

From Equivalency to Admission: An Analysis of Credential Evaluation Policies for Foreign Applicants to Taiwanese Universities

Research Overview

This study examines how Taiwanese universities evaluate foreign academic credentials in admissions. Using qualitative interviews with admissions officers, it analyzes policy interpretation and implementation, highlighting variation, discretion, and institutional pressures shaping access, equity, and international enrollment within Taiwan's expanding higher education system.

Introduction and Purpose of Study

Taiwan's international student population has grown rapidly, increasing from under 80,000 in 2013 to over 140,000 by 2025 (Lin, 2025; Study in Taiwan, 2026; Yang, 2024). Growth has accelerated in recent years, including a 16% increase between 2024 and 2025 alone (Study in Taiwan, 2026). On a per-capita basis, Taiwan now enrolls nearly twice as many international students as the United States.

While existing scholarship has examined student mobility, push-pull factors, and internationalization policy, limited attention has been given to how universities evaluate the academic credentials of foreign applicants during admissions. This gap is significant, as credential evaluation policies directly shape access, equity, and institutional capacity to sustain international enrollment growth.

In this study, credential evaluation refers to institutional processes used to assess the legitimacy, comparability, equivalency, and admissibility of foreign academic qualifications. Rather than a purely technical procedure, it is conceptualized as a discretionary administrative practice shaped by institutional goals, policy ambiguity, and organizational pressures.

Drawing on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) and institutional governance perspectives, this study examines how Taiwanese universities interpret and implement credential evaluation policies. It addresses three questions:

1. How do admissions officers interpret and implement credential evaluation policies?
2. What institutional and policy factors shape variation across universities?
3. How do admissions officers balance enrollment goals with concerns regarding academic legitimacy, fairness, and equivalency?

By documenting admissions officers' perspectives, this study contributes to understanding how institutional gatekeeping practices shape international student mobility and access to higher education in Taiwan.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to explore admissions practices in depth. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews with approximately 20 admissions officers responsible for international applicants at a diverse set of Taiwanese institutions, including public and private universities with varying enrollment profiles. Additional participants may be recruited through theoretical sampling.

Interviews focus on evaluation criteria, operational procedures, policy development, and the role of emerging technologies in admissions. Institutional documents related to credential evaluation supplement interview data. Data collection continues until thematic saturation is reached.

Interviews are transcribed and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009), including initial coding, focused coding, memo writing, and category development. This iterative process supports the identification of recurring and emergent themes and the development of a conceptual model linking institutional practices to international admissions outcomes.

Results and Discussion

This study conceptualizes credential evaluation as an institutional governance process involving interpretation, discretion, and judgments of legitimacy. Admissions officers operate within organizational environments shaped by competing pressures, including enrollment targets, institutional reputation, regulatory compliance, and academic quality concerns.

Findings are expected to highlight both commonalities and variation across institutions, as well as potential gaps between formal policies and actual practices. A grounded-theory framework enables the development of an explanatory model linking admissions policies to institutional capacity for international enrollment.

The study also examines how emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and digital verification systems, are reshaping credential evaluation. While these tools may increase efficiency, they also raise questions regarding transparency, consistency, and the role of human judgment in admissions decision-making.

Conclusions and Implications

Little is currently known about how credential evaluation policies differ across Taiwanese universities, how they have evolved, or how consistently they are implemented. Additionally, limited research has examined how admissions officers exercise discretion when interpreting academic equivalency across diverse international education systems.

This study addresses these gaps by providing empirical insight into the policies and practices that shape international student admissions in Taiwan. Its findings have implications for institutional policy development, administrative practice, and broader efforts to sustain higher education internationalization.

More broadly, the study contributes to international higher education research by demonstrating that credential evaluation is not merely a technical procedure but a socially and institutionally constructed process through which universities define academic legitimacy and regulate access to transnational educational mobility.

References

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