Student Data Portability and the Groningen Declaration

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Overview

Studying abroad has become an important way to gain a more global perspective and to understand issues affecting the world. Unfortunately, as more students study globally, the college and university admissions process has not evolved enough. Reliance on paper documents makes verification of student credentials and identity difficult and time consuming.

To address this problem, many ministries of education and universities worldwide have created digital repositories of student information. However, much of this data is siloed and difficult to share. The Groningen Declaration is intended to facilitate student mobility and student data portability on the international level. This initiative is gaining support worldwide.

Context

The panel discussed the importance of student mobility and how initiatives like the Groningen Declaration promote student data portability.

Key Takeaways

- As students become more globally mobile, higher education can provide better service through digital documents.

Students are more mobile than ever before. Studying abroad has become an important way to understand issues affecting the world. In the near future, close to a million international students will be in the United States each year and over a quarter of a million Americans annually will study abroad.

To serve students on the move, educational institutions must abandon paper documents. All the necessary technology is available today, but without the will of key stakeholders it will not happen.

"All our records are born digital, but we still consume and transact in paper. We have to stop; otherwise we can't serve our students.”
— Tom Black, Stanford University

Several initiatives are already underway at the national and international levels to improve verification of student information.

- China has developed a robust system for verifying student qualifications and records.

In China, two important educational milestones are qualifications and degrees. The qualification system began in 1950, while the degree system started in 1981. Qualifications are documented in individuals’ personal archives and are directly related to employment and compensation. In 2012, around 10.9 million students received qualifications and one-third that number got degrees.

One of the responsibilities of the China Higher Education Student Information and Career Center (CHESICC) is verification of qualifications. This institution, which reports to the Chinese Ministry of Education, maintains a database with application information, national college entrance examination scores, enrollment records, qualification data, and job information. CHESICC’s database contains approximately 720 million records.

CHESICC is the only organization authorized by China’s Ministry of Education to provide verification reports of qualification. This service is used for work verification, student loans, credit cards, job applications, overseas study, and the Chinese Service Center for Scholar Exchange.

In addition to student qualification, verifications are also available for:

1. Study record and scores at higher education institutions.
2. Qualification of high school and scores in the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE).
CHESICC offers three types of verification services.

1. **Online verification.** The China Higher Education Student Information website is the only resource for online verification. Study record and qualification verification can be provided in several different forms: personal review, individual verification, member verification, batch verification, web service, or XML.

2. **Electronic verification reports.** These pdf reports are available in Chinese and English. The barcode in verification reports can be pasted into resumes.

3. **Paper verification reports.** Paper reports contain anti-counterfeiting features. In addition, they can verify qualifications which may not be in the database.

CHESICC’s information service has dramatically improved China’s education credibility system. In 2012, over 70 million data were verified and nearly 3 million e-verification reports were run. Demand for e-verification reports increased by 50% in 2012, while requests for paper verification reports were stable. Over the last 10 years, the percentage of fake or unrecognized qualifications has decreased dramatically. Looking ahead, education background reports will be launched this year which integrate qualification information into one report.

- **Mexico’s national student data registry is intended to fight fraud and improve student mobility.**

To obtain a higher education degree in Mexico, the Ministry of Education must ensure that the student’s high school background is authentic. Unfortunately, it can take months to validate high school diplomas issued in Mexico.

A few years ago, a student information database was created. It has approximately 47 million documents, but most are elementary and secondary education certificates. The goal is to augment the database with tertiary education data. In January 2011, the Mexican Congress made the legal changes needed to create an official national registry of student data.

Every state in Mexico must develop its own student data registry which will connect with the national registry. The primary issues now are creating a national standard for student data and improving regulations related to data protection.

- **The Groningen Declaration aims to streamline the student verification process internationally.**

As in other countries, Dutch education administrators grappled for many years with authentication of student information. In response, the Netherlands created a system that enables students to go abroad and take their digital data with them.

Herman de Leeuw, who works at the Dutch Ministry of Education, recognized that countries like the Russian Federation, China, India, and South Africa all collected student data in similar systems. If these systems could be united and share data, it would be possible to eliminate paper documents and increase security around student identities.

To formalize efforts around digital student portability, Mr. de Leeuw wrote the Groningen Declaration, which is based on the Bologna Declaration. This initiative gained momentum as the European Association for International Education (EAIE) established a task force focused on Digital Student Data Portability in 2011.

- **Education leaders around the world support the Groningen Declaration.**

The Groningen Declaration provides students the opportunity to develop their talents on the global stage without paperwork, apostilles, or fraud-related delays becoming limiting factors. The initiative is significant because universities and ministries of education are developing information depositories, as well as game plans for information sharing that will enable the admissions process.

In addition to countries like the Russian Federation, China, and the United Kingdom, three leading education organizations have endorsed the Groningen Declaration.

— **The National Clearinghouse.** The National Clearinghouse decided to participate in the Declaration because it believes in the governing principles of privacy protection and security of student information.

> "Fraud is a $2.5 billion business annually. It makes it complicated to understand which students are valid and which aren’t. Getting to reliable data is absolutely critical."

— Rick Torres, National Student Clearinghouse

— **Agence de Mutualisation des Universités et Établissements (AMUE).** AMUE develops information systems and advises universities on how to improve the quality of their management. AMUE recognized that signing the Groningen Declaration would help universities enhance the experience for students coming to France, as well as for French students studying abroad.

— **EAIE.** One reason the EAIE likes the Groningen Declaration is because its development has been a grassroots initiative, similar to the Bologna Process. EAIE believes that when global mobility processes are streamlined, both students and institutions benefit.

The next annual meeting for the Groningen Declaration will be held in 2014 in Washington, DC.
• **However, several obstacles must be overcome before the vision of international student mobility can be attained.**

Although the panelists were supportive of the Groningen Declaration’s goals, they recognized that barriers to success exist.

— *The Apostille Convention may need to be updated.*

Changes may be needed to international treaties related to recognition of studies.

— *Many American educational institutions aren’t aware of the Groningen Declaration.* In the United States, education leaders must understand the goals of the Declaration before they will be willing to change how they operate.

— *Government funding is often limited for trans-sectoral initiatives.* The European Commission tends to fund projects that focus on a well-defined sector. Although the Groningen Declaration streamlines international student admissions, it also helps individuals build an e-portfolio throughout their lives. Since that portfolio feeds into the labor market, governments may be reluctant to pay for it.

— *Establishing a standard for information exchange may be challenging.* With numerous countries involved, it may be hard to agree on standards. One possible solution is establishing regional agreements.

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**Other Important Points**

• **National Clearinghouse and the Netherlands Admissions Pilot.** In fall 2013, the National Clearinghouse and the Netherlands will participate in a pilot focused on the admissions process. Universities will use the Clearinghouse portal to verify student information in an easy, transparent way.

• **SPEEDE Server.** The University of Texas at Austin deals with student mobility on a large scale. Its SPEEDE Server program allows student records to be exchanged electronically, both nationally and internationally.