

## Episode 25 – The 3-year Bachelor’s, International Transcripts, and English Proficiency

Welcome to Grad-post! I’m your host, Brian S. Mitchell and we’re here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I’ll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

As the deadline for submission of your grad school applications quickly approaches, I thought I’d talk a little bit about specific aspects of the application that are mostly unique to international applicants. Again, you domestic students might want to eaves drop on this episode just to know what your future classmates had to go through, but also to educate yourself on how colleges and universities operate around the world. You never know where your career path will take you!

There are three topics I want to touch on today: 3-year bachelor’s degrees; transcripts from non-US institutions, or what I’ll call “international transcripts;” and English proficiency requirements.

Let’s start with the 3-year bachelor’s degree. I’m primarily talking about bachelor’s degrees earned in the European Union (EU), although there are other 3-year bachelor’s degree programs around the world – even here in the United States. What makes the EU bachelor’s degree somewhat unique is that it is primarily the result of something called the [Bologna Process](#), named after the Italian city in which the agreement was signed in 1999. This process provides a “framework” for degree programs in the European Higher Education Area — of which there are currently 49 participating countries — including all EU countries. This educational framework has three “cycles” or curricular requirements corresponding to bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. The agreed-upon credit structure in the “first cycle” — bachelor’s degrees — is such that students can generally complete the requirements in three years of full-time study. Hence, the term “three-year bachelor’s degree” is sometimes used in the United States to reflect the fact that the credit framework is slightly different from that used at most US universities where four or even five years to completion are common. What does this mean for international applicants? It just means that you should verify that your bachelor’s degree is recognized by the institution to which you are applying. Most institutions have a formal policy on whether they accept these three-year bachelor’s degrees. For example, [North Carolina State University only recognizes 3-year bachelor’s degrees from Bologna Process institutions](#). [Santa Clara University has a more detailed policy](#), including acceptance of both EU and Indian 3-year degrees with additional requirements. Other institutions, like the University of Texas-Austin, do not generally accept a 3-year degree from EU countries, opting for what they call a [“Bologna Master Degree.” from many EU countries](#). These three examples illustrate the wide variation of policies on admissions requirements for students with 3-year bachelor’s degrees. In general, though, don’t let your 3-year degree dissuade you from applying to a U.S. postgraduate program. [Given the push for 3-year bachelor’s degrees here in the United States](#), these policies can change rapidly, so be sure to check and double-check with the institutions you are applying to.

If there is no formal policy, then you may have to petition to have the degree accepted. Go ahead and apply – this process may only be necessary if you are accepted. But if verification is required, it usually just means someone in the program you apply to reading your transcript and documenting that the required components of the three-year degree are equivalent to a four-year degree in the US. That means you will need an official transcript for review. Which brings us to the second topic – your university transcript.

Transcript verification is a tricky process, and in today’s AI world there is even more emphasis and scrutiny put on it. There are a couple of components to transcript verification. One is just making sure that it is authentic, but the processes of translation to English and equivalencies of grading scales are equally important. For example, the University of Tehran – as with many Iranian universities - uses a 20-point

grading scale for its courses, with no indication on the transcript of whether a 16.75 is good or average. Covenant University in Nigeria uses a 100-point scale, but assigns a letter grade to the raw score, with scores in the range 70-100 earning an “A.” There is a corresponding 5-point grading scale for each letter grade similar to the 4-point scale used at many U.S. institutions. Some institutions offer no grades at all. Institutions often provide an English translation equivalent of their transcripts to the student, but there may still be aspects that require verification or interpretation.

You can see that this can be a time-consuming process, which is why many U.S. institutions have contracted with third-party vendors to do the transcript verification process. Or, the institution may require that YOU do the verification. The [National Association of Credential Evaluation Services](#) maintains a list of members who provide transcript translation, verification, and grade equivalencies. Typical costs are in the hundreds of U.S. dollars, which can be a substantial barrier for some international applicants. Shop carefully if you are required to submit a verified transcript and make sure the vendor you choose is accepted by the institutions you apply to. Also check with the institution you are applying to if they will do the transcript verification. Some schools have contracted with the vendors and do this on a routine basis.

Finally, let’s look at English language proficiency requirements. Previously, the most common way to show proficiency in English for international students was to take a standardized test like TOEFL or IELTS. As discussed in [Episode 3 with respect to the Graduate Records Examination \(GRE\)](#), there is not only a waning interest in using standardized tests for admissions evaluation, but a lack of access to such tests especially during the global pandemic and because the cost can be prohibitive. Graduate schools have taken a variety of approaches to these difficulties, including eliminating TOEFL/IELTS requirements altogether, accepting alternative evidence of competency like Duolingo, or waiving further evidence of language proficiency for those who received instruction in English as an undergraduate. These exceptions are often insufficient, however, and the surest test of someone’s comprehension and ability to express themselves is with an interview. A few places may require an interview prior to acceptance, but most may offer conditional admission contingent upon language proficiency as demonstrated by an interview. Be prepared for such an interview in the weeks following your application. Check out the pointers on preparing your personal statement in [Episode 22](#) to help prepare you for this interview, but we’ll discuss the admission interview in more depth in an upcoming podcast.

You’re nearing the finish line! Polish up that personal statement, keep on top of your letter of recommendation writers, and don’t wait until the last minute to submit your application. I’ll be back in two weeks with some last-minute thoughts on applying to graduate school, but in the meantime ...

thank you for joining me today. All the links provided in my podcasts are available at [grad-post.com](http://grad-post.com). There, you’ll find additional resources and information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

Every degree counts - even if it’s a three year degree!

### Links

<https://grad.ncsu.edu/faculty-and-staff/three-year/>  
<https://www.scu.edu/globalengagement/about/policies-and-procedures/policies-and-procedures/three-year-undergraduate-degrees-from-outside-of-the-us/>  
<https://utexas.app.box.com/s/x8w7gs3xacr8dsicpjhd19dyv8jv9a41>  
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