

Dear Editor,

Streamlining the process to support higher education: a case for technological adoption

Highly qualified and experienced healthcare professionals are in demand worldwide, with targeted efforts directed at recruiting and retaining high-calibre individuals. The industrialized countries: North America, Europe, and Australia actively engage recruitment agencies to identify professionals to meet the demands of their healthcare services. Asian countries, such as India, are one of the top sources for hiring qualified professionals to meet healthcare needs in foreign countries. Comparable education and established licensing processes for some professions have facilitated the significant movement of this personnel. For instance, physical and occupational therapists from India have an established track record of relocating to Canada or the USA. While moving to industrialized countries to continue pursuing one's profession is highly lucrative, transitioning from the home education system to obtaining a license in a foreign country is arduous. The first step starts with getting certified documents from the degree-granting institutions.

The primary objective of this report is to present the current process and barriers to accessing certifications (academic marksheets and transcripts). I will make a case for technology adoption to minimize barriers to procuring these documents from the Maharashtra University of Health Sciences (MUHS), one of the largest publicly funded universities in Nashik in the state of Maharashtra. The University offers undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral training in several health sciences disciplines.

The barriers to obtaining certified documents are listed below.

1. Information

- a. **Accessible information:** There is no publicly accessible available information on the application process or cost of obtaining certified documents on the University's website. The only way to know about any changes to the process is by calling a landline number. The applicant has to be mindful to call during office hours, keeping in mind the lunch breaks and meetings when the personnel is not likely to be around. The landline is not equipped with a voice messaging system requiring multiple attempts to reach the

proper personnel. This method is inaccessible to applicants from different time zones and those who are currently residing outside India.

A 2020 notification has a standard form for application submission to obtain undergraduate documents. While the process for postgraduate and doctoral trainees still involves application through the applicant's college of training. In case there is an urgent need for these documents, for example, the deadline for application submission to a foreign university, the University offers an in-person application submission and pick-up. It involves the applicant or a relative physically visiting the University campus in case the applicant is already out of India. The MUHS-affiliated colleges are located across Maharashtra State, with the farthest college located at around a distance of 627 kilometres. In-person application is quickest, but the travel and accommodation added to the expenses.

- b. For postgraduate and doctoral professionals, the application to obtain certified and sealed marksheets and transcript starts at the training college, which may be in a different part of the State. This process is exceptionally challenging for professionals who have moved to other countries. The application process involves submitting seven copies of all documents and the payment at one's training college. These documents are marksheets, transcripts, and other evidence supporting degree completion. This first step is rarely a one-time process, and it is well known among the applicants that it takes multiple human resources visits. A very likely scenario that is a significant barrier where the professional's training college is located far from their residence. Another barrier to access is when the human resources personnel are unaware of the process or are on leave with often no replacement.
2. **Payment method and cost:** There are currently two payment options; an online and a demand draft. The only option is only available to those who wish to receive undergraduate marksheets and transcripts. For any other training levels, the only payment option is by demand draft (similar to a certified cheque) from a nationalized bank. This process involves an in-person visit to a bank. Applicants who requesting postgraduate transcripts and marksheets require a separate payment made to the college through a second demand draft.

3. **Minimum copies:** The University stipulates a minimum of five copies per application with an additional cost for more copies. The submission involves providing seven copies of all documents. When the documents are certified, sealed, and sent back where the college retains one copy, the University retains the second, and the applicant receives five copies. As there is a minimum request of five copies, any future submission will require you to repeat the whole process, as one can only request fewer than five copies. As it stands, the college and the University will accumulate one copy each for every applicant and with every application.
4. **Receipt of submission:** Once the application is submitted at the college, there is no way to track the progress or application status. Currently, the University only provides hard copies of certified documents. No alternative allows one to retrieve or submit soft copies of the documents. These have been critical options during the current COVID-19 pandemic that enforced travel and in-person restrictions. There are several secure ways to receive and share documents; for instance, the National Student Clearinghouse offers cheap options to electronically submit documents with most University and educational credential evaluation organizations. The University uses a speed post service which relies on the recipient being at the delivery address to receive the documents.
5. **Cost:** From an applicant's perspective, this is not an inexpensive process. The cost of obtaining five certified and sealed transcripts for an undergraduate degree in physiotherapy is ₹ 20,350 INR, and that for a postgraduate is ₹ 16,250 INR. There was no accessible information about these costs. The cost of the whole process is directly proportional to the year of graduation. Additional costs involve any forms that need to be filled out by the University. For instance, the University charges an additional ₹2,400INR per degree to fill a document required for international educational equivalency agencies such as World Education Services.

Potential solutions

The transformation will require a systemwide change to minimize barriers to healthcare professionals to obtain their certifications. There are several steps the University could implement to transform the current process.

- a. The University should have a dedicated webpage that clearly states the steps to receiving any documentation, including information, application, documents, costs, and other details.

- b. Implement an online system to submit, track, and retrieve applications. Every student registered at the University has a unique Permanent Registration Number that could be used to retrieve all records, thereby avoiding the applicants having to send paper copies, a positive step towards a paperless solution.
- c. There is already an online payment system available to procure documents for undergraduate degrees, which could cover all levels of training. An option to submit a demand draft could be retained while the system is modified or in situations where online payment option is not possible. Finally, the University issues separate documents, marksheets, and transcripts. Most international academic institutions will generate a single copy, including grades (marksheets), transcripts, and other academic achievements. This transformation will require collaboration with different departments and colleges and best done with feedback from the end-user and applicants.

The above-listed barriers will require consorted efforts and commitment across the board to streamline the process of procuring documents and make the process cost-effective and less stressful for everyone, irrespective of geographical location. Adopting a secure platform that will accept applications and payments, process the request, and deliver the documents will be a step in the right direction.

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