



Building a Resource Library, Part V: Researching Institutions

Transcript Research

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Building a Resource Library – Part V

Thank you for joining me for the latest installment in this series on building your resource library. Previous issues have included information about adding sample credentials to your collection, organizing your library, building a glossary, and more. This installment focuses on doing some of the research. In particular, we're going to focus on researching institutions.

There are several major reasons you would want to research an institution. First and foremost, you need to identify the recognition. In addition to recognition, you might need to look up information about the program to identify things like standard duration, entrance requirements, or the study plan and course requirements. The grading information might differ from what you have previously seen, or this institution may have different scales depending on the faculty, program, and time period. Finally, you might need to find contact information to ask questions or verify the credential. There are likely other reasons for institutional research, but these reasons will be the focus of this discussion.

Recognition

Recognition of an institution or program is of critical importance to compare a student's records to your own country's system. While TAICEP members are a varied lot from any number of countries, I personally am writing from a US perspective so many of my examples will be North American based. As a result, my goal when working with international educational institutions is to compare them to regionally accredited institutions in the US. If you are working for an institution that is not from the US, your goals when looking up an educational institution will be different. For more information about accreditation in the US, you can check out [an article](#) I wrote previously. Most countries outside the US do not have accreditation; their higher education authorities will confer recognition instead.

How do you identify the recognition of an institution (and program, when needed)? In the majority of countries, there will be a single central higher education authority that confers recognition of public higher education institutions (HEIs) like universities, institutes, post-secondary colleges, academies, and more. Private HEIs may be recognized by the same authority, or there might be a different body in charge of private education. The same may be true for non-university higher education institutions. It is also fairly common for teaching colleges, music or arts academies, technical institutes, nursing colleges, military academies, or medical universities to be authorized by a different higher education authority than the one recognizing general academic public universities.

Identifying recognition of public universities is generally the easiest because those are the ones most likely to be listed on the education authority's website. When I am trying to research an institution, the first thing I want to do is look at the higher education authority's website. In many cases, this is the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), but in some countries, all levels of education are handled by the Ministry of Education (MOE). In other places, the higher education authority goes by a different name like University Grants Commission, Ministry of University Education and Research, Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Supreme Council of Universities, Secretary of Public Education, National Council for Higher Education, and other variations.

In a few places, the educational authority does not have its own website but is part of the website for the national government. In our technological age, I prefer going to the higher education authority's



website rather than relying on books or databases that are issued by someone else if I am not totally confident what their criteria was for listing the institutions in those resources. Some of the print publications I used to include on my “save from a burning building” list 15 years ago are no longer even in my regular research rotation because I have come to learn that they have included diploma mills and unrecognized institutions. Also, many of the print publications and subscription databases focus on public universities, which means that I generally have to look elsewhere for the non-university higher education institutions anyway.

To try to find an educational authority, I usually conduct an internet search by typing the name of the country in the native language followed by “educational system.” This will give me a great deal of totally unofficial – but still often useful – information, but it will frequently help me identify the educational authorities after scrolling through a few pages of results. I love research and can easily lose a few hours that way. Sometimes, though, it’s nice to just have a list of those educational bodies already at hand so that you can go right to the source to look up your institution.

Every two or three years, my organization releases a publication called *Higher Education Authorities* (formerly, *Researching International Education Systems and Institutions*). We have updated that publication in conjunction with the release of this fifth installment in the *Building a Resource Library* series in order to give TAICEP members an updated list of tools for researching institutional recognition.

As always, this is not an all-inclusive list. There will be some countries who have newly implemented national accreditation agencies that we haven’t learned about yet. There are countries on this list whose websites are currently being migrated, whose websites are down, whose websites are currently in progress. For some countries, we were unable to find any official website for government authorities covering education. For other countries, we have an entire page filled with different types of educational authorities but still might have missed something. In most cases, we have focused on academic higher education, but we have also included a large number of technical educational authorities and even some vocational bodies. This publication is identified as a draft because we will be making additional edits in the next few weeks and months as time permits. If you find we’ve left something out, or you are able to track down working web-pages that we were unable to find (or if the url changes from the beginning of the month to the end!) please feel free to pass it along, and we will update the document on our website for other evaluators to use. You can access the draft version of *Higher Education Authorities 2019* [here](#).

Once you have your higher education authorities lists, you can navigate to the website to if your institution is listed. If you are working with an older credential, there is a high likelihood that some institutions have changed names, merged, lost recognition, closed, been upgraded from college to university status, or other updates. In those instances, you would want to then refer to your print publications and educational advisors I talked about in previous articles in this series.

Remember, too, if you are dealing with translations, sometimes the hardest thing to figure out is how it’s been translated on the documents compared to the educational authority’s list. It is not a good idea to assume that the translator who translated the school’s name is going to use the same exact translation that the ministry (or Google Translate) used. As a result, if you are working with documents that are not issued in the language(s) you read, and you do not initially find the institution on the higher education authority’s list, it is a good idea to try to look it up in the native language. It’s also important to note



that while many educational bodies have multiple language versions of their websites, their native language version is generally going to be the most extensive. For example, it is very common for the English-language version of a site to have generalized information about the education system and might even contain a list of public universities, while the French-language main website also includes lists of the colleges of education, private universities, *grandes ecoles*, and other institutions.

In my office, we attempt to visit and save a local copy of each higher education authority's website every year or so. That way, if a new government decides to revamp the website and throw out all of that useful information, we still have it. If the country suffers from political unrest resulting in power fluctuations and websites that are down more often than not, we still have it. If the school closed last year or didn't pay to renew their domain, we still have the list from two years ago. You get what I mean. We typically save a PDF of the list in our country folder using the acronym for the higher education authority (MOE, for example) and append the year to the end. That way, if the website's address actually stays the same from year to year, we maintain our historical records and are not replacing what we had previously downloaded when we go to save the page.

Some countries also require programmatic accreditation, but that is beyond the scope of this article. (You can read more about programmatic accreditation in that same article about US education I linked above.) However, we have tried to include programmatic accrediting bodies in our *Higher Education Authorities* publication as often as we can track them down. For countries where this process is newly being developed, the information is not always available online, however.

Degree Program Information

You have tracked down the ministerial website. You have navigated through the twists and turns and finally found your institution. But now you look at the transcript and find that you have more questions! You have never heard of this kind of credential; it isn't in your resources so you are uncertain about its admissions requirements, standard duration, graduation requirements, or anything else that helps you fit it into the educational system of its home country so that you can then relate it to something you already know how to handle.

There are no credits, coefficients, hours, or any other weights to let you know if some classes are more intensive than others. Many academic records (transcripts) are issued without any type of course weight or credit, but most institutions do actually assign weights to the coursework, meaning you will need to track down that information if you need to assign hours to individual subjects or calculate a weighted average.

You may need to look up course names that are abbreviated in an unclear way, or perhaps the marksheet just has course codes, and the attested copy doesn't include the back (overleaf) which would have listed the subject names, too. You might need to find out if those language classes are language preparation rather than university level, or if that "prerequisite mathematics" course is remedial (pre-degree) and should not receive advanced standing. You may also be uncertain as to whether an incomplete program was taken on a full-time basis, or if the student was enrolled part-time, which would affect the amount of comparable credit you would recommend for a transfer student. Your student may have said that the program was offered entirely in your language rather than the standard language of instruction for that country.



For those of you at higher education institutions, your institution may need you to identify the more advanced coursework that is required later in the program. If you need to match the coursework to your own institution's coursework (catalog matching) to try to award transfer credit, you may hope to track down course descriptions if they have not been provided by the student. These are some of the reasons you might need information about the specific program of study. All of these situations require further information than what you will generally find on the academic documents themselves.

This is frequently accomplished by going to the institution's website and navigating through their offerings. Sometimes, though, a website is so huge or cumbersome, or so bare bones it has little more than an address and list of prices, that it may be difficult to find the things you need. There are strategies for using a search engine rather than directly seeking the information on the institution's website. Sometimes institution websites go down, or old curricular information is replaced, but people might upload curricular information, catalogs, or educational presentations to document storage services like Scribd, Doc Player, Issuu, or SlideShare. It is becoming more and more common for institutions to share their course catalogs, prospectus, degree brochures, graduation programs, and even presentation slides on these external sites, but these documents are uploaded by others as well.

When searching for course information, your search engine will be a fantastically helpful tool. With patience and a series of key words, you will be amazed at how much information is stored on the internet. It is critical to note that the proper terminology will give you the best results. If you are working with a US transcript for example, and you want to know the information about about the course content, the hours required for graduation, the recommended outline of coursework, and other critical components of a degree program, you might use terms like degree plan or catalog. Less commonly, you might use such terms as planning chart, course of study, and degree completion program. If you were to try to look for this same information from India, you would use syllabus, though in the US, a syllabus generally refers to the requirements and schedule of a single course rather than the overarching blueprint for the entire degree program. From Canada, you might have better success looking for a catalog or calendar, and Canadian universities often maintain calendar archives on their websites of historical information. In Spanish-speaking countries, you may find that *plan de estudio*, *oferta*, or *estructura curricular* are more useful. You might also find useful information by searching for the *carrera* (academic career) or *carrera educativa*.

In Europe, they may use course structure, mentions of ECTS or Bologna, or just study plan. The diploma supplement itself will also have incredibly detailed information, and many institutions in Europe (and those who are modeling themselves on the Bologna system or applying to be signatories) may have sample diploma supplements posted online. At some institutions, the prospectus will be simply application information (but can still yield important information on entrance requirements and duration of study so we still want them), but other times, the prospectus will include detailed information about the courses, grading, weight, etc. Academic Regulations is another common phrase you can use when searching for this information and may also provide the program details or grading scale information. Student handbooks can also be incredibly helpful resources.

Using the Internet Archive, you can also look up historical information by copying and pasting the website address into the Wayback Machine to see what has been backed up from that domain. For older credentials, we sometimes find that the institution appears to have launched a new website at a new address, so you may also need to search for the old website. Resources for hunting down these older



website addresses include print books as well as the electronic publication that I mentioned in previous entries in this series. Unofficial sources like wikipedia and online news websites also might point you to old institutional website addresses. For example, Indian universities now primarily use websites whose addresses look like this: `universityname.ac.in`. But when you go to that website and try to look up historical information in the Internet Archive, you see that nothing goes back further than a few years, and the documents you're examining are from eight years ago, recently enough that it's likely that they had a website. You can make the educated guess that they have changed their web address. If you look in the Universities Handbook, you will find that most Indian universities used to have addresses that looked like this: `universityname.ernet.in`. Now you can plug that old website into the Internet Archive and try to find the information about your student's program that is no longer offered. The Internet Archive can be incredibly useful, allowing you to look up entrance requirements, standard duration or full-time status, course requirements, course curriculum, and more, but from a historical context.

Another strategy for looking for this curricular information is to conduct an internet search with the institution's name and one of the course names or course codes. Ideally, you would want to select a subject or subjects that seem like they would be relatively unique to that program, such as courses that appear to be in the major, courses taken at what appears to be an advanced level, that sort of thing. Sometimes, you might end up finding course descriptions, but frequently, this will allow you to track down a degree plan. As before, I encourage you to use quotes around the name of the institution and the name of the course (or the course number) and italicize it. You might be able to get some success by doing an internet search of the full degree name, but sometimes that information is too broad, and the purpose here is to identify more narrow information. As always, I encourage you to save the syllabi and degree plans (or whatever they're called for that country and institution) to your resource library. Even if you don't use it again for that specific degree program in the future, you may end up working with another student from that institution or even that country who has similarly named courses.

Grading Scales

Another situation where you may find that you have to do some serious research is when trying to identify the appropriate grading scale for use at that institution for that program at that moment in time. The strategies used for searching for grading scales is very similar to those mentioned above when trying to track down the curriculum. In the majority of situations, an institution has a single grading system it uses throughout all of its programs, so you won't necessarily need to search for the grading scale or system specific to your student's program. There are certainly countries where that is not the case (India being the most obvious answer); in those scenarios, a single institution might have different grading scale for each program or even different grading systems in place for diploma, Bachelor, and Master graduate programs.

Regardless, you can follow the same steps as our earlier research. Conduct a search with your favorite search engine and search for terms like grading system, grading scale, grades, marks, marking system, marking scheme, assessment system, *media*, *calificacione*, *notes*, *nota*, *escala de calificaciones*, score, result, and others. Sometimes, only the highest and lowest grades are listed, without any information about the distribution of those grades. Searching by those grades may lead you to more detailed information. If the transcript is in another language, try to use the native language terminology from the header column for where the grades are listed. If the transcript shows verbal or descriptive grades (excellent, very good, good, etc), those are also key terms that may help you identify the grading scale.



You can also try searching for terms like minimum passing grade, minimum pass mark, and grade average. If the transcript shows multiple types of grades used (descriptive grades, percentage grades, letter grades, and/or grades on a 10-point or 4-point scale), you might have more success with searching by a different grading type. If degree classifications are used, you can search by "second class" or "degree classification" or guess about what you think the range of grades might be for that classification based on other grading scales from that country.

Sometimes there are common grading scales used by many institutions at that level within a country. You may be able to use that information as your starting point. Generic grading scales are listed in many of the resources that are identified in previous installments of this series as well as the resources shared in the Resources for Members section of the website. Once you have this starter scale, you can try searching by the name of the institution and its grade ranges, essentially reverse engineering the grading scale used by assuming that is the scale used at that institution and trying to find confirmation.

Hopefully, these different strategies help you find grading scales when needed. This is a gold mine of information that you definitely want to keep. Like so many things, the more often you practice searching for scales, the less intimidating and easier it becomes.

Verification

At our institution, we attempt to send all documents for verification if we are not able to verify them online. We find the TAICEP database of verification sources to be a great starting point, but we also end up seeking out new verification contacts ourselves. This often involves going to the institution's or exam body's website and trying to find contact information. For secondary leaving exams, many of the exam boards are now offering online databases that allow you to electronically verify the results of the most recent exam sitting; some boards maintain larger databases that extend further into the past. National exam boards often share their results lists with news outlets who post it online. Many institutions also maintain electronic databases of graduates to allow you to easily confirm graduation, and more and more are allowing digital verification or issuance of the complete academic record. Blockchain has the potential to revolutionize our industry in fascinating and challenging ways as more records are digitized and made available securely, but we are still taking small steps. Universities often publish their list of current or recent graduands or graduates on their convocation webpage. Growing numbers of countries are building national databases of degree holders in an effort to combat fraud. In 2017, the Resources for Members Committee presented a webinar on Using the Internet for Verification of Academic Documents, and both the recording and handout are still available for members in the TAICEP webinar archive section.

In addition to the other ideas listed here, there are other things you can do to try to find someone who will respond to your request. If the institution has a records, registrar, student records, or registration section, that is often a good place to start. You can also check under student administration, administrative units, examination and graduation division, and other categories that refer to recording student school data. In addition, you might get a faster response by looking for the particular college or faculty. While you want the documents to be issued by the central records office, the dean in the department of biology in the faculty of science might be more likely to respond to your request because



they have a closer connection to the student. In addition, you can often find contact information for actual people rather than a generic email address to a large office.

When all else fails, many institutions have a generic email address like `info@xxxx` or `help@xxxx`. The same is true for things like registrar, rektor, rector, records so if you are not able to easily find an email address on the website, you can try searching for the native language term for the registrar followed by `@universitydomain`, like rektor@bgpu.ru, and see if that is a legitimate email address or directs you to something similar.

If the website has this option, you can use the built-in search feature to navigate directly to the person or office who processes degree validation, transcript verification, enrollment confirmation, transcript processing, document authentication, or other student services. If the website does not have a search feature, you can use Google Site Search syntax by going to [google.com](https://www.google.com) and typing in `site:url "search term"`. For example, if you want to find the verification mentions on our website, you can go to google and type:

`site:taicep.org "verification"`

The screenshot shows a Google search interface. The search bar contains the text "site:taicep.org 'verification'". Below the search bar, there are tabs for "All", "Images", "News", "Books", "Videos", "More", and "Settings". The "All" tab is selected. Below the tabs, it says "About 217 results (0.30 seconds)". The first search result is titled "Verification Sources for Educational Documents - taicep" with a URL "https://www.taicep.org > ... > Resources for Members > Reference Materials". Below the title, there is a snippet of text: "This content is for Individual, Member of Organization, Affiliate, Individual – Pay by Check, M Organization – Pay by Check and Affiliate – Pay by Check ...". The second search result is titled "Webinar: 'Using the Internet for Verification of Academic Documen" with a URL "https://www.taicep.org > Home > Events". Below the title, there is a snippet of text: "Oct 17, 2017 - In those days, institutions had to send a letter by postal mail to request verific authenticity of your applicants' academic documents."

Sometimes, you will notice that the documents themselves might have contact information. If the transcript lists an email address on it, it is always a good idea to search for that address using your search engine to see if that email is legitimate. Naturally, older email addresses might have been retired in more recent years as staff change and websites get updated, so failure to find a current use of that email address does not automatically mean it is not legitimate (but I would not recommend using it exclusively if you can't find any confirmation on the institution's website or other official resources that the email is tied to the institution.). It's also important to note that, in many countries in Francophone Africa and the Middle East as well as other parts of the world, the official email accounts might actually be gmail.com, yahoo.fr, yahoo.com, or other third-party email providers.

Ideally, when sending verification requests, you will want to send the email in the native language. We have email templates for common languages in an effort to increase the likelihood of getting a response. Sometimes an institution's website will have an international students section where they might speak your language. You might also try contacting that office to see if they can point you in the right direction if you don't get a response to your initial request or are unable to find a contact person.



Due to privacy concerns, our application form has a section that specifically requires the student to agree to allow us to send their documents for verification, and they have to provide a signature release as proof. We also created a verification form that allows the institution to quickly and easily respond to whether or not the documents are legitimate by simply checking off yes or no (and explaining why if the documents are not authentic) and then adding their signature and stamp. When we send our verification requests, we send our language-specific email with a series of attachments: the signed release from the application granting us their permission to send their documents for verification, our easy-to-answer verification form, and copies of the applicant's documents in the native language.

When I'm searching for one degree plan, catalog, or grading scale, I often come across numerous others that I don't need right then. Students also sometimes provide copies of their study plans or course descriptions, graduation requirements, other things like that as part of their personal application packet. Transcripts will frequently include grading scale information or even information about the program curriculum or education system as a whole. This is especially true for Bologna signatories but is increasingly popular even outside of Europe to improve transparency. I save all syllabi, catalogs, grading scales, etc as I come across them in their respective country folder. When I'm searching for information about a new-to-me credential or institution, I check in the country folder first. If an institution has an online repository of degree plans, archived catalogs, or other extensive information, I also save that in the Additional Resources section of the wiki for that country (in addition to downloading all of the files in case they disappear with the next website revision or change in leadership.)

I know this was a rapid and broad take on researching institutions, but I hope that it pointed you in the right direction and helped you as you continue to grow your resource library.