institution recognized, accredited or both, at the time when the credential in question was issued?
- Was the program in question recognized, accredited or both at the time when the credential was issued?

³ **Recognition** usually refers to an official status granted by the legislation. In Canada, a recognized institution is an academic institution that is recognized by a provincial government for the purpose of awarding degrees. **Accreditation** is a form of recognition as well. In Canada, it is generally defined as a process of quality assurance which guarantees that a program of study complies with standards of education established by professional authorities, with the goal of ensuring that graduates from such programs meet the academic and registration requirements established by the profession. (CICIC, 2003). Recognition and accreditation processes may vary from country to country. See **Appendix 2** for definitions.

08 | FRAUDULENT DOCUMENTS AND DIPLOMA MILLS

As was mentioned earlier, evaluations should always be approached on the premise that most applicants are honest. However, the need to establish the authenticity of documents is a part of the assessment procedure, and dealing with fraudulent documents is one of the aspects of the authentication processes. It is therefore important to understand the contributing factors to fraudulent documents, in order to know what type of fraudulent documents exist and to develop procedures for how to deal with them in a consistent and constructive manner.

8.1 Contributing Factors

Academic credentials and transcripts are a record of an individual's educational human capital and are therefore critical instruments of mobility. They can enable people to move within and across borders, to seek higher education, work commensurate with their qualifications, and professional licensure. The issue of document reliability is critical, as an individual's academic credentials will be more portable when considered authentic. While the number of fraudulent credentials is fairly small as compared to the overall number of people who hold genuine credentials, advancements in technology have made fraudulent documents easier to access and harder to detect. The diploma mill industry makes millions of dollars annually, with technology providing the capacity for a reasonably low overhead and a significant profit margin.

The recognition of a credential that is later proved to be fraudulent could easily undermine the credibility of an organization or institution assessing credentials and of the entire evaluation process. Socio-economic factors are often cited as a major contributor to the production of fraudulent documents, where inadequate funding and capacity to provide formal education can lead to corrupt practices in certain educational systems, institutions or countries.

Diploma mills (also often referred to as degree mills) are businesses that use the names of non-existent universities to sell documents that are not backed by appropriate study or examinations.

8.2 Fraudulent Documents: Document Alterations and Counterfeiting

The most common types of fraudulent activity include the following:

- Counterfeiting entire documents. These fraudulent documents are a fabrication of degrees or transcripts from legitimate academic institutions. Often, these documents very closely resemble authentic documents.
- Altered documents. These are credentials issued by legitimate academic institutions, which have been altered or changed in some way. For example, names, grades or examination results, subjects or other statements were added or altered.

There are several warning signs that should alert credential evaluators. Most of these signals stem from a comprehensive knowledge of the specific system of education in question. It may be useful to create a checklist of warning signs to use while reviewing documents. While this list is not comprehensive, some of the warning signs are the following:

- Applicant claims that required documents cannot be provided while previous cases indicate the contrary.

- Very high grades in a system where grades tend to cluster at the lower end.
- Uncharacteristic documentation format, language or terminology for the institution or the system of education in review.
- Inconsistency in typeface elements on the document.
- Spelling errors.
- Records stamped “confidential” and yet submitted by the applicant.
- Coloured photocopies (good-quality coloured photocopies may easily be accepted for original documents).
- Lines, words, numbers, etc. missing from the use of white-out.
- Noticeable inconsistencies: dates or names appearing on various documents on file do not match.
- Syllabus content does not match academic transcript.
- Lack of security features.

8.3 Diploma Mills and Diploma Mill Credentials

Exploiting demand for higher education, diploma mills have been operating for many years.⁴ Diploma mills can be difficult to trace because they usually use mail drops and multiple addresses. Numerous diploma mills operate on the Internet where they often pose as institutions of distance learning. Legitimate distance learning providers are recognized in the countries where they are located and their status can be verified by contacting the relevant educational authorities. Credential

evaluators should be suspicious of documents issued by institutions with addresses that are office suites or box numbers that cannot be verified in any authoritative independent publication. Most diploma mills also claim ‘accreditation’ by one or more fictitious ‘national’, ‘international’, ‘worldwide’, or ‘global’ accrediting agencies.

Other warning signs include:

- The institution’s website provides little or no information about the location of incorporation and ownership or governance;
- Credential attainment requirements involve little, if any, coursework or few assignments and little, if any, student attendance, either on-site or online.

Verifying the existence and status of an institution is an essential step when reviewing educational documents. The best way to establish the legitimacy of a specific issuing institution is to be as familiar as possible with the educational system in which the institution in question operates. It is just as important to learn as much as possible about the history, structure, governance, programs and official status of institutions whose recognition status is unclear. The “International Handbook of Universities” or the “Commonwealth Universities Yearbook” should be among the first sources

⁴ Text adapted from WENR article “How to Obtain Authentic Academic Credentials”

to consult. Other online and published resources that provide reference regarding recognized and non-recognized institutions include but are not limited to: “Bears’ Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning”, [Oregon Student Assistance Commission website](#) and [India University Grants Commission website](#).

8.4 Preventative Strategies

The problem of illegitimate and fraudulent documents will probably never be entirely eliminated as long as demand persists. Nevertheless, effective strategies to prevent and combat fraudulent credentials can be found: Rather than trying to detect fraudulent documents, which is a very difficult task, receiving documents directly from issuing institutions will greatly diminish the possibility of illegitimate documents and credentials from entering the system.

Knowing specific educational systems’ characteristics and being familiar with the documents from an individual country is another very important weapon in combating the entrance of fraudulent documents into the system. Therefore ensuring adequate training for staff involved in credential evaluation is an essential step for all institutions and organizations engaged in the assessment and/or recognition of international credentials.

An increased collaboration among stakeholders could allow for a greater information exchange as well as for developing common documentation practices to help fight the entrance of fraudulent documents into the system. Notifying colleagues in the field about diploma mills or fraudulent credentials could be an effective way of ensuring that such documents are not re-submitted to another organization for evaluation (i.e. ENIC/NARIC network).

When developing documentation standards policies, it is important to reflect on what consequence(s) exist when fraudulent credentials are submitted, including qualifications issued by diploma mills. When policies are made clear to the public, this can work as part of an effective preventive strategy to applicants who are considering engaging in fraud. For this strategy to be effective, consequences to anyone submitting fraudulent credentials should be considerable, as compared to the benefits of submitting fraudulent credentials and having them go undetected. In a recent document, [“Towards Effective Practice: Discouraging Degree Mills in Higher Education”](#) (UNESCO, 2009), practical advice and a list of actions to be considered for dealing with diploma mills and diploma mill credentials can be found.

Regardless of the circumstances, applicants should be given an opportunity to appeal any evaluation result, including those that identified a credential in question to be fraudulent.

09 | SITUATIONS WHERE REQUIRED DOCUMENTS ARE UNAVAILABLE: POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

9.1 Establishing Criteria

In most cases there are systems and ways to obtain authentic academic documents. However, in some rare instances, despite an individual's efforts and the available assistance from the assessing organization, some individuals may still find it impossible to obtain the required documents to support their application. Most institutions and organizations have developed alternatives for handling such applications. In most such cases, assessing organizations will gather information from the individual about their circumstances first and then decide whether it is appropriate to apply an "unavailable documentation solution".

To ensure that unavailable documentation situations are handled in a consistent and fair manner, it is important to introduce criteria identifying scenarios to which an alternative solution should apply.

For example, the following are often cited as reasons for unavailable documents:

- An institution no longer exists or is not functioning.
- An institution has lost records due to war, upheaval, natural disaster or other crisis.
- An institution is refusing to provide the required documentation (for example, student has not completed military services).
- Contacting an institution to request a document raises a well-founded fear of discrimination or persecution for the individual and his or her family.

This list is not complete and other circumstances "outside an individual's control" should be considered. Based on the role a specific organization plays in the credential evaluation or recognition process, each organization should develop its own distinct policies on required documents and identifying circumstances deemed "outside an individuals' control". This should incorporate solutions to unavailable documentation situations.

The next section discusses some possible solutions to unavailable documentation situations. None of these should be considered sufficient in itself to assure authenticity, but they are possible tools to help establish credibility.

9.2 Alternatives to Unavailable Documentation

The documents that must be submitted with the application are used to verify an individual's credentials, determine his or her preparedness to practice a profession, enter further education or gain employment. Failing to get all the documents can lead to gaps in the information, which in turn may affect registration, admission or hiring decisions.

On a case-by-case basis, assessing institutions and organizations may determine that there may be difficulties in terms of the type or form of documents available in a particular country or in getting an institution to respond to a request. In such cases, notwithstanding the documentation requirement policy set by the assessing organization, the decision can be made to gather information

from individuals about their circumstances and determine whether it is appropriate to apply an “unavailable documentation solution”.

The following considerations may help when deciding whether it is appropriate to rely on alternative forms of documentary proof and what forms of documentary proof may be sufficient:

- Provide an opportunity to an individual to describe their particular situation and gather all the facts; ask an individual to provide supporting evidence that the required documents cannot be obtained for reasons outside of his or her control. For example:
 - Affidavit from an individual stating reasons for which required documents cannot be obtained
 - An official letter from the issuing institution stating that student records were lost and cannot be re-produced
- Do your own investigation as to whether or not the documents in question are obtainable: Is there information and evidence regarding the specific country/educational systems’ characteristics (including documentation practices, political and/or economic situations) that might prevent an individual from obtaining the required documents?
- Determine whether it is appropriate to implement the “unavailable documentation solution” given the facts presented
- Identify what gaps in the information exist and determine which alternative document proof will help to bridge these gaps
- Where possible use more than one alternative to the unavailable documentation method to ensure maximum reliability
- When deciding on alternatives, ensure that all gaps in the information are addressed. Often this will require use of more than one alternative method

Based on the gaps in the information, unavailable documentation solutions may range from providing assistance with obtaining required documents to competency assessments. The following solutions could be considered. This list is not inclusive and, based on the role a specific organization plays in credential evaluation or recognition process, other alternatives could be deliberated.

9.3 Assisting with Obtaining Required Documents

In some cases, difficulties in obtaining required documents are due to varied English or French language proficiency or because institutions abroad are not familiar with the standard practice among North American institutions in sending official academic transcripts directly from one institution to another. In other cases, institutions abroad might send official academic documents overseas only if such a request was made by a “recognized authority” or “government office”. To reduce miscommunication in obtaining official documentation, assessing institutions and organizations might consider providing individuals with an “International Academic Record or Transcript Request Form”. By providing such a form institutions unfamiliar with the Canadian education system will know exactly what documents to send and in which format. The form should clearly explain its purpose, provide concise instructions to both individual and issuing organizations on what is required, ask for the authorized person’s signature, identify a return address, and stipulate how documents are to be sent.

While it is very rare, some institutions issue academic documents only once and do not follow North American practice of sending official academic transcripts from one institution to another. In most cases, if official academic documents cannot be obtained, the documents submitted by the

individual can be sent to the institution that issued them to be verified for authenticity (Document verification processes are described in **Section 4.2**).

It was mentioned earlier that one of the most common reasons for unavailable documents is because an institution no longer exists or is not functioning. It is often presumed that there is no way to track documents of those who attended this institution. While this may at times be the case, investigating the situation to find out whether the previous institution merged with another institution, or whether there is an alternate system that can be used to verify the student's enrolment and completion are important steps to take. In most cases, an appropriate authority in the country of education such as a Ministry or Board of Education could provide the appropriate source. Once it is determined how and where documents were archived this information can be shared with the individual for him or her to make arrangements for required documents. Alternatively, assessing organization can contact the archiving authority directly to verify documents provided by the individual.

A few countries such as China, Pakistan, Russia and Cuba have set up Ministry-authorized offices that verify and send academic documentation on behalf of institutions and students. It can be requested that verification reports or verified credentials be sent directly abroad. The documents received from the ministries or ministry authorized offices are issued in a consistent and standard format, making the authentication process an easier task to complete.

If assisting with obtaining required documents alternatives fail or do not bring required results based on individual's particular circumstances, alternatives described in this section should be considered.

9.4 Affidavits and Documentary Proof from Sources Other than Issuing Institutions

In cases when official academic documents cannot be obtained due to school closure or records lost through war or other disasters, institutions and organizations might consider official confirmations sent directly from the appropriate professional associations abroad. Generally, professional associations abroad would also have entry to profession requirements, which can be compared to Canadian entry-to-practice requirements. For example, when a nursing college no longer exists, individuals could be asked to request a registration certificate from the nursing council or other equivalent organization to confirm that professional competencies in the country of education were met.

In some cases, the individuals could be asked to provide an affidavit in which the individual describes their circumstances or knowledge. These can be combined with the statements or affidavits from third parties, such as former instructors or someone who has personal and professional knowledge of the individual's credentials or circumstances.

Other documentary proof could be used in place of required documents. Some examples of such documentary proof are:

- Instructors' statements about an individual's training
- A published list of registered students
- Student ID
- Student Book
- Admittance to state examinations
- Tuition fee payment proof
- Professional status

9.5 Online Verification Tools and Services

With advances in technology, more and more academic institutions around the world are developing new methods for verifying information about their students. A number of universities and academic institutions provide access to information regarding their students on their websites. Fee-based services that allow registered users to verify degree certificates have been established in a number of countries, such as India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Ukraine, the UK, and South Africa. In most cases on-line verification services or websites confirm award of the degree only and do not attest to an individual's marks or subjects taken. Moreover, due to little information available about security of the data, these records cannot be considered as highly reliable. Therefore, while these are valuable tools, these websites are not a substitute for official academic documents, and should not be relied on as the only source for verifying academic documents.

9.6 Competency Assessments and Exams

Credential evaluation is one of the main instruments for recognizing international credentials. However, in cases where individuals are unable to obtain required documents or where additional information about an individual's skills and competencies is required, competency assessment or exams could allow participants to demonstrate that they are qualified and possess the competencies required to practice in a profession, enter an education program or gain employment.

Competency assessment processes vary from organization to organization. The methodology used to assess prior learning may include assessment of educational documents, portfolio review, exams, structured interviews and clinical assessment in simulation scenarios.

Portfolios are dossiers, which identify past and present competencies specific to a required profession acquired through formal and non-formal experience. Interview and other assessment instruments such as tests, exams and observations in a situational or clinical setting validate portfolios.

Based on the information gathered through these processes, assessing institutions and organizations identify whether a participant demonstrates a sufficient level of professional competence and whether a full recognition for prior learning can be granted. If the assessing organization concludes that a full recognition cannot be granted, a participant is given recommendations for steps to take in order to develop his or her competencies to the required level.

While competency assessment is a great tool, especially in unavailable document situations, it presents a number of challenges. Competency assessment processes can be very time consuming to develop and administer. Thus, the costs associated with developing and administering competency assessment are often quite high and if the participant's fees are not subsidized it can be a significant barrier. Nevertheless, if planned thoroughly, competency assessment can yield very valuable results, which in turn can facilitate access to meaningful employment, educational opportunities or licensure for a participant. Moreover, in some cases this is the only pathway available for individuals who cannot obtain required documents or where additional information about an individual's skills and competencies is required.

CONCLUSION

The Best Documentation Practices Guide is the result of teamwork and a consultative process in which representatives of Ontario regulatory bodies and World Education Services (WES) have developed guidelines on how to obtain authentic documents, set up-to-date documentation requirements, identify fraudulent and diploma mill credentials, and develop alternatives to unavailable documentation.

These guidelines are recommendations and users are not bound into setting policies and implementing practices based on the points of view expressed in this Guide. However, it is hoped that The Best Documentation Practices Guide will assist individuals and organizations assessing international credentials use common terminology and move towards developing and sharing consistent, objective and transparent documentation practices.

ABOUT THIS GLOSSARY AND TERMINOLOGY GUIDE

Surveys and discussions with stakeholders in the credential evaluation sector revealed that the use of credential evaluation terminology differs from one organization to another and in some cases even from one department to another within the same organization. The language of international credential evaluation is prone to jargon and acronyms. At times it can be confusing to organizations and institutions assessing credentials themselves, as well as individuals using these services.

As a first step in moving towards more harmonized documentation practices, it is essential that all involved in credential assessment use a common credential evaluation vocabulary.

First and foremost, this guide attempts to include definitions related to credential evaluation documentation practices only and is not intended to cover all terms associated with credential evaluation methodologies. Originally intended for Ontario regulatory bodies, it reflects terminology concerns highlighted by this group. However, inconsistencies and confusion with terminology abound in the field of international credential assessment and we believe this will be a useful reference for sharing and promoting the use of common terminology across Canada.

The Glossary and Terminology Guide is a work in progress. It currently contains 40 terms and definitions.

Appendix 2 of the Resources lists all publications and websites that were used in compiling the glossary and the Best Practices Guide.

As this is in a living document, we welcome suggestions and feedback. This can be sent to

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APPENDIX 1:

GLOSSARY AND TERMINOLOGY GUIDE

Academic Credential is a documented evidence of learning based on completion of a recognized program of study. Degrees, diplomas, and certificates are examples of academic credentials.

Academic Record is a file containing academic information on each student at an institution. It may include such information as a student's program of study, transfer credits awarded, names of credit and non-credit courses completed, course grades and grade-point average, repeated courses, prior learning assessments, disciplinary actions, and appeals.

Academic Transcript is a document or record of a student's enrolment, progress, and achievement within an education institution. The transcript identifies courses taken (title and course number), credits and grades achieved, and credentials earned.

Accreditation is a process of quality assurance through which accredited status is granted to an educational institution or program of study by the responsible authorities. It means that standards of education established by professional authorities have been met. In Canada, individuals and educational institutions are not accredited. The term applies only to educational programs of study and institutions. The process usually includes self-assessment by the program under review and on-site visits by qualified, external reviewers from government and/or nongovernmental agencies. Degrees, diplomas, or certificates emanating from non-accredited programs do not have the same status as those issued by accredited programs and may not be recognized at all. A program's accreditation status is normally subject to periodic review and may be withdrawn by relevant professional authorities.

Accrediting Body is the authority that is acknowledged as having the responsibility of granting accreditation to formal education programs. Accrediting bodies can be (but are not necessarily) mandated by legislation or by regulatory bodies and consist of government representatives, stakeholder representatives, external academic experts, and professional regulatory bodies.

Affidavit is a written declaration upon oath made before an authorized official.

Apostille is a legal way to have legal documents mutually recognized in other countries as determined by Hague convention.

Certified True Copy is a photocopy of the original document attested to by an authorized person. This attestation is made to the fact that the copy is identical to the original document from which a photocopy is made and not to the fact that the original document is authentic.

Certificate is a document attesting to the successful completion of an educational course or program that is normally less than four semesters in length. A certificate may also qualify holders for entry into an occupation (i.e., Certificates of Qualification in the skilled trades).

Certified Translation is a translation of a document conducted by specially qualified and experienced translators who are authorized to translate documents.

Clinical Training is a period of on-the-job, generally supervised, training included in a professional or vocational qualifying program of study (may be required in addition to academic qualifications for entry into a trade or profession).

Copied Document is one that has been copied by someone other than the authorities at the academic institution or the certifying official. Copies made by notaries are still considered copies.

Course is a single unit of study offered by educational institutions.

Course Description is a documented description of a course. It may include learning outcomes, objectives, content, texts and other resources, and student evaluation methods.

Credit is a unit of recognition indicating successful completion of study, training, or a defined competency as documented in an academic record/transcript.

Degree is a title awarded by a university or other authorized academic institution for successful completion of a program of academic study.

Degree Certificate is a document of recognition confirming award of a degree.

Diploma is a title awarded upon graduation, or a document attesting to the successful completion of a program of postsecondary academic and/or vocational training and education. It is also a document of recognition awarded to a student who has completed an approved program of at least four semesters' duration or the equivalent.

Diploma or Degree Mills are fraudulent businesses that use the names of non-existent universities to sell documents that are not backed by appropriate study or examinations.

Diploma Supplement is a document produced by national institutions (mostly) in European countries that is appended to credentials and that provides a description of the nature, level, context, content, and status of studies pursued and successfully completed by an individual. Attached to the diploma supplement is a description of the national higher education system within which the individual named on the original qualification graduated.

Fraudulent Credential is a document, which was illegally modified or reproduced. Fraudulent documents are also considered forged if it is claimed that they were issued by a legal entity that did not issue it. Fraudulent credential modifications may include:

- The addition of subjects or statements to an academic credential or a transcript
- Alterations of grades or examination results on an academic credential or a transcript
- The substitution of names on an academic credential or a transcript (whereby the academic information is true and accurate, but pertains to a different individual)
- The counterfeiting of an entire credential or transcript.

International Academic Credential is an academic credential that has been granted by an institution or authority outside of Canada.

Issuing Authority with respect to any academic credential is:

- The institution or authority which granted that credential; or
- A centralized agency established and authorized by an appropriate government agency (i.e., Council or Ministry of Education) to collect, issue and verify records pertaining to that credential.)

Licence and/or Certificate of Registration is a document used by some trades and professions to signify that the licence-holder meets competency and other requirements and is entitled to practise. Although generally used within a regulatory system prohibiting practice without a licence, there are

occupations for which licensing is voluntary. Licences may also be granted to services and facilities (as in a licensed day-care facility).

Non-recognized Institution is an academic institution in Canada that is not recognized by a provincial government for the purpose of awarding degrees or diplomas.

Notarized copy is a photocopy of an original document attested to by a notary public. This attestation is made to the fact that the copy is identical to the original document from which photocopy is made and not to the fact that the original document is authentic.

Official Document is the one that has been received in a sealed envelope directly from the issuing award authority and has never been in possession of anyone other than the institution that issued it. It must bear the institution seal, date and appropriate signing authority signature.

Original Document is the one that was issued to the student by the award-issuing institution.

Portfolio contains formally presented documentation and other supporting evidence that demonstrates and provides validation of learning achieved from prior experience and that articulates the learning toward course or program requirements.

Proof of Identity is a document that may be used to verify aspects of a person's personal identity; commonly used to verify the name, date of birth and nationality of individual. Often only government-issued documentation is accepted such as a birth certificate or passport.

Practicum is a school or college course, especially one in a specialized field of study that is designed to give students supervised practical application of previously studied theory.

Recognition is a formal acceptance of a student's knowledge, skills, or former academic studies and the granting of advanced standing or credit. May also apply to formal acceptance of an educational institution by another institution or public authority.

Recognized Institution is an academic institution in Canada that is recognized by a provincial government for the purpose of awarding degrees.

Regulatory Body governs the profession/trade. It has the authority to set entry requirements and standards of practice, to assess applicants' qualifications and credentials, to certify, register, or license qualified applicants, and to discipline members of the profession/trade. To practice a regulated profession and use a regulated title, one must have a License, Certificate or be registered with the regulatory body for the occupation.

Sealed Envelope is a stationary item used to transmit official academic documents. It is also a criterion used to identify whether or not a document could be considered official. The sealed envelope must bear the institution logo and/or seal, date and appropriate signing authority signature. For a document to be considered official, a signing authority at the award-issuing institution will have to place a document inside an envelope, seal the envelope, sign it across the flap, and forward to a recipient. If the seal is unbroken when the envelope reaches the recipient, the document could be considered official. It is the recipient who ultimately determines whether the document is official.

A Statement of Professional Standing is a letter from a licensing institution, such as a regulatory body or ministry, confirming registration status and whether (and if so, for what reason) the right of the individual in question to practice a profession has ever been suspended. This statement provides the recipient institution or organizations with information regarding the individual's past professional experience. In some cases, it lists past suspensions or other disciplinary actions against the individual in question.

Statutory Declaration is a legal document commonly used to allow a person to affirm something to be true for the purposes of satisfying legal requirement or regulation when no other evidence is available. It is similar to affidavits; however, it is not sworn or made on oath.

Syllabus is a written description of a program of study and its courses.

Translation is a rendering of a document issued in one language into another language.

Verified Document is one which has had its authenticity confirmed through direct contact with the issuing authority and/or centralized agency authorized to verify academic credentials.

APPENDIX 2: RESOURCES

- **Best Practices.** Ohio Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers. http://www.ohioaacrao.org/best_practices.asp
- **Dictionary.com.** <http://dictionary.reference.com/>
- **The Dilemma of Forgery: Altered Documents in an International Context.** R. Cook. Educational Credential Evaluators (ECE). 2005
- **Diploma and Accreditation Mills: Exposing Academic Credential Abuse.** Eyal Ben Cohen and Rachel Winch. 2010. www.accredibase.com
- **Enic-naric.net website.** <http://www.enic-naric.net/>
- **Evaluation Definitions.** National Association of Credential Evaluation Services. <http://www.naces.org/evaluationdefinitions.html>
- **A Foreign Qualification Recognition Plan for Alberta.** Alberta Employment and Immigration. 2008. work.alberta.ca/
- **General Guiding Principles for Good Practice in the Assessment of Foreign Credentials.** Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, <http://www.cicic.ca/502/good-practice.canada>
- **Guide to Terminology in Usage in the Field of Credentials Recognition and Mobility.** English version. Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC). 2003. <http://www.cicic.ca/410/guide-to-terminology-usage-in-the-field-of-credentials-recognition-in-canada.canada>
- **Guidelines for the Recognition of Refugee’s Qualifications.** E. Malfroy. NARIC-Flanders. 1999
- **How to obtain Authentic International Academic Credentials.** WENR. WES. 2007 <http://www.wes.org/ewenr/WESDocumentationMthd.pdf>
- **Labour Market Integration of Skilled Immigrants: Good Practices for the Recognition of International Credentials.** T. Owen, S. Lowe. World Education Services. 2008 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001798/179835e.pdf>
- **National Transcript Guide for Use in Canadian Postsecondary Institutions.** Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC). 2003
- **New Directions in Global Documentation Standards, Recognition and Portability.** Sophia J. Lowe, WES. 2009
- **Office of the Fairness Commissioner Publications.** <http://www.fairnesscommissioner.ca/en/publications/index.php>
- **Ontario College of Teachers 2010 Registration Guide.** Ontario College of Teachers. 2010. www.oct.ca
- **Practical Skills in Credential Evaluation.** WES Workshop Participant Guide. World Education Services. 2008

- ***Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications.*** Forum of Labour Market Ministers, 2009 <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/publications/fcr/pcf.shtml>
- ***Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Credential Evaluation. Final Report.*** Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials. 2008
- ***Recognition and Authentication of Overseas Students Qualifications: Towards a Best Practice Model for Australia.*** G. Brown. The University of Adelaide
- ***Recognition of Foreign Qualifications. Guide for Recognition Specialists.*** EAIE Professional Section. 2004
- ***Recognition of Professional Qualifications to Work in Regulated Professions in Canada.*** Canadian Network of National Association of Regulators. 2005. <http://www.cnnar.ca>
- ***Recommendations on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications.*** UNESCO, Lisbon Recognition Convention, <http://www.cicic.ca/docs/lisboa/recommendation-foreign-qualifications.en.pdf>
- ***Regulators' Guide for Promoting Access to Professions by International Candidates.*** Ontario Regulators for Access. <http://www.regulators4access.ca/html/guidprin.htm>
- ***Survey of Good Practices for the Recognition of Equivalence of Credentials and Training Acquired Outside Quebec.*** Conseil interprofessionnel du Quebec. 2006. www.professions-quebec.org
- ***To the Point: A Plain Language Guide for Regulators.*** Office of the Manitoba Fairness Commissioner. 2010. http://www.manitobafairnesscommissioner.ca/wp-content/uploads/To-the-Point_A-Plain-Language-Guide-for-Regulators4.pdf
- ***Towards Effective Practice: Discouraging Degree Mills in Higher Education.*** Council for Higher Education Accreditation. UNESCO. 2009
- ***Training Course on International Credential Evaluation for Mediterranean Countries.*** UNESCO. 2005
- ***Training Handbook and Reference Guide for Evaluators of Educational Qualifications, Credentials and Academic Documents.*** A. J. Alisaukas. New Papers on Higher Education. Meeting documents. UNESCO.
- ***The UNESCO portal on Higher Education Institutions:*** http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49864&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.htmv



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