

The European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions

Practical guidelines for credential evaluators and admissions officers to provide fair and flexible recognition of foreign degrees and studies abroad.

Fourth edition: April 2025

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Usage



This manual is designed to assist and enable staff in higher education institutions to practise fair recognition as part of admissions according to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) - the regulatory framework for international academic recognition in the European region. The scope of this manual is thus mainly on recognition for the purpose of obtaining access to higher education (academic recognition).

The manual offers a practical translation of the principles of the LRC, advocating a flexible recognition methodology that focuses on the question of whether students are likely to succeed in their studies. Therefore, this manual is useful for any admissions officer, academic staff and others who are involved in enrolling students that have qualifications matching their institution's programme requirements, in order to contribute to the overall quality of the programme and to the success rate of the students.

In principle this manual can be used by staff in higher education institutions from all countries that are party to the LRC (mainly European countries and some from North America,

Asia and Oceania) and further by countries from other regional recognition conventions that are based on the principles of the LRC (such as the Asian Pacific and African regions).

It should be noted that the recommendations in this manual are formulated from the perspective of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and are therefore particularly relevant for higher education institutions - specifically admissions officers - dealing with the recognition of foreign qualifications for admission purposes within the EHEA.

It is acknowledged that users of this manual may have different levels of experience in the recognition of foreign qualifications. Thus this manual may be used in different ways, for example as a quick reference guide, as an introduction to the fundamental concepts of recognition or as a training tool.

It is the intention of the authors that this manual will foster a fair recognition culture and support quality enhancement in recognition procedures according to the principles of the LRC.



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Acknowledgements

This is the 4th edition of the European Area of Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR-HEI manual), published five years after the 3rd edition of 2020. In those five years, recognition of foreign qualifications is increasingly being addressed at the international policy level. It plays an important role in many recent initiatives of the European Commission, the Council of Europe, UNESCO, the Bologna Follow-Up Group, and the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee, resulting in a constant flow of Recommendations, Communications, Subsidiary Texts, Communiqués and publications.

Fortunately, these organisations are well connected with each other in the field of recognition, and are also in contact with the networks of national information centres on academic recognition. Therefore, their policies on recognition are very much in line with each other, as can be seen for instance from the developments in automatic recognition and in the recognition of micro-credentials.

Nevertheless, it must be quite difficult for admissions officers working at higher education institutions to keep up with all of the new policy and guidelines developed at European and world-wide level. We hope that the updated EAR-HEI manual will be a valuable tool to provide a broad overview of current policy in recognition, linked with very practical guidelines on how to apply all of the existing good practice to the recognition procedures of higher education institutions.

The publishing history of the EAR manuals dates back to 2009, when the first EAR manual for credential evaluators (at ENIC/NARIC centres) appeared. In 2014 the first EAR-HEI manual was published, which was based on the EAR manual and specifically geared to the daily practice of admissions officers.

Some of the previous editions of the EAR manuals have been sent around for consultation throughout our European networks, leading to feedback from hundreds of credential evaluators, admissions officers and other recognition experts and stakeholders. This not only resulted in many improvements, but also in very broad dissemination and a high level of acceptance of the manual. This was reflected by the endorsement of the EAR manual by the European Ministers of Education in the Bucharest Communiqué of 2012 and recently again (with regard to the revised EAR manual) in the Tirana Communiqué of 2024.

I would like to thank my colleagues from the ENIC-NARIC networks, the ENIC Bureau and the NARIC Advisory Board for their contributions, cooperation and constant support. I extend my gratitude to the recognition experts of the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the European Commission for actively supporting the EAR manuals, while the European Commission is also thanked for funding the projects through the Erasmus+ programme.



And finally I would like to thank the members and Steering Group of the AR25 project team, who produced this updated edition of the EAR-HEI manual. Special thanks go to Jenneke Lokhoff, who coordinated the AR25 project, as well as the production of all previous EAR manuals.

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Note from the editors

The fourth edition of the manual has been produced as part of the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 NARIC “AR25” project. The changes in the fourth edition are minor and follow developments that have occurred since the publication of the previous editions:

- Chapter 1, ‘Introduction to recognition’ now includes further information of the ENIC-NARIC networks and their governance structure to support transparency to all actors in the ecosystem of recognition. Additionally, the chapter now also includes a section on the Global convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education. The map of the ENIC-NARIC networks is removed to keep the manual up to date;
- Chapter 2, ‘The five elements of a qualification’ now includes examples to illustrate the different elements;
- The title of Chapter 3, now includes status of the institutions: ‘Accreditation and Quality assurance (status of the institution);
- Chapter 5, ‘Authenticity’, the order of the recommendations changed, since the emergence of external online verification tools make it a more logical step to start with online external verification, followed by internal verification if needed, and if necessary external verification;
- Chapter 12, ‘Institutional recognition practices & procedures’ has seen a significant expansion. It further focusses on how to organise recognition within an institution and the elements of a procedure. The chapter now also includes more examples.
- The title of Part V changed to “Specific types of procedures and/or qualifications”. Additionally the part now includes two new chapters: chapter 16 on “Automatic recognition” (in previous version part of introduction) and chapter 21 on “Non-country specific qualifications (international degrees)”. Moreover, micro credentials are now included as subtopic of Chapter 18, ‘Flexible learning paths.

All chapters are updated to fit the institutional context and include reference to the latest good practice, without further changes to the recommendations itself (otherwise noted above).

In general, the information has been streamlined and we used a new refreshing layout in landscape to support readability. The ‘Further reading’ section at the end of the document has been removed. All sources are referenced in the EAR manual; for the development of this manual, we drew on the sources of the EAR manual as well as the latest published good practices by the ENIC-NARIC Networks, the Co-Secretariats (Council of Europe, UNESCO, and European Commission) and the EHEA and its stakeholders, thus safeguarding the integrity of the manual.



As part of the AR25 consortium, the following ENIC-NARICs produced this fourth edition of the EAR - HEI manual: ENIC-NARIC Netherlands (coordinator), Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Poland and Sweden, and ENIC UK and Ukraine. Furthermore, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) and the European University Association (EUA).



Part I. Introduction to Recognition

Part I of the manual aims to improve understanding of the concept of recognition of foreign qualifications by discussing the legal framework, operational structures, and the diversity of recognition procedures and education systems. It also presents the five elements of a qualification that must always be considered when evaluating a qualification.





1. Introduction to recognition

This chapter introduces the concept of recognition of foreign qualifications in the European region by outlining its legal foundations - the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and the Global Recognition Convention (GRC or GloCo) - explaining the role of national information centres in the practical implementation of the LRC, and highlighting the diversity of recognition procedures and education systems across countries.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) is a joint UNESCO and Council of Europe treaty that forms the legal basis for the recognition of qualifications and periods of study in the European region. It lays down the fundamental principles for fair and smooth recognition.

Signatory states commit to fulfilling the treaty's obligations through their competent authorities. The term *competent authorities* refers to the ENIC-NARICs (national information centres on academic recognition; see below) but also includes other entities responsible for recognition decisions. How recognition responsibilities are divided and who is considered a competent authority varies by country. But in the vast majority of cases this includes higher education institutions, which are therefore bound to follow the principles set out in the LRC.

Core principle

The core principle of the LRC is that a foreign qualification must be recognised unless there are substantial differences between the qualification and the purpose for which recognition is sought. Additionally, the LRC emphasises that the burden of proof for any substantial differences lies with the competent authority, not the applicant. In other words, the competent recognition authority responsible for assessing the foreign qualification must demonstrate if a substantial difference exists. The concept of substantial differences, along with other LRC principles, is explained in this manual.

Subsidiary texts

In the years following the adoption of the LRC, subsidiary texts were added to provide more detailed recommendations and guidance for institutions and credential evaluators.

The main subsidiary texts are:

- Revised Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (expected in 2025);
- Revised Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services (expected in 2025);
- Guidelines for national online information systems (2019);
- Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation (2017);



- Revised Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees (2016);
- Recommendation on the use of qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications (2013);
- Revised Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Explanatory Memorandum (2010);
- Recommendation on International Access Qualifications (1999).

The LRC and today's recognition methodology

The main principles of the LRC form the backbone of today's evaluation methodology known as 'acceptance'. Acceptance is based on the idea that differences in learning outcomes between qualifications from different education systems will always exist, and that these differences should be regarded as an enriching aspect of the internationalisation of higher education rather than as obstacles to recognition and mobility.

This, however, has not always been the approach to credential evaluation. Equivalence—or 'nostrification' or 'homologation'—was a common approach in many countries from the 1950s to the mid-1970s (and still exists in some countries today) and involved evaluating a qualification on a course-by-course basis, where each component of the foreign programme had to match the components of a comparable programme in the receiving country. Today, the 'equivalence' approach is considered outdated, as it is not aligned with the LRC and constitutes an obstacle to fair recognition and student mobility.

Due to increased student mobility and the growth and diversification of higher education programmes, equivalence gradually became an untenable approach and was replaced by the concept of 'recognition' in the 1980s. Under this new approach, a foreign qualification did not have to be completely equivalent, as long as it served a similar purpose and conferred the same rights as the comparable qualification in the host country. 'Recognition' paved the way for the approach considered best practice today, which gained broader support from the 1990s onwards: 'acceptance'.



Policy support

The LRC holds a central position in policy and political initiatives related to recognition in the European region. Notably, the Bologna Process, launched in 1999, has played a major role in placing recognition firmly on the European agenda, as it was seen as essential to creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Within the Bologna Process, the LRC is regarded as the main international legal instrument supporting the fair recognition of access qualifications and higher education qualifications. The Bologna Process has also given rise to numerous initiatives aimed at improving the transparency and recognition of qualifications. Examples include strong support for the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement, and the implementation of qualifications frameworks, all of which are discussed later in this manual.

In recent years, other policy frameworks, such as the European Education Area (European Union), have also advanced ambitions for recognition. One example is the concept of automatic recognition, which originated with the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and is strongly rooted in the principles of the LRC.

Governance

The LRCC (in full “Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region”) is charged with overseeing, promoting and facilitating the implementation of the LRC.

The LRCC is an intergovernmental board, composed of delegates from each State Party to the LRC. Representatives of governmental and non-governmental organisations may also be invited to attend LRCC meetings as observers. The LRCC meets in ordinary session at least every three years. The LRCC reports to UNESCO and the Council of Europe, in their role as Co-Secretariat of the LRC.

The LRCC may, with a majority of the Parties, adopt recommendations, declarations, protocols and models of good practice to guide the competent authorities of the Parties in their implementation of the LRC and in their consideration of applications for the recognition of higher education qualifications.

The LRCC Bureau was established by the LRCC, in close collaboration with UNESCO and the Council of Europe. The LRCCB provides advice to the LRCC on issues related to the implementation and monitoring of the LRC. To that end, the LRCCB:



- drafts recommendations, declarations, protocols and models of good practice that are submitted to the LRCC for adoption. These aim to support LRC implementation;
 - conducts monitoring exercises on LRC implementation by Parties to formulate recommendations to the LRCC, based on the findings.
- The LRCC Bureau is composed of elected representatives of a Ministry or another body from a Party to the LRC. It is composed of a President, a first and second Vice-President, and a Rapporteur. Elected representatives serve on a voluntary basis. The Secretariats of the LRCCB are the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

Regional Conventions

The LRC is considered the first in a series of modern recognition treaties. Beyond the European region, the other four UNESCO regional conventions are:

- The “Tokyo Convention” or “Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education” (2011 adopted, 2018 entered into force, replaced the 1983 Bangkok Convention);
- The “Addis Convention” or “Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States” (2014 adopted, 2019 entered into force, replaced the 1981 Arusha Convention);
- The “Buenos Aires Convention” or “Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean” (Revised: 2019, entered into force in 2022, replaced the 1974 version);
- The “Arab States Convention” or Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States (1978, revision ongoing).

Like the LRC, these regional conventions form the legal basis for the recognition of foreign qualifications within their respective regions. A significant recent development is the adoption of the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention in November 2019, which aims to support fair recognition on a global scale and facilitate academic mobility between regions.

The Global Recognition Convention

In November 2019, the Global Convention on Higher Education was adopted by UNESCO’s General Conference. The Convention entered into force on 5 March 2023, in accordance with Article XVIII, after twenty countries ratified it.

The Convention establishes a framework for the fair, transparent, and non-discriminatory recognition of higher education qualifications worldwide. Compared to the regional UNESCO treaties, such as the LRC, its novelty lies in creating



opportunities for inter-regional academic mobility on a global scale and establishing universal principles to improve recognition practices between regions.

Thus, with the Global Convention, there are now two legal frameworks for recognition: the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and the Global Convention. It is important to note that the Global Convention and the LRC follow the same principles and are fully compatible. It is expected that good recognition practices developed under the LRC framework can continue to be applied to interregional mobility and recognition.

UNESCO serves as the secretariat of the Convention, ensuring and monitoring its implementation through an Intergovernmental Conference of Parties. This body meets at least every two years to provide guidance—including recommendations, guidelines, and good practices—to the countries that have committed to the Convention (States Parties) and are therefore obliged to adhere to its provisions.

The Global Convention also promotes the establishment of National Information Centres (NICs), providing a mechanism for national authorities to collaborate across borders and regions to develop improved tools and practices for the recognition of higher education qualifications. In practice, these NICs align

with the structures already established under the regional conventions. In the European region, these NICs are the ENIC-NARIC Networks.

The role of the ENIC-NARIC centres

In the European region, there are two networks of national recognition information centres established to support the implementation of the LRC: the ENIC and NARIC networks. The networks consist of individual centres, designated by the Ministries of Education or by other authorities performing similar functions in their respective countries.

The ENIC network

The European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) was established by the Council of Europe and UNESCO in 1994. Its purpose was to develop policy and practice for the recognition of qualifications. The ENIC Network fulfils this function by providing information on foreign qualifications, education systems, mobility schemes and recognition of foreign awards. The ENIC Network formed the basis for the development of the LRC. Under the LRC the ENIC Network has a treaty task to support the implementation of the Convention. The Network consists of the national information centres of the LRC signatory countries. It cooperates closely with the NARIC Network.



The NARIC network

The Network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) is an initiative established by the European Commission. The network was created in 1984 to improve the recognition of academic diplomas and periods of study in the Member States of the European Union (EU). It also includes the European Economic Area (EEA) countries and additionally, Erasmus+ programme countries. All member countries have designated national centres. The purpose of these national centres is to assist in promoting the mobility of students, teachers and researchers by providing advice and information concerning academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study. The main users of this service include higher education institutions, competent recognition authorities, students and their advisers, parents, teachers and prospective employers.

Cooperation

The ENIC and NARIC networks - although formally separate networks - work closely together. In countries (or parts thereof) that belong to both networks, one single centre represents both networks. Both networks have joint infrastructures to share expertise and information.

In addition, they seek to strengthen their effectiveness by cooperating with other stakeholders relevant to the recognition ecosystem, such as international student organisations, and

accreditation and quality assurance agencies. The Networks organise a joint annual meeting for representatives of all ENIC and NARIC offices.

Ongoing changes in the global education landscape and the various forms of international cooperation, support close collaboration between the two networks and their counterparts in other regions of the world, particularly in developing appropriate criteria and procedures for recognition.

Governance

The governance of the ENIC and NARIC Networks is supported by two consultative and coordinative bodies: the ENIC Bureau (EB) and the NARIC Advisory Board (NAB), as well as ELCORE, each with separate functions.

The ENIC Bureau was established by the ENIC Network in close collaboration with UNESCO and the Council of Europe, who serve as Co-Secretariat of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). Meanwhile, the NARIC Advisory Board was established by the NARIC Network under the European Commission. The EB and NAB report to the ENIC and NARIC Networks and share a joint workplan outlining priorities, goals, and activities for collaboration across the Networks.



The EB and NAB are elected biennially by the Networks and consist of experts from ENIC-NARIC centres who contribute on a voluntary basis. The NAB has three positions, each held by one expert. The EB consists of one President and two Vice-Presidents. The ENIC President represents the cooperation mechanism of the ENIC-NARIC Networks.

The ELCORE Working Group (Working Party on Electronic Communication for Recognition) is a structure supported by the Council of Europe and reports to the EB and NAB. ELCORE provides advice on issues related to the electronic provision of information concerning the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). It is also responsible for managing the ListServ (supporting the expertise and information exchange between centres). Members of ELCORE contribute on a voluntary basis.

Tasks

The ENIC-NARIC centres serve as the national contact points for anyone with questions about the education system of that country and the recognition of qualifications. The centres are tasked under the LRC to support the implementation of the LRC in the national context.

It is important to note that the status and scope of responsibilities of individual centres may differ. Consequently, each ENIC-NARIC centre may vary in aspects such as remit,

range of services offered, staff size, and legal status. The centres' tasks, activities, resources, and expertise are outlined in the Joint ENIC-NARIC Charter of Activities and Services.

Contact details for all ENIC-NARIC centres can be found at www.enic-naric.net. The website also provides additional information on recognition, including relevant documents such as the LRC.

Diversity of recognition procedures

The recognition of foreign qualifications is a formal process that can take place through various legal procedures and for a range of purposes. Moreover, recognition cultures and procedures differ between countries and institutions and may involve a wide range of competent authorities.

Procedures that may include some form of recognition in some countries – but not in others – include, for instance, obtaining a work permit, obtaining the official status of highly skilled migrant, or applying for a job in the public sector or for a position at a specific (higher) rank.

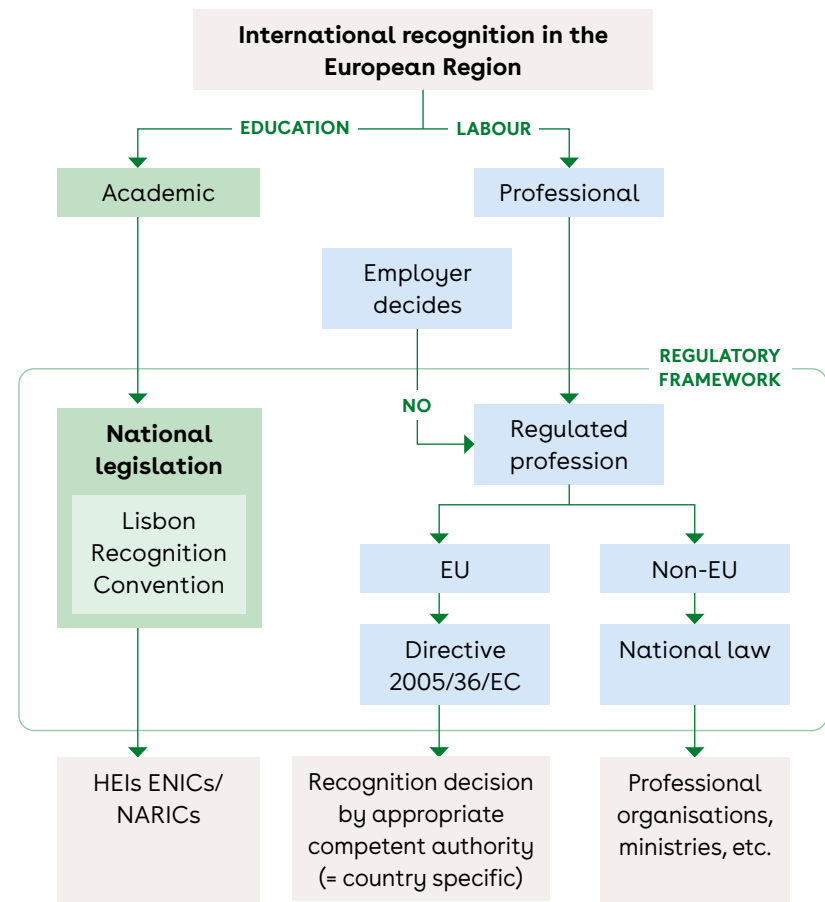
Within this diversity, two main types of recognition procedures can be distinguished in the European area: academic recognition and professional recognition. Academic recognition refers to recognition sought for the purpose of further studies or the right



to use an academic title. Professional recognition concerns recognition sought for the purpose of entering the labour market, particularly in the case of regulated professions. In the case of non-regulated professions, the LRC applies.

Since this is a manual for higher education institutions, the focus is solely on academic recognition for the purpose of access to further studies. Chapter 12, 'Institutional recognition practices', discusses recommendations on how to organise recognition procedures, taking into account the diversity between and within institutions.

Framework for international recognition in the European Region:





Diversity of education systems

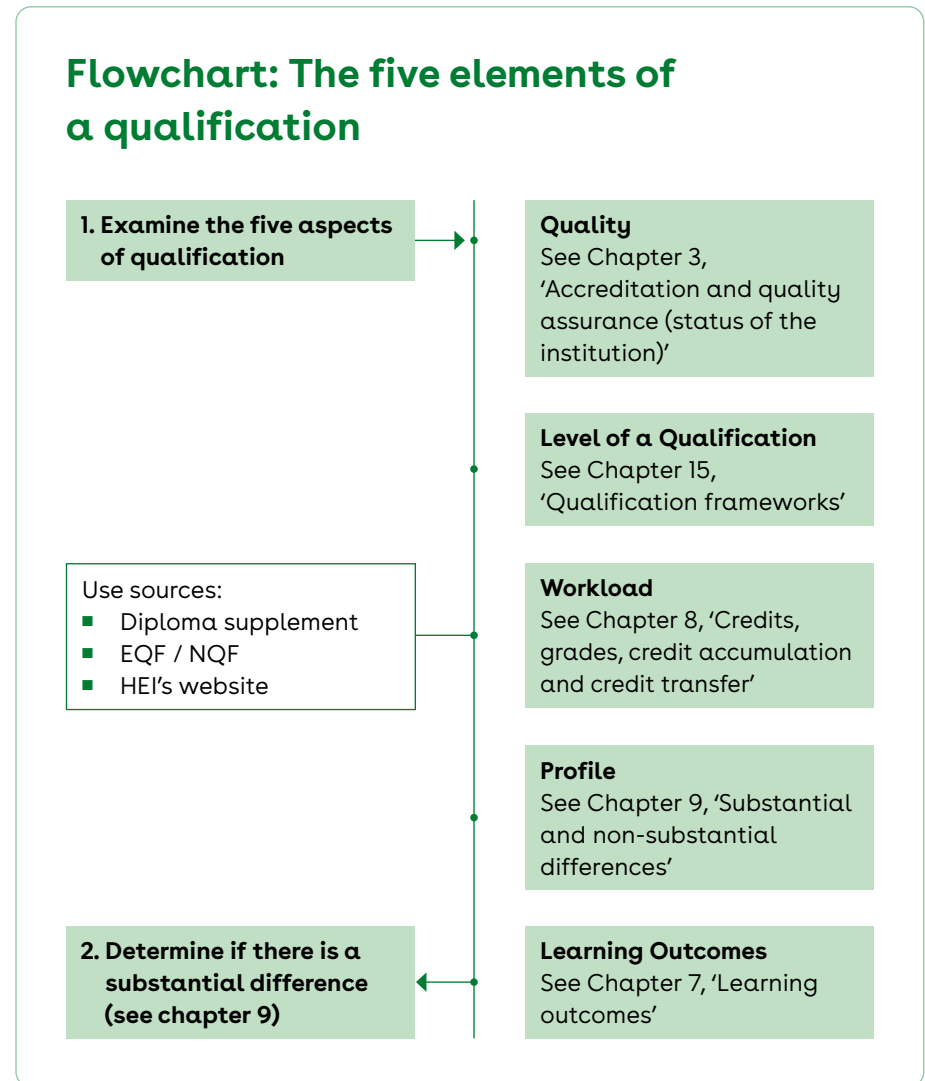
Knowledge of national education systems and their differences is essential in the field of recognition, as foreign qualifications are compared to qualifications within the host country's education system. A key factor in this comparison and evaluation is the rich diversity of education systems within Europe and worldwide, as well as the complexity and variety of institutions, programmes, and qualifications they encompass.

National education systems reflect principles, ideas, and methods shaped by national cultures and the heritage of civilisations, as well as by universal models. While increased international cooperation and globalisation have fostered cross-fertilisation among systems and some harmonisation - particularly within Europe through the Bologna Process and related developments - they have also led, and continue to lead, to the proliferation of new institutions, programmes, and qualifications. In addition, new developments in quality assurance, credit accumulation and transfer, and methods of delivering education have emerged and continue to do so.

In principle, differences at the system level - or at the institutional or programme level - should not prevent the fair recognition of qualifications. In some cases, differences between systems, particularly in learning outcomes or structural features, may make direct transfer from one system to another more challenging. However, in most cases, such differences do not - and should not - make transfer impossible. How this is addressed will be discussed in the following chapters of this manual.

2. The five elements of a qualification

Five parameters define a qualification: level, workload, quality, profile, and learning outcomes. Although there is overlap between the concepts, all are essential for assessing a qualification and determining whether there are substantial differences between a foreign qualification and the required one (see [Chapter 9, 'Substantial and non-substantial differences'](#)). Learning outcomes are becoming the most important factor, and their evaluation is aided by the other indicators.





1 - Level of a Qualification

The level of a tertiary qualification, which places it in a developmental continuum, is normally defined by a set of level descriptors. These descriptors set the level at which educational outcomes must be achieved to reach a defined point in this continuum. A country with a national qualifications framework (NQF) will have a set of descriptors for each qualification level. These may also be referenced or linked to an overarching qualifications framework, such as the European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework (EHEA-QF) or the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which helps comparison between different national frameworks.

For higher education, three such levels (bachelor's, master's and doctorate) are now commonly used. These are referred to as cycle 1, cycle 2 and cycle 3 respectively in the EHEA-QF, and level 6, 7, and 8 in the EQF. A general set of level descriptors is also defined for both qualifications frameworks.

Example 2.1 - EQF Descriptors

In the EQF, each of the eight levels is described in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. For the bachelor level (6), the general descriptors are:

- Knowledge:** Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles;
- Skills:** Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study;
- Competence:** Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts.
Take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups.



However, in the light of the relatively recent adoption of the three-cycle model in Europe, not all qualifications are linked to these levels.

Although the overarching European qualifications frameworks have three main levels for higher education qualifications, there may be extra levels or subdivisions in the national qualifications frameworks of individual countries. For instance, bachelor honours degrees and ordinary bachelor degrees may have separate levels in the NQF (with different level descriptors), but they map onto the same level in the EQF (level 6). Taught master's programmes may differ from research-based ones, particularly in terms of the descriptors related to the ability to conduct independent research and those associated with professional training. In such cases, qualification descriptors may distinguish between two types of programmes at the same NQF level. In general, the descriptors associated with (or implied by) the applicant's qualification should correspond to the level descriptors in your system that would allow admission into a given programme.

2 - Workload

In most cases, the time to acquire a given qualification is measured in academic years and a certain number of credits is assigned to one academic year. Each credit is then associated

with a student workload. Credits are usually awarded on satisfactory completion of a course module, not on attendance. Credits must also be accumulated, with a student gaining an appropriate number of credits at all levels within the programme for the qualification to be awarded.

Student workload is a quantitative measure, in hours, of learning activities that are required for the achievement of the learning outcomes associated with a programme and the subsequent award of the appropriate credits.

Workload can be a problematic issue when comparing qualifications. Despite being a quantitative measure, it is sometimes calculated in different ways in different systems. For example, within the Bologna signatory countries the defined student workload within an academic year varies by up to 40%.

Workload within one system may vary from subject to subject, especially when a subject requires practical experience. Workload may also vary depending on the level of a qualification. For instance, a taught master's programme may have a defined workload whilst a master's undertaken mainly by research may have a notional workload. Or, a qualification may have been obtained where some academic credits were awarded on the basis of recognition of prior learning, meaning



that the student may not have had to attend all programme modules to gain the qualification; such details should be noted in their transcript.

This variability means that it is not appropriate in terms of the LRC to insist on a fixed number of hours, years or credits for recognition. Workload should be considered as one of the elements that play a role in achieving the learning outcomes of the qualification.

Example 2.2 - ECTS and the ECTS Users Guide

The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a tool of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for making studies and courses more transparent.

In Europe 60 ECTS = 1 full-time year's study. The ECTS Users' Guide of 2015 suggests a median figure of 1500-1800 hours per academic year, or about 25 hours per ECTS.

Workload should include the total student experience (in the classroom, fieldwork, workplace experience, time spent on reading or assignments or assessment etc.) and not just formal classroom or contact hours.

3 - Quality

The concept of quality is applied to academic programmes in three ways.

Firstly, through the internal assessment of student learning outcomes. This is usually expressed through a grading system, whose criteria may vary greatly between and within countries. See [Chapter 8, 'Credits, grades, credit accumulation and credit transfer', 'Grades' section](#).

Secondly, the programme and its associated institutional support structures may be subject to external quality assurance (QA) procedures. These may be statutory or voluntary and are generally based on a 'fitness for purpose' model. Quality assurance is seen as essential for building trust in higher education qualifications, institutions and systems.

Example 2.3 - External quality assurance

In country X, all accredited study programmes periodically undergo an external quality assurance process every four years. A register of accredited programmes with information detailing the accreditation periods is published by the competent authority. The admissions officer should check whether a given qualification was issued during the programme's valid accreditation period. If this condition is met, the programme's quality can be automatically accepted without further verification.



Thirdly, a higher education institution, a constituent department or school may be ranked nationally or globally. The value of this indicator is discussed below.

Rankings

One of the aspects to take into account in the evaluation of foreign qualifications is the quality of the institution and of the qualification. As a general rule, admissions officers establish whether an institution and/or programme is recognised or accredited, which implies that certain minimum educational standards have been met. Sometimes it might be tempting to utilise international ranking lists of higher education institutions, which are published by various organisations around the world. Nonetheless, recognition experts generally do not recommend this as good practice, for the following reasons:

- Most rankings are strongly biased towards research performance, and do not necessarily reflect the quality of educational programmes;
- Rankings have no direct links to the learning outcomes obtained by individual students;
- Ranking lists usually only contain a few hundred institutions, which means at least 97% of the world's higher education institutions are not covered by rankings. This severely limits their use when comparing qualifications.

The indicators used are not always objective and may contain flaws.

You can read more about quality in [Chapter 3, 'Accreditation and Quality Assurance \(status of the institution\)'](#).

4 - Profile

The concept of the qualification profile has been used in various ways, either to describe the general purpose of the programme or its content. Typical aspects of the qualification profile that are relevant for the recognition process are:

- The programme may have a clear emphasis on either preparing the student for further academic study, or for seeking employment.
- In the first case, the programme is designed to provide a strong theoretical background and to develop research skills. In the second case, the accent is on the applied arts and sciences and on developing professional skills, and the programme may include a work placement.
- In practice, virtually all higher education programmes aim to provide a combination of both types of skills. In higher education systems with a clear distinction between research universities and universities of applied sciences (binary systems), these two types of profiles may be distinguished more easily.
- The programme may cover a broad range of subjects or may have a strong focus on the student's specialisation. For example, the programme may be designed to offer the



student an introduction to a wide range of subjects, which is the case in liberal arts education, while in other cases the programme consists of subjects that are all related to a particular field of study (e.g. biochemistry). In practice, there will be many variations of broad and single-focus programmes.

- The programme may be multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, or mono-disciplinary. In the first two cases, the programme combines two or more subject areas and may have a specialisation which is in between these areas.

Example 2.4 - Using the profile of a qualification in recognition

Your institution may have formulated entry requirements for admission to a particular programme for applicants with a foreign qualification in terms of a qualification profile (e.g., a 'specialised bachelor programme in business studies with a professional orientation'). In that case, all qualifications that align with this profile (and also fulfil other criteria such as authenticity and accreditation status) can be easily recognised.

Qualifications that do not fit a profile may require closer inspection to determine whether their learning outcomes sufficiently match your programme's requirements. Depending on the programme's requirements, a very specific profile (i.e., 'a Bachelor's degree in Physics or Astronomy') or a whole range of profiles (e.g., 'a bachelor in art history, architecture, design, archaeology, museum studies or related field') may be formulated.

By using the qualification profile in this way, you can speed up the evaluation process and avoid unnecessary checks.

Transparent information about a programme's profile is very helpful in the recognition process, as it provides a general perspective on its learning outcomes. However, it is not always possible to obtain a clear view of the programme's profile from the qualifications and transcripts issued by higher education institutions. The Diploma Supplement format (see [Chapter 14, 'Diploma Supplement \(and other information tools\)'](#)) allows institutions to provide more information on the programme's profile. In addition, the model for a "degree programme profile"[1] provides an 'academic map' for a particular degree that is useful for recognition. This programme's profile includes the subject area and orientation of the qualification, any special features distinguishing the programme, the programme in terms



of student-acquired competences and staff-assessed learning outcomes, and a summary of the methods of teaching, learning, and assessment.

5 - Learning Outcomes

A learning outcome can be defined as ‘what a learner is expected to know, understand and is able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning’. It may be a written statement for a single module or programme component, a complete specific programme, a qualification level, or anything in between. There are various systems for writing learning outcomes and linking them to levels within national and overarching qualifications frameworks.

Credits obtained by students certify that they have satisfactorily demonstrated the required learning outcomes for the module or programme; such details are given in the programme profile and/or the Diploma Supplement (see [Chapter 14, ‘Diploma Supplement’](#)).

In the absence of a statement or description, a learning outcome may also be reconstructed from the other four elements of a qualification, as discussed in the paragraphs above.

Given that learning outcomes reflect all five elements of a qualification, they are essential for applying the concept of “substantial difference”, which is the core of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

More information about learning outcomes can be found in [Chapter 7, ‘Learning Outcomes’](#).

Example 2.5 - Diploma Supplement

In country X only holders of a title Bachelor in Engineering can be accepted for a master’s programme in engineering. An applicant submits a diploma awarding a title of bachelor (without the reference to engineering) but the learning outcomes described in the Diploma Supplement demonstrate that the programme completed by the applicant covered the engineering training. The learning outcomes should be accepted and the applicant can be considered for admission to the programme in engineering.



Part II. The Evaluation Process

Part II of the manual sets out, in chronological order, the main aspects to be taken into account in the evaluation process: the accreditation and quality assurance of the institution that awarded the qualification; ensuring the qualification has not been issued by a diploma or accreditation mill; verifying the authenticity of the qualification; determining the purpose of recognition; establishing the learning outcomes of the degree programme; considering the credits and grades obtained; recognising the qualification unless there is a substantial difference; and, lastly – if applicable – granting partial recognition and providing the applicant with the right to appeal against the decision.

From this part onwards, the chapters follow a similar structure. They begin with a short summary, include a flowchart outlining the main points of the chapter, contain a brief introduction, and provide a section with numbered recommendations and examples.



The flowcharts are a schematic summary of each chapter. The boxes are numbered following the recommendations to which they refer. The different colors reflect the following:

- Pink reflects a stage in process;
- Green reflects a decision (yes/no);
- Blue reflects an outcome.

The boxes are connected by arrows reflecting the logic and flow of how to deal with the topic.

Flowchart

Legend

Step in process



Next step in procedure

Sub-process-other
chapter from manual



Next step in procedure,
depending on situation

Data

Document

Decision

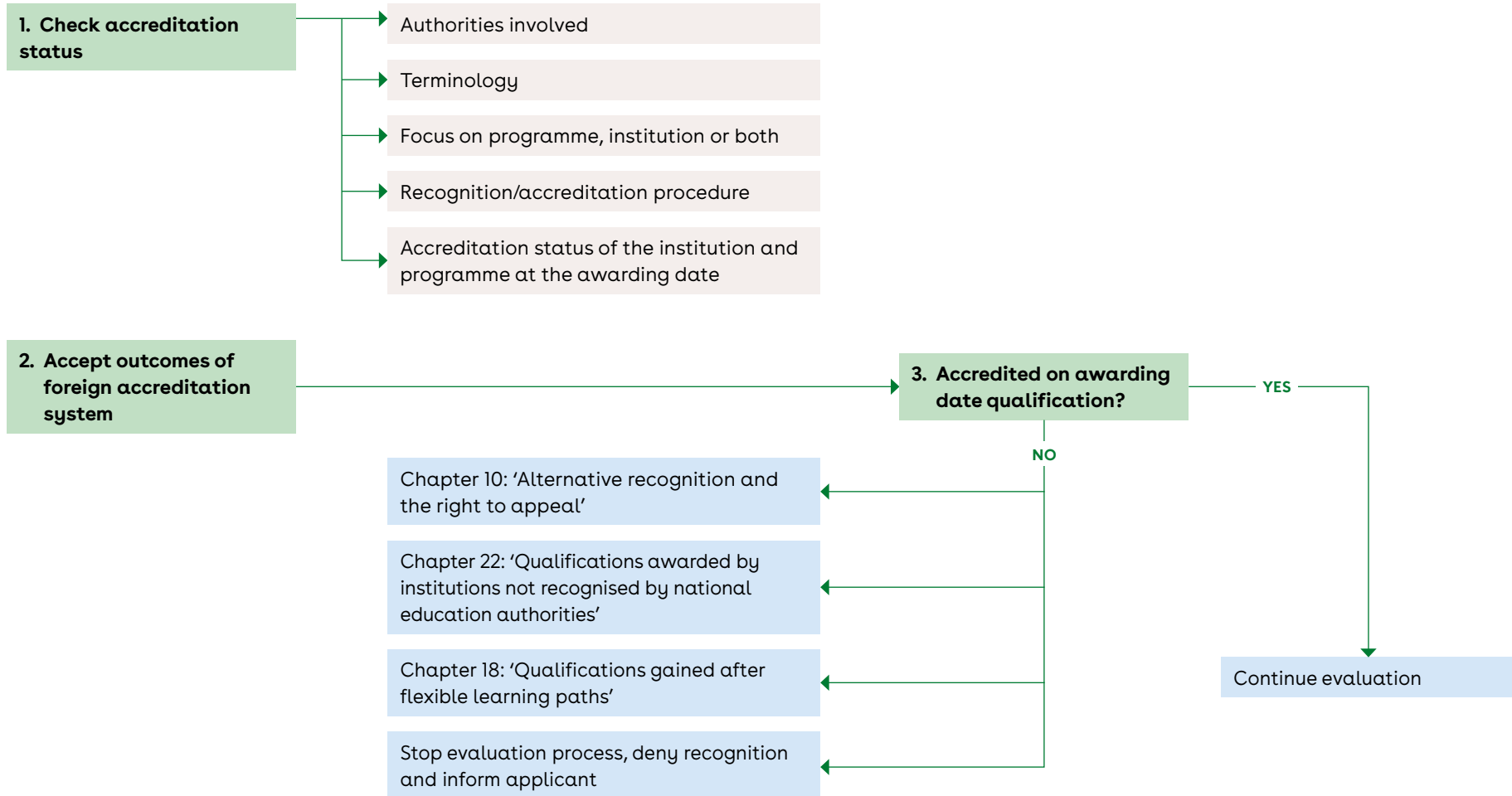


3. Accreditation and Quality Assurance (status of the institution)

This chapter discusses the concepts of accreditation and quality assurance as integral parts of the recognition process and accepts the outcomes of such procedures as sufficient evidence for the quality of a higher education programme or institution. The chapter also provides practical information and tools for navigating these processes.



Flowchart: Accreditation and quality assurance





Introduction

A foreign qualification cannot be properly evaluated without taking into account the official status of the institution awarding the qualification and/or the programme undertaken. In other words, you should establish whether the institution is authorised to award qualifications which are accepted for academic and professional purposes in the home country and/or, where applicable, whether the programme is accredited. The fact that an institution and/or the programme are recognised or accredited indicates that the awarded qualification represents an appropriate minimum level of quality in that particular country.

Depending on the country, different terms may be used in reference to the status of the institution or programme. The two most common are “recognition” and “accreditation”. They are often used interchangeably, but they are not synonyms. Quality assurance systems are not necessarily included in national recognition and accreditation procedures, but are addressed in this chapter to provide a better understanding of recent developments in this area.

Recognition

Recognition of an institution by the appropriate authority in that country is intended to ensure a certain level of quality. Recognition often goes hand in hand with the authority to award qualifications and issue academic degrees.

Sometimes other terms are used to refer to recognised institutions, such as ‘validated’, ‘registered’, ‘chartered’ and ‘approved’. However, be aware that, depending on the national context, these terms might refer only to the granting of certain right, and not serve as proof of quality. For example, an institution might have been given the right by the appropriate authority to offer private training programmes without having the right to award nationally recognised higher education qualifications.

Therefore, when evaluating a qualification, it is important to find out what kind of ‘recognition’ (guaranteeing the quality) is required for the institution awarding the qualification. Sources that can be used are listed at the end of this chapter and in [Chapter 13, ‘How to find and use information’](#).

In some educational systems, this type of institutional recognition is the only form of quality control available and should be accepted as sufficient evidence of quality.



Accreditation

Accreditation is often mentioned in the same context as quality assurance. They are not synonymous, although they can co-exist and even though both are strong indicators of the quality of a qualification. Accreditation means that the operation of an institution or the delivery of a particular programme is authorised by a body legally empowered to do so. This body might be a government ministry or an accreditation or quality assurance agency dedicated to vetting aspects of higher education provision. Accreditation is an external process. To obtain it, institutions and programmes must satisfy conditions imposed externally.

Quality Assurance

In recent years, many countries have introduced formal procedures for assuring the quality of programmes and qualifications. The principal driver for this has been the promotion of quality assurance in the Bologna Process, linked to the consolidation of institutional autonomy. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) now has sets of principles and procedures, enshrined in the so-called ESG, the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (last published in 2015). These propose a model in which institutions take charge of their own quality assurance processes in an organic and holistic manner constituting an internal 'quality culture', that is still periodically overseen by an external agency.

Accreditation can be granted to institutions, to programmes, or to both. When evaluating a qualification, it is important to establish what kind of accreditation is required in the system from which the qualification originates. National accreditation should be accepted as sufficient evidence of the quality of a qualification, as it provides the link to the levels of the national education system and/or to the levels and learning outcomes of the national qualifications framework.

In addition to national accreditation of institutions and/or programmes, some countries have separate accrediting bodies for specific types of professional programmes. In countries with this additional type of accreditation, accreditation of programmes involving public health and safety (in medicine, teaching, or social work, for example) is usually required. In some cases, institutions may hold some form of programme-specific accreditation (business is a common example) but no form of national accreditation in that country. There are various schools of thought on how to proceed in such cases. Some recognition authorities require that an institution have some form of national accreditation to be considered officially accredited, while others accept programme accreditation alone, provided the accreditor is recognised by the appropriate authorities as an accrediting body. If you are seeking guidance on how to proceed in cases where national accreditation is lacking, a report published following the completion of the NARIC project "[The recognition of non-country specific awards \(RENSA\)](#)" may be useful.



In the increasingly global world of higher education, there are also forms of accreditation at the international level. Accreditation by a foreign body is an attractive strategic option for institutions that rely on the recruitment of international students or that place a high premium on their international profile and activities. Many bodies operate on a cross-border basis in specific fields. They may require institutions to demonstrate features beyond those normally present in nationally or regionally accredited institutions, thus investing them with an added value that makes them attractive to particular groups of students. It must be stressed, however, that the absence of such additional forms of accreditation for a foreign qualification in no way implies that recognition must be withheld.

Another relevant topic when considering the recognition of programmes offered across borders is transnational education. With the increase in transnational programmes, you may encounter a qualification awarded upon completion of a programme in Country X that is accredited by the accrediting authorities in Country Y. For more information on how to verify the status of these programmes, see [Chapter 18: 'Qualifications Awarded through Transnational Education'](#).

Recommendations

1. It is important to check the recognition and/or accreditation status of the qualification and the awarding higher education institution when evaluating a foreign diploma, taking into consideration:
 - a. Which authorities are involved in the recognition and/or accreditation process and whether these authorities are themselves fully recognised within the system in which they operate; and the scope of their responsibilities.
 - b. What terminology is used in a given higher education system with regard to recognition and accreditation, for example: 'accredited', 'recognised', 'validated', 'registered', 'chartered', and 'approved';
 - c. Whether the focus of the recognition and/or accreditation system is on institutions, programmes, or both;
 - d. What procedures are involved in recognition and/or accreditation, and what levels and types of education they cover:
 - i. Whether the education is governed by national, regional, or local legislation, and whether the status is granted by this legislation;
 - ii. If the procedures include quality assurance;
 - e. If the institution awarding the qualification and/or the completed programme were recognised and/or accredited at the awarding date.



Example 3.1 - Authorities involved in the recognition/ accreditation process (1)

An applicant seeks recognition of a master's degree.

This qualification was awarded by a recognised higher education institution listed on the website of the Ministry of Education. No accreditation system has been implemented in the country where the degree was obtained, so neither the institution nor the programme is accredited.

Recognition by the Ministry of Education guarantees that both the institution and the programme have been established in accordance with national legislation on higher education, and that the awarded qualification represents a nationally accepted level of education.

Example 3.2 - Authorities involved in the recognition/ accreditation process (2)

An admissions officer assessing a master's degree has established that the awarding institution is a recognised higher education institution in Country B. However, in the education system of Country B, it is not sufficient for the institution alone to be recognised; the programme must also be accredited. Therefore, the admissions officer checks the database of accredited programmes maintained by the national accreditation organisation of Country B to confirm that the programme is accredited.

Note that you should always verify the information provided by the institution by comparing it with at least one additional external source (see 'Information Tools and Sources' below).

Be aware that some cases require further research or investigation into the institution and/or the programmes. Four specific cases where this often occurs are described in detail in [Chapter 4, 'Diploma and accreditation mills'](#), [Chapter 19, 'Qualifications Awarded through transnational education'](#), [Chapter 20, 'Qualifications awarded by joint programmes'](#), and [Chapter 22, 'Qualifications awarded by institutions not recognised by national education authorities'](#). As a starting point, it is good practice to accept the outcomes of the recognition and accreditation processes of foreign education systems (even if they operate according to rules different from those of your own national system) and to base your evaluations consistently on these outcomes.

Example 3.3 - Accept the outcomes of the accreditation process

An admissions officer in Country X receives for assessment a master's degree awarded by an accredited private institution in Country Z. In Country X, only public higher education institutions can be accredited. However, the admissions officer should trust the accreditation system of Country Z and recognise the qualification.



2. If, after applying recommendation 1 of this chapter, you find that the institution and/or the programme was not properly recognised or accredited at the date the qualification was awarded, you have no objective information on the quality of the qualification. This may be considered a substantial difference in terms of the LRC. The following options are available:
- Try to establish whether parts of the programme may be partially recognised (for example, transfer credits that may have been quality assured at another higher education institution);
 - Try to establish whether the institution is a non-recognised but legitimate institution (see [Chapter 22, 'Qualifications awarded by institutions not recognised by national education authorities'](#));
 - Refer the applicant to an assessment procedure that might lead to a RPL certificate (recognition of prior learning) that may be (partially) recognised;
 - Stop the evaluation process, deny recognition and inform the applicant.

Example 3.4 – Non-accredited programme

An applicant seeks admission to a master's programme in business studies and submits a first-cycle degree awarded by an institution in Country Z. This institution specialises in business studies and offers numerous short courses as well as one bachelor's programme. Country Z has a system of programme accreditation, and the admissions officer discovers that this particular bachelor's programme lost its accreditation several years before the degree was awarded to the applicant. Consequently, the outcomes of the programme are uncertain, and the admissions officer cannot grant full or partial recognition.

Nevertheless, the study undertaken by this student at the institution cannot be dismissed entirely, given its previous and current status as an educational institution. The admissions officer refers the applicant to a relevant RPL procedure, where they may be assessed against the learning outcomes achieved in business studies. Depending on the outcome of the RPL assessment, the student may be admitted to the bachelor's programme in business studies at the appropriate level, receiving exemptions for parts of the programme in accordance with the assessment.



Sources and references

Recognition and accreditation

- You can consult the following sources, which are also fully listed in [Chapter 13, 'How to find and use information'](#), to establish the status of an institution and/or programme:
- Documentation provided by the awarding institution;
- National official sources, such as websites of accreditation and quality assurance bodies, websites of the Ministry of Education, and websites of associations of accreditation and quality assurance agencies;
- Official national publications regarding the education system;
- International official sources, such as websites of international organisations and credential evaluator networks;
- Publications containing information about national education systems, accreditation, and recognition;
- Websites of international organisations and information tools regarding quality assurance and accreditation;
- For guidance on the recognition of institutions and awards that are not nationally recognised, see the report on Recognition of Non-Country Specific Awards (RENSA).
Link: www.mfhea.mt/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/RENSA-guidance-and-template.pdf.

Associations and registers of accreditation/quality assurance bodies

- ASPA (Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors).
Link: <https://aspa-usa.org/>;
- CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation).
Link: www.chea.org/;
- ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education).
Link: www.enqa.eu;
- ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education).
Link: <https://ecahe.eu>;
- EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education).
Link: www.eqar.eu/register.html;
- DEQAR (Database of External Quality Assurance Reports), a database developed by EQAR containing reports on higher education institutions and programmes that have been externally reviewed against the European Standards and Guidelines by agencies registered with EQAR.
Link: www.eqar.eu/qa-results/deqar-project/;



- INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education) provides an overview of quality assurance networks worldwide. The member lists of these networks can be used to find national accreditation and quality assurance agencies.

Link: www.inqaahe.org/membership/members/;

- Nationally Recognised Accrediting Agencies (U.S. department of education).

Link: www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/higher-education-laws-and-policy/college-accreditation/college-accreditation-united-states/college-accreditation-in-the-united-states--pg-6#NationallyRecognised.

Professional accreditation bodies

- AACSB, Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.
Link: www.aacsb.edu/accredited/;
- ACBSP, Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs.
Link: www.acbspsearch.org/;
- CEMS, Global Alliance in Management Education.
Link: www.cems.org;
- EAEVE, European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education.
Link: www.eaeve.org/;
- EQUIS, Accreditation of Management Education.
Link: www.efmdglobal.org/accreditations-assessments/business-schools/equis/;

- EUR-ACE, European Network for Accreditation of Engineer Education.

Link: www.enaaee.eu/eur-ace-system;

- UEMS, the European Union of Medical Specialists.

Link: www.uems.eu.

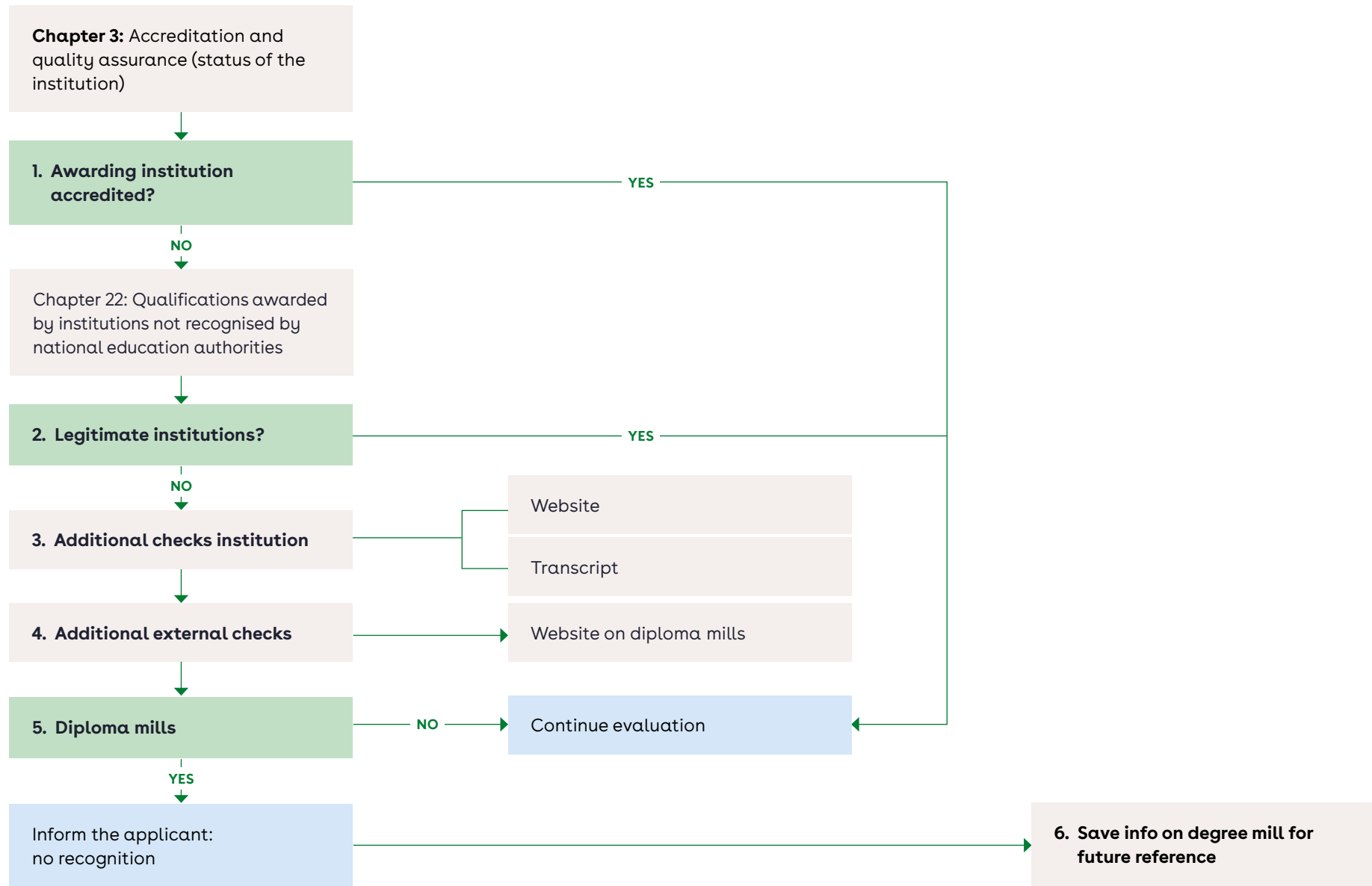


4. Diploma and Accreditation mills

This chapter discusses diploma and accreditation mills, which remain a serious concern for credential evaluators in ENIC-NARICs, admissions officers, recruiters, employers, and the general public. It provides definitions and tips for identifying diploma and accreditation mills and recommends how to deal with diplomas issued by such providers.



Flowchart: Diploma and accreditation mills





Introduction

Diploma mill

A 'Diploma mill' refers to "an institution or organisation which is not recognised by national competent authorities or organisations as an institution accredited or authorised by the law of any Member State to confer awards or qualifications, and which purports, by means of misrepresentation, to issue such awards or qualifications" (Council of Europe, 2022).

A diploma mill typically exhibits the following characteristics:

- Sells bogus qualifications without any requirements for serious study, research, or examination;
- Lacks recognition by national competent authorities or lawful accreditation, even if it may possess a license to operate as a business licence;
- Usually has no physical presence and operates online.

Some of the most common features of diploma mills include:

- Credits and qualifications are offered based almost solely on life experience;
- There is a strong emphasis on fees and payment options. For example, credit card logos may be displayed on the website;
- Courses may be very short in duration. In some cases, a bachelor's degree may be obtainable in as little as five days;

- A long list of 'national', 'international', or 'worldwide' accreditation agencies and affiliated bodies is mentioned on the website, most of which are also not legitimate;
- No visiting address is provided, only an office suite or a P.O. Box number. Contact details may also differ from the claimed location of the institution;
- Qualifications offered have unlikely titles;
- The name of the diploma mill is similar to well-known, reputable universities;
- Little or no interaction with professors is required.

Please note that not all non-accredited higher education institutions can be classified as diploma mills. For more information please see [Chapter 22, 'Qualifications awarded by institutions not recognised by national education authorities'](#).

Accreditation mill

'Accreditation mill' refers to "an institution or organisation (in any legal form) which is neither recognised by national competent authorities nor authorised by the law of any member State to provide accreditation for education programmes or awards, and which intends to mislead employers, students or the public" (Council of Europe, 2022).



An accreditation mill characteristically displays the following features:

- It lacks official recognition as an accrediting body from legitimate national authorities;
- It falsely claims the authority to provide accreditation without any proper authorisation to do so;
- Its accreditation decisions can be acquired for a fee, often without any genuine review process;
- These mills are frequently closely linked to diploma mills, sometimes even sharing common ownership.

Please note that not all non-recognised accreditation agencies are accreditation mills. It is important to be aware of the relevant accreditation procedures and quality assurance standards. For more information on accreditation, please refer to [Chapter 3, 'Accreditation and quality assurance \(status of the institution\)'](#).

Recommendations

It is imperative not to recognise qualifications or credits from diploma mills. Specifically, the following steps are essential to prevent their recognition when assessing foreign credentials:

1. Check whether the awarding institution is accredited and/or appropriately recognised by the competent authority in the relevant country (see [Chapter 3, 'Accreditation and quality assurance \(status of the institution\)'](#)).

Example 4.1 - Identifying a diploma mill

An applicant for a master's programme has submitted several qualifications attesting to their previous education. Your routine checks into the accreditation status of the awarding institutions reveal that the applicant's Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) was issued by an institution not accredited by the appropriate authorities in its country of origin. A review of the institution's website show no studies are required to obtain a qualification, and no physical address is provided for the institution. Further checks on the national list of unaccredited institutions confirm that this institution is considered a diploma mill. You then add the institution's details to your internal list of identified diploma mills to assist other staff.

Consequently, you inform the applicant that recognition of their qualification is refused, and they cannot be granted admission based on the BBA.



2. If the awarding institution is not accredited and/or appropriately recognised by the competent authority, determine the legitimacy of the provider (see [Chapter 22, 'Qualifications awarded by institutions not recognised by national education authorities'](#));
3. If you cannot confirm the legitimacy and/or status of the awarding institution, check the qualification, transcripts, and the institution's website for features indicative of diploma mills, as mentioned above.

Example 4.2 - Identifying an accreditation mill

When you check the website of an unknown higher education institution, you might find information on the accreditation status of its master's programmes in management. It may appear that these programmes have been accredited by an organisation called 'Quality Assurance European Universities (QAEU)'. QAEU will likely claim on its website that it's a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). As an admissions officer, you'll be familiar with ENQA's aims and its member agency review procedures, and might therefore be inclined to accept QAEU's claimed ENQA membership as sufficient proof of this accreditation organisation's quality.

However, a check on ENQA's official website reveals that QAEU isn't listed as a member, though some organisations with confusingly similar names might appear. When you decide to contact both QAEU and ENQA, you'll find that e-mails and phone calls to QAEU go unanswered. Conversely, ENQA will inform you that QAEU is an obscure accreditation mill with only a website, and that it's mentioned on the websites of three well-known degree mills.

4. Consult websites listing known diploma mills (see sources below). However, bear in mind that no such list is exhaustive, as new diploma mills constantly emerge and older ones frequently change their names (see also recommendation 6 below).
5. If evidence indicates that the awarding institution is a diploma mill, no form of recognition should be granted to the applicant. Inform the applicant of your findings, but do not offer alternative recognition. It is important to note that the applicant retains the right to appeal your decision.
6. Collect and save examples of qualifications from diploma mills for your reference. This will help you become familiar with the common formats and contents of these deceptive documents.



Example 4.3 - Internal databases of confirmed diploma mills

If your institution receives a qualification you suspect has been issued by a diploma mill, creating an archive of such documents can prove invaluable. This proactive approach allows your higher education institution to systematically collect information on organisations confirmed as diploma mills by competent authorities. You can effectively structure this archive by country, typology, and the website of the competent authority that confirmed the institution as a diploma mill.

To make the archive truly effective, maintain a comprehensive list detailing the format and content elements of the diploma mill's qualifications. This should include particular features like template designs, seals, layout, and fonts. Also, record additional information about the diploma mill itself, such as the qualification name, country of claimed accreditation, the mill's name, and its website.

It is important to monitor those lists and to update any changing information over the time, as qualifications issued by diploma mills in the past may be presented for credential evaluation.

Sources and references

Policy documents

- Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec (2022)18 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on countering education fraud, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 13 July 2022 and explanatory memorandum (2022).
Link: <https://rm.coe.int/ok-prems-137222-gbr-2512-cmrec-2022-18-et-expose-motifs-a5-web-1-/1680a96147>;

Publications

- CIMEA against the mills. How to spot and counter Diploma Mills (2010).
Link: www.cimea.it/Upload/Documenti/3337_CIMEA_Against_the_mills_2010.pdf;
- CIMEA, FRAUDOC - Guidelines on Diploma Mills and Document Fraud for Credential Evaluators (2018).
Link: www.cimea.it/Upload/Documenti/Guidelines-on-Diploma-Mills.pdf;
- CIMEA, FraudS+ - Knowledge and awareness of fraud in education: a student perspective (2022).
Link: www.cimea.it/Upload/Documenti/FraudS_Student_awareness_on_fraud_in_education_singole.pdf;
- ETINED - Council of Europe, Means to counter education fraud. Legislation, practices and instruments. Volume 7 (2023).
Link: <https://rm.coe.int/prems-023823-gbr-2512-etined-vol-7-16x24-web-4-/1680addf63>;



Articles

- Brown, G. M., Fighting Credential Fraud. In: World Education News & Reviews, 2005;
- Kearny, R., Detecting Forged Credentials in a High Tech World. In: World Education News & Reviews, 1994;
- Eaton, S.E., Carmichael J.J. and Pethrick, H., eds. (2023), Fake Degrees and Fraudulent Credentials in Higher Education. Springer Cham.

Links to more information about diploma mills

- ENIC-NARIC Networks – Fraud in Education.
Link: www.enic-naric.net/page-CoE-recommendation-countering-education-fraud;
- World Education Services.
Link: <https://wenr.wes.org/2017/12/diploma-mills-9-strategies-for-tackling-one-of-higher-educations-most-wicked-problems>;
- US Department of Education – Diploma Mills and Accreditation.
Link: www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/higher-education-laws-and-policy/college-accreditation/diploma-mills-and-accreditation;
- Useful questions about diploma mills and accreditation mills.
Link: www.chea.org/important-questions-about-degree-mills.

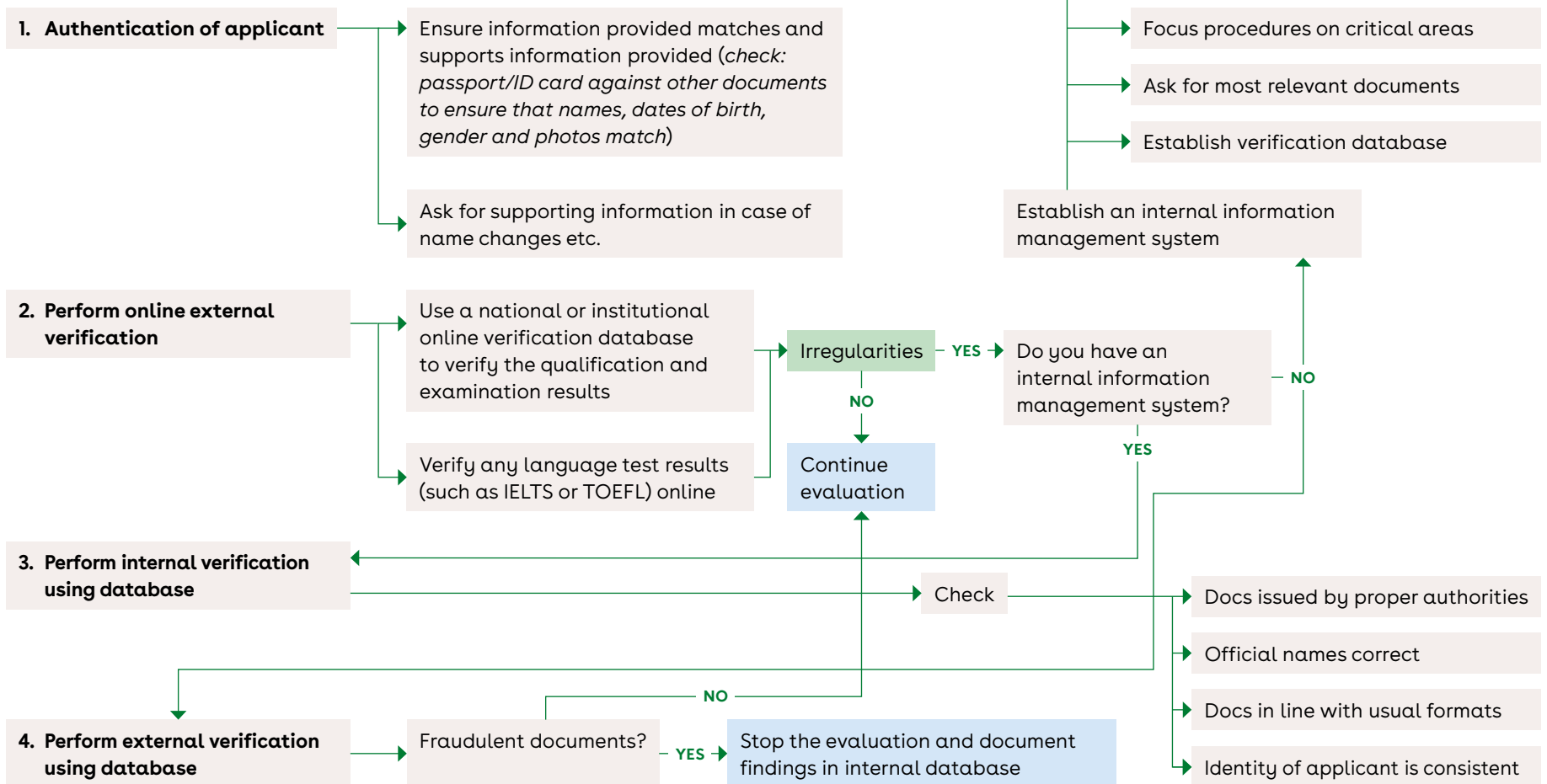
Note: The initial response of credential evaluators to the occurrence of diploma mills was to produce ‘blacklists’ of such institutions. However, this proved to be a moving target, as new and renamed diploma mills constantly emerged. Furthermore, there is the risk of legal action from these organisations. For these reasons, many recognition experts now prefer to rely on ‘whitelists’ of recognised and accredited institutions.



5. Authenticity

This chapter provides information on the external and internal procedures of verification of documentation submitted by an applicant. It also includes recommendations on how to verify a credential, practical examples, together with a list of information sources where you can verify documents, and other tools helpful in establishing whether the credentials are authentic.

Flowchart: Authenticity





Introduction

The process of establishing the authenticity of documents presented by an applicant – in other words, checking that they are not fraudulent – is called verification. Verification of credentials is essential, as the number of forged qualifications appears to be on the rise. This is unsurprising, given the value of certain qualifications and the rights and opportunities they can provide in terms of immigration, employment, and access to further education.

Verification is therefore crucial, as recognising fraudulent qualifications would be unfair to holders of genuinely earned qualifications. Holders of fake degrees, if admitted to further studies, may gain an unfair advantage in higher education, impede the teaching and learning process, and continue unethical practices within academia. Moreover, holders of fake degrees, if granted free access to the labour market, may pose risks to the health and safety of individuals and society in general. Fake degrees also damage the reputation of both higher education institutions and employers.

Generally, the most reliable form of verification is external verification at the source. The development of modern communication technologies has made this procedure faster and less costly. In several countries, it is possible to verify the authenticity of a document using a specified link, and several

of these links are listed at the end of this chapter under 'Sources and References'. Combined with the expertise available in the evaluator's office, external verification is often sufficient to detect altered or fabricated documents.

Although verification is an important part of the recognition process, it is equally important to ensure that applicants are not placed under undue scrutiny, which may substantially prolong the procedure and result in them choosing another institution or even another country for their further studies. Therefore, your starting point should always be to assume that documents are genuine unless there are clear indications to the contrary. Easily accessible external sources offer a low-key and time-efficient approach to verifying documents. Once the results of the external verification have been checked against internally available information and no irregularities or red flags have emerged, you can assume that the documents are genuine.

It is common practice to work with (usually certified) photocopies of all required documents, except for transcripts, which are sent directly by the awarding institution to the admissions officer. Online verification portals and digital credentials are becoming increasingly widespread and substantially ease and speed up the authenticity check. Additional requirements for the applicant should be imposed only in exceptional cases.



There are different types of fraudulent documents. In general, these can be grouped as follows:

- Fabricated or otherwise fake documents;
- Altered documents;
- Illegitimately issued documents (for example, documents issued to persons who have not undertaken the required study and/or examinations for the qualification presented, but who have obtained the document by means of bribery).

Please note that in addition to the types of fraudulent documents mentioned here, you should also be aware of diplomas issued by diploma mills and other authenticity issues, such as misleading translations (for more information on diploma mills, please see [Chapter 4, "Diploma and accreditation mills"](#)).

Recommendations

1. Start with authentication of the applicant.
Check the passport or ID card against the other documents in the application to ensure that names, dates of birth, gender, and photos match. In cases of a change of name or legal gender, supporting documentation should be provided by the applicant.

2. Perform online external verification:

- a. Use a national or institutional online verification database to verify the qualification and examinations results. Alternatively, you could look for graduates lists published on the institutional website for different years, or research repositories at institutional websites to find bachelor and master theses.
- b. Verify any language test result (such as IELTS or TOEFL) online. If these have been tampered with, you could also have doubts about the rest of the application. Doubts about authenticity are usually the result of a combination of factors.

Note: Before online sources were available, the starting point was to carry out internal verification (Step 3) before proceeding to external verification. With the emergence of digital external sources, it is now recommended that you make use of these external sources first. However, if extensive external verification is required (step 4) this should always be preceded by internal verification (step 3).



Example 5.1 – Use of online verification database

You receive a qualification from Moldova, which you identify as a Diploma de Bacalaureat. You have never seen this type of qualification before, so you cannot compare it with a verified example and you are not confident that it is an authentic document. As your office lacks experience with qualifications from Moldova, you consult the websites of various national bodies for information on the Moldovan education system and possible methods for verifying credentials.

While browsing the website of the Ministry of Education of Moldova (<https://edu.gov.md/>), you come across a link to the Ministry's official document verification site, CTICE. You then go to <https://ctice.md/verif/> and select the column for General Education. The verification is carried out by entering the serial number and registration number of the diploma holder, after which the confirmation is displayed instantly. A decision can then be made accordingly.

Example 5.2 – Verification of examination results online

You receive an examination result statement (Results Slip) from a Cameroonian candidate. Final Certificates for the Advanced Level and Ordinary Level for secondary education graduates are issued only six months after the publication of results to the centres for distribution. Prior to that, examination result statements are issued as Results Slips, which list the grades obtained in individual subjects. Advanced Level and Ordinary Level examination results can be verified for the current year on the website of the Cameroon General Certificate of Education (GCE) Board, which is the main recognised secondary education board in Cameroon, providing qualifications within the Anglophone system. To check results online, go to the Board's website at <https://camgceb.org/> and click on the column for GCE Results. If you are unable to find the candidate on the list by searching for their name, you may be able to locate them using the Exam Centre number (as stated on the Results Slip) instead.

The authenticity of higher education qualifications awarded in Pakistan can be verified using the tool available on the Higher Education Commission (HEC) portal. By selecting the 'Degree Attestation Verification' option and entering the HEC sticker code together with the applicant's citizenship number (without spaces), the system will display information related to the document.



Example 5.3 – Verification of documents by the corresponding link or QR code online

You receive a secondary education qualification from Pakistan. For most recent years (post-2020), secondary education qualifications issued in Pakistan include a sticker with an Inter Board Committee of Chairmen (IBCC) QR code on the back of the document. Scanning the IBCC QR code opens the <https://attest.ibcc.edu.pk> website, which provides information certifying the authenticity of the document.

You receive a diploma or transcript that contains a code and a link for checking its authenticity. By following the link, the diploma or transcript can be verified. For example, you can upload digital diplomas received from graduates of Danish university colleges, enter the verification ID as stated on the diploma, and click “Verify Diploma”. If the diploma is authentic, it is indicated that “The diploma is valid”.

Example 5.4 – Digital transcripts

Digital transcripts are increasingly appearing in applications. They are sent through secure links, often using technologies such as blockchain, with the student’s permission. As these links are valid for only a limited period and the transcript cannot be printed because it contains protected data, other ways of storing such student data should be considered. The discussion on the secure transfer of digital student data has been initiated by the Groningen Declaration Network. An example of this can be found in Australia and New Zealand, where many higher education institutions provide access to digital versions of academic transcripts and testamurs through My eEquals – a digital certification platform that enables students and graduates to share qualification documents with third parties via a secure online portal. My eEquals was launched in 2015 as a joint Australian and New Zealand higher education sector response to the Groningen Declaration and its commitment to digital student data portability. My eEquals is managed by HES (a not-for-profit organisation serving the Australian higher education sector) and powered by Parchment (formerly Digitary CORE). Students and graduates can access their digital documents through their personal My eEquals account and have several options to share them with another person (e.g. an employer) or organisation. This includes generating secure links, sending the documents directly to registered organisations, or downloading a PDF.



3. Establish an internal information management system for verification. To set up an efficient internal verification process, you should:
 - a. Analyse the contexts in which fraudulent practices are more likely to occur. These may be limited to specific qualifications or institutions;
 - b. Adapt your admissions and recognition procedures accordingly, focusing your verification efforts on these critical areas;
 - c. Ensure that you request the most relevant set of documents for each particular country, to support efficient verification.

Example 5.5 – Ask for the relevant documents

In some countries, original diplomas are primarily intended for display – they may be oversized, ornately designed documents that contain little detailed information. In such cases, higher education institutions usually prepare official transcripts for individual graduates on request. These transcripts are used in any procedure where the applicant needs to provide evidence of the qualification obtained. It is not useful to scrutinise a copy of such a diploma for irregularities if you can instead request that an official transcript be sent directly by the higher education institution to your admissions office.

- d. Establish a verification database, which may include the following:
 1. A list of common and reliable verification procedures for specific countries;
 2. Records of all incoming qualifications that have been checked and confirmed as genuine, including their validity dates and any security features, to serve as reference material for future applications. This helps familiarise you with the format and content of educational documents typically issued by individual countries and institutions, as well as the educational terminology used;
 3. Examples of fraudulent documents to illustrate common fraudulent practices (e.g. the use of scanned signatures);
 4. A glossary of common terms in foreign languages. Do not rely solely on translations.

It is essential for the verification process to keep the database up to date by adding the latest examples and the most recent information. When credential evaluation is not carried out at central level, it is worthwhile to establish an information-sharing system with colleagues within your institution and with other higher education institutions in your country.



4. As indicated above, external online verification of credentials should be the first step in the recognition process. However, if external verification is unavailable, yields insufficient information, or reveals irregularities, credentials should also be subjected to internal verification. This means authenticity should be evaluated based on the documentation submitted and the information sources available to you. To undertake internal verification, you should check:

- a. Whether the qualification and any other required documents have been issued by the appropriate authority in that country. You can verify this by consulting sources such as those listed at the end of this chapter;

Example 5.6 – Qualifications issued by the appropriate authority

Using Nigeria as an example, ensure that upper secondary qualifications have been issued by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) or the National Examinations Council (NECO), rather than by a secondary school. Not only do these councils provide quality assurance for the examinations taken by the applicant, but they also offer the means to verify the applicant's results.

- b. Whether all official names on the documents (such as those of the signatories, the institution named on the diploma, the Ministry of Education, or the country) were correct at the time the qualification was issued; and whether the format of the qualification aligns with the usual national or institutional formats. Please note that while some countries have a (national) standard format, in others the format of documents may vary depending on the region, the level of the qualification, the institution, or even the faculty;

Example 5.7 – Standardised format and numbers on diplomas

Norway's secondary education qualification, *Vitnemål for Videregående Opplæring*, is a standardised (national) format document that has changed little over the years. The document must contain prescribed information, including a document number consisting of a V for "vitnemål", the school's organisation number, the year, and a serial number. In the case at hand, irregularities in the document format and document number or other specified information raise suspicion of fraud.

- c. Whether the content of the qualification conforms to what you would expect from that country. For example: logos, awarding bodies, dates and duration, number of subjects studied, grading system used, and compulsory subjects;



- d. The appearance of the documents for irregularities. For example: unusual font varieties, absence of official stamps and/or signatures, misalignment, scanned signatures, informal language, spelling errors, inconsistent terminology, improbable qualification titles and inconsistent typefaces - all of which can indicate fraud. Also, check the chronology of the information presented. For example, verify that the duration of secondary schooling corresponds with the expected number of years, and that the age of the person who obtained the qualification is plausible;
- e. Check whether the institution, programme and/or qualification are accredited or recognised in the issuing country. Please refer to the previous chapters on accreditation and quality assurance ([Chapter 3](#)) and diploma mills and accreditation mills ([Chapter 4](#)) for more details. One possible outcome when checking the accreditation status is that the diploma was issued by a diploma mill. Although the names may initially sound familiar, it may become clear that it is not the same institution, as the name, logo, colours, and document layout differ slightly from what would be expected;
- f. Whether the information on the applicant's learning path contained in the documents is consistent with how the foreign education system operates (e.g., whether the applicant has met the entry requirements of the foreign programme in terms of level and grading);
- g. Whether the information regarding the applicant's identity is consistent throughout the documentation. Bear in mind that names may change for various reasons, such as marriage, divorce, national differences in distinguishing between first and last names, bilingual versions of the name, and differing transcription rules that may cause variations in spelling.

Example 5.8 - Checking the identity of the applicant

An applicant (born in Ukraine) submits an application file which contains a British and a German qualification. The British qualification was obtained by someone with the name of Ivanko, while the German qualification mentions the name Iwanko. Since this is a common difference in transcribing Ukrainian names into English and German, and all other information on the applicant (such as date of birth) is consistent throughout the application file, this does not warrant further investigation into the applicant's identity.

Some states have two official languages, which allows people to use two forms of their name. It is possible that the secondary qualification may use one form, whilst the university transcripts may use another. For example, in Ireland the name Ryan (English form) may be spelled Ó Riain (Irish form).



5. In case of irregularities, undertake external verification and/or impose additional requirements on the applicant.

The expertise available within the evaluator's office is often sufficient to detect altered and fabricated documents. However, where internal verification reveals more subtle irregularities, you may consider undertaking external verification or imposing additional requirements on the applicant to establish the documents' authenticity. The best course of action will depend on the specific case and the nature of the irregularity detected.

- a. External verification - establishing authenticity through external checks may include the following steps:
 1. Contact the issuing institution to verify the applicant's qualifications;
 2. Request that the applicant has their transcript sent directly to you by the awarding institution in a sealed envelope;
 3. Contact the relevant bodies and/or authorities in the country of origin, or consult your national recognition centre for their professional opinion on the authenticity of the documents presented;
 4. Submit original documents for forensic examination.

It is important to obtain the applicant's permission before externally verifying their documents for reasons of privacy protection. You should consider including a

request for this permission in the standard application form used by your educational institution. Please also bear in mind that some countries and institutions may not respond to such enquiries; however, this should not be held against the applicant.

A recent initiative to facilitate the verification of foreign qualifications is the Digital Student Data Depositories Worldwide (www.groningendeclaration.org/). Its aim is to make national student databases accessible for qualification verification.

Example 5.9 - Checking with issuing institution

An applicant has submitted an application for admission. After comparing their educational documents with a verified certificate and transcripts issued by the same institution in the same year, available in your internal database of verified genuine credentials, you identify considerable differences in appearance: the logo is incorrect and misplaced; the text is right-aligned rather than centred; and several spelling errors and inconsistencies are detected within the text.

Upon noting these inconsistencies, you send a request for verification to the issuing institution, attaching the submitted copies of the documents. Further processing of the application is suspended until a response is received from the issuing institution. Once the response is received, a decision is made accordingly.



- b. Additional requirements for the applicant may include:
1. Request to see the original documents. If this option is part of your recognition process, ensure that you have a reliable procedure for handling original documents. This should include clear instructions to the applicant on how to send the originals safely (e.g., by registered mail) and guidance for your office on how to receive and store them securely, handle them during examination, and return them safely to the applicant. You should also consider the costs involved and who will bear them, as well as any (financial) risks if something goes wrong;
 2. Request legalisation or an Apostille under the Hague Convention (1961) in countries where legalisation/ Apostille is a common practice. Bear in mind that legalisation seals and Apostilles do not attest to the accuracy of the document's content, and in some countries documents are not verified prior to legalisation. Legalisation or Apostille stamps do not guarantee that an institution or educational programme is legitimate. Be aware that the absence of legalisation is not a reason in itself to suspect fraud and should only be requested in exceptional circumstances where fraud is suspected, to avoid unnecessarily complicated and costly recognition procedures.

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requested in exceptional circumstances where fraud is suspected, to avoid unnecessarily complicated and costly recognition procedures.

Note: Additional requirements for the applicant should be set only in exceptional cases.

Sources and references

Examples of country specific sources for verifying certain documents

The following sources can be used to verify certain documents. Please note that no single comprehensive list exists that provides all the necessary information and sources. Be aware that this list is not exhaustive and is subject to change:

- Armenia: school leaving qualifications awarded from 2022 onwards can be verified through verify.e-gov.am by submitting the document number and date of issue of the diploma;
- Bangladesh:
 - secondary school and higher secondary examination results:
Link: www.educationboardresults.gov.bd;
 - vocational and professional examination results:
Link: https://180.211.162.102:8444/result_arch/index.php;



- Bulgaria:
 - register of documents for completed primary education, secondary education and/or acquired degrees of professional qualification: regdiploms.mon.bg/;
 - register of all active, interrupted and graduated students and doctoral students: <https://students.nacid.bg/graduated/>;
- China: verification service for Chinese qualifications: www.chsi.com.cn/en/service/index.jsp;
- Croatia: Digital Diploma Register: <https://visokoobrazovanje.hr/registar-diploma/provjera>;
- Cameroon: <https://camgceb.org/> (verification of examinations result of the current year);
- France: this website delivers certified digital certificates and provides third-party verification services for Brevet, CAP, BEP, Baccalauréat and BTS degrees: <https://diplome.gouv.fr/sanddiplome/login>;
- Gambia: West African Examinations Council (WAEC): <https://app.waecgambia.org/resultchecker/resultchecker.aspx>;
- Ghana: West African Examinations Council (WAEC): <https://ghana.waecdirect.org/>;
- Guinea: verification website for university diplomas: <https://diplome.gov.gn/>;
- India:
 - Central Board of Secondary Education: www.cbse.nic.in;
 - India Results: www.indiaresults.com;
- International Baccalaureate (verification of examination results): www.ibo.org/;
- Kenya: KNEC: www.knec.ac.ke/;
- Lithuania: with the consent of the diploma holder, it is possible to verify general and vocational education diplomas and certificates (including Matura certificates) issued from 1 May 2023 onwards through the Register of Diplomas, Certificates and Qualifications: www.dakpr.smm.lt/aikos2-dakpr/edocSearch.xhtml;
- Moldova: verification service for Moldova qualifications: <https://ctice.md/verif/>;
- New Zealand: the New Zealand Record of Achievement (NZROA) is an official transcript of a person's New Zealand qualifications and standards, as reported to NZQA by education providers. An electronic copy of the learner's NZROA can be verified using the NZROA Verification Tool: www2.nzqa.govt.nz/qualifications-and-standards/access-your-results/verify/;
- Nigeria:
 - WAEC: www.waecdirect.org/;
 - NECO: <https://verify.neco.gov.ng/>;
- Norway: Diploma Registry (Vitnemålsportalen): www.vitnemalsportalen.no/english/;
- Pakistan (HEC):
 - Secondary and Intermediate Examination results can often be verified at the issuing institution's website, e.g. BISE Lahore results: www.biselahore.com;



- Degree verification Higher Education Commission (HEC) portal: www.hec.gov.pk/english/Pages/default.aspx; <https://eservices.hec.gov.pk/#/degree-verification/main>;
- Verification for the University of the Punjab: <https://pu.edu.pk/home/results>;
- Romania: www.ebacalaureat.ro;
- Sierra Leone (WAEC): www.waecsierra-leone.org/ResultChecker/;
- Syria:
 - You can check the exam results of students in secondary education on the website of the Ministry of Education: moed.gov.sy/site/. Only the results from 2014 onwards are online;
 - The Syrian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has a database for PhD dissertations: <https://mohe.gov.sy/researchMc-PH-DB/searchPH.php>;
- South Africa:
 - South African Qualifications Authority: <https://verisearch.sqa.org.za/>;
 - Department of basic education: www.education.gov.za/ (Matric Results section);
- Tanzania: ACSEE results can be viewed on the Tanzania Examinations Council website: www.necta.go.tz/;
- Ukraine: verification service: <https://info.edbo.gov.ua/edu-documents/>.

Country-specific sources for national format document samples

- Australia: www.education.gov.au/quality-and-legislative-frameworks/resources/guidelines-presentation-ahags;
- France: cache.media.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/file/43/59/0/annexe9139_367590.pdf (university degrees only);
- Lithuania: www.aikos.smm.lt/Puslapiai/Pradinis.aspx;
- Ukraine: <https://osvita.net/ua/>;
- United Kingdom: <https://hear.ac.uk/>.

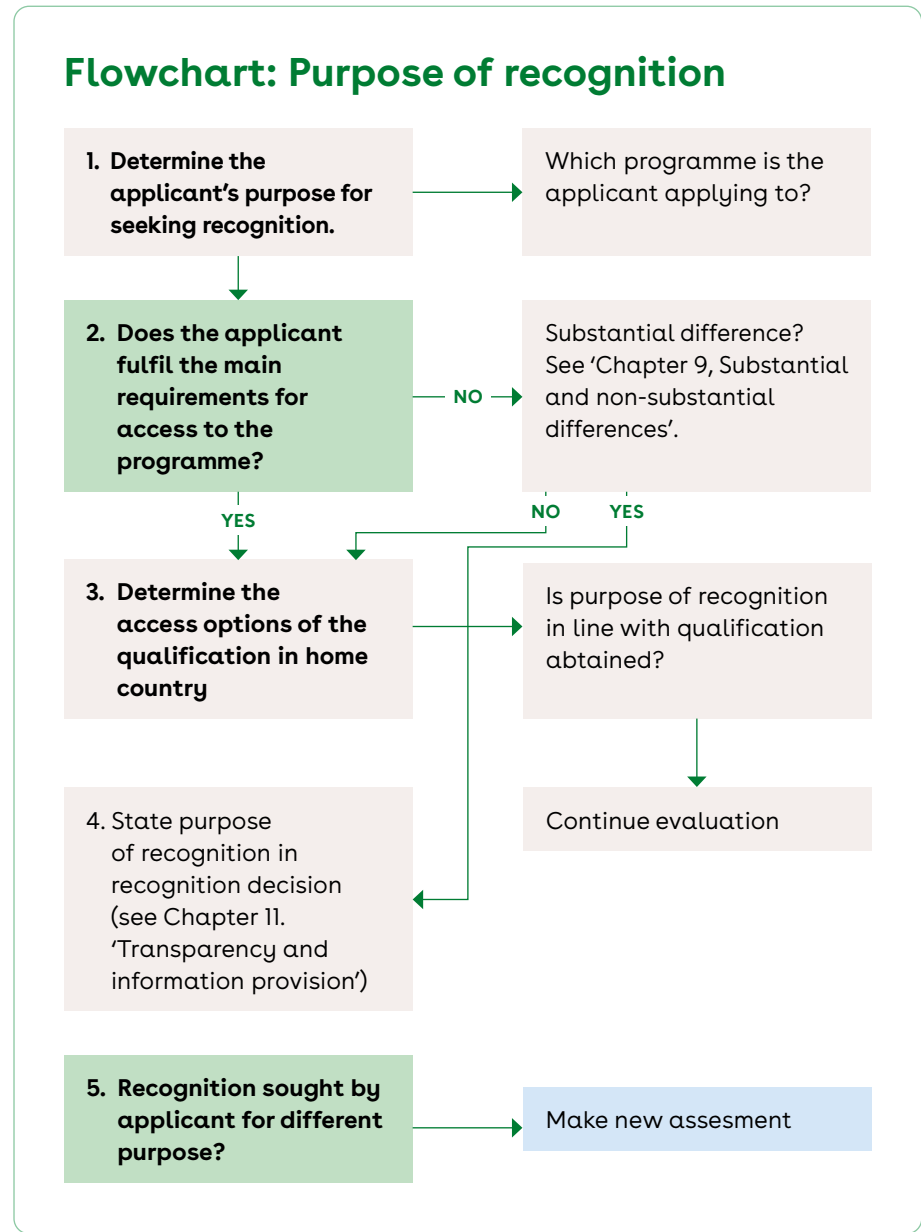
Note: only a limited number of countries use national formats for their higher education qualifications.

Reaching inactive or outdated websites

Old and defunct websites can in certain cases be accessed using the Wayback Machine: <https://web.archive.org/> in order to check logo, institution name, programmes offered, etc.

6. Purpose of recognition

This chapter outlines the main purposes for which recognition may be sought and explains the role of purpose in making recognition decisions. In practice, admissions officers will deal primarily with the academic purpose of recognition. This chapter therefore serves to provide a better understanding of how purpose should be taken into account in academic recognition.





Introduction

Purpose of recognition

Recognition of foreign qualifications may be sought for different purposes, the most common being access to further education and training (academic recognition) and/or entry to the labour market (professional recognition).

Academic recognition

Academic recognition refers to the recognition of periods of study or qualifications awarded by an educational institution for the purpose of enabling a person to continue or begin studying, or to use an academic title.

Assessment of a foreign qualification and purpose of recognition

It is important to take the purpose of recognition into account when assessing a foreign qualification, to ensure that the assessment is both accurate and relevant. The assessment and recognition of a qualification for entry to the labour market or a regulated profession may differ from the assessment and recognition of a qualification for admission to further studies. The decision regarding academic recognition may also vary depending on the level and specialisation of the specific study programme for which admission is sought. In other words, the

assessment of the required learning outcomes and competences associated with a completed qualification may vary depending on the purpose of recognition.

Recommendations

1. Determine the purpose for which the applicant seeks recognition. For which programme does the applicant apply?
2. Check if the applicant's qualification(s) fulfil the requirements of the study programme they are applying for. If the applicant does not meet the requirements, consider if this constitutes a substantial difference, see Chapter 9, 'Substantial and non-substantial differences'.

Note that the LRC – and therefore the concept of substantial differences – only applies to access requirements that determine whether the applicant's qualifications are sufficient for entry into the programme, not to additional selection requirements that institutions are able to set in some systems. See Chapter 9, 'Substantial and Non-substantial Differences', and Chapter 12, 'Institutional Recognition Practices'.



Example 6.1 - Take the purpose of recognition into consideration

Usually, the admission requirements for applicants with qualifications obtained within your national education system are well-defined and transparent. There may even be clear sets of rules and regulations that apply to certain types of national qualifications.

To create efficient and transparent admission procedures for applicants with foreign qualifications, you should aim to translate the national and institutional requirements into a set of comparable requirements that must be met by applicants with foreign qualifications in order to have a good chance of successfully completing the programme. Since the requirements for admission to a bachelor's programme in dentistry will differ greatly from those for admission to a master's programme in business administration, the purpose of recognition largely determines the outcome of the recognition process.

To ensure efficient and transparent admission procedures for applicants with foreign qualifications, it is recommended to adapt national and institutional requirements into a comparable set of standards for foreign qualifications. This increases the likelihood that such applicants will successfully complete the programme. For example, one key requirement – proof of proficiency in the language of instruction – is usually the same

across different study programmes. However, other requirements vary significantly depending on the programme. The admission requirements for a bachelor's programme in dentistry will differ greatly from those for a master's programme in business administration. Ultimately, the purpose of recognition largely determines the outcome of the recognition process.

Example 6.2 - Take the compliance with the admission requirements into consideration

It is important to prioritise the steps leading to the recognition procedure. Begin by checking compliance with the least complex requirements, thus avoiding an inefficient recognition procedure in cases where the applicant does not meet other admission requirements that are easy to verify. Applicants for a given programme usually have to meet a range of admission requirements. Academic recognition is just one of these, but it can be a time-consuming process. Therefore, before undertaking it, the applicant's readiness should be verified. For example, an applicant typically must demonstrate proficiency in the language of instruction. If their language proficiency does not meet the admission requirements for the programme, proceeding with recognition would no longer be relevant.



3. Determine the access right(s) of the qualification in the issuing country. Some qualifications may grant restricted access to higher education in the home country. Such restrictions may apply to certain levels of programmes, specific types of higher education institutions, and/or particular fields of study. Depending on what the student wishes to study, the same restrictions may need to be applied at your institution.

Note that a difference in access rights may constitute a substantial difference. This can be particularly relevant in the context of automatic recognition (see Chapter 16, 'Automatic recognition'). However, unless there is no doubt whatsoever that access alone constitutes a substantial difference, the evaluation should proceed.

Example 6.3 - Take cases of restricted access into consideration

An applicant submits a vocationally oriented qualification in computer studies. In the home country, the applicant may either enter the labour market within the occupational field of the qualification or seek access to a higher education programme, but only in a relevant subject area. An admissions officer at a higher education institution in another country grants full recognition for admission to a bachelor's programme in computer science. However, if the applicant were seeking admission to a bachelor's programme in medicine, the admissions officer would report a substantial difference in profile and learning outcomes for the purpose of admission.

4. The recognition decision prepared for the applicant should provide clear and transparent information and explicitly state the purpose of recognition. See Chapter 11, 'Transparency and information provision for information about communicating the recognition decision'.

Note the recognition decision should only be communicated to the applicant after considering substantial differences (see Chapter 9, 'Substantial and non-substantial differences'), and - if applicable- partial or alternative recognition (see Chapter 10, 'Alternative recognition and the right to appeal').



Example 6.4 – State the purpose of recognition in the recognition decision

An admissions office at a higher education institution in country A provides the following information in the recognition statement to an applicant with a qualification from country B:

- the purpose of recognition (specifying admission to which programme at the higher education institution in country A);
- a comparison of the qualification from country B with a specific qualification in country A's education system. If the qualification does not fully correspond to a particular level in country A's education system, the assessment expresses the level in terms of a certain part (or number of credits) of a study programme in country A;
- the decision on full, partial, or alternative recognition (explained in terms of substantial differences);
- information on partial recognition (possibility of applying for credit transfer based on the qualification from country B) or alternative recognition (possibility of applying for another programme in a similar field that better matches the applicant's qualification).

5. If recognition is sought by an applicant for a purpose different from that covered in a previous recognition statement, a renewed assessment is recommended.

Example 6.5 - Make a revised assessment for a different purpose of recognition

A holder of a Bachelor of Liberal Arts was not granted full recognition for admission to a postgraduate programme requiring a highly specialised prior degree in the relevant field. The applicant then applies to another postgraduate programme at the same higher education institution, which requires only a general bachelor's degree. The admissions officer refers to the previously gathered information in the application file (e.g., verification of the accreditation status and authenticity of the qualification), adjusts the purpose of recognition in the recognition statement, and issues a new assessment of the qualification, this time granting full recognition.

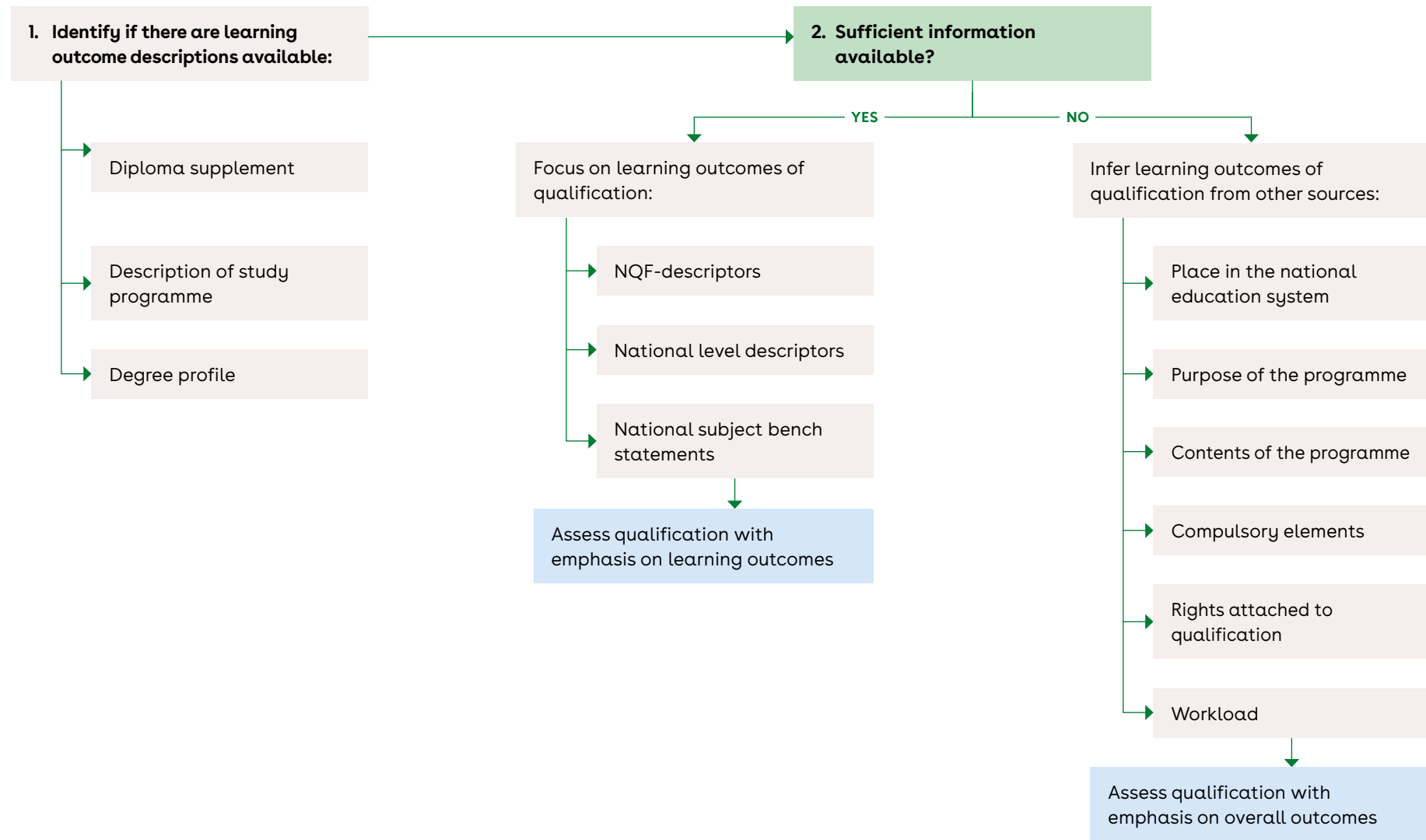


7. Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications, allowing a recognition process based on a detailed assessment of the formal criteria of the foreign qualification, but also taking into consideration what a person knows, understands, and is able to do. This chapter gives a brief introduction to the concept of learning outcomes and provides guidance on the use of learning outcomes in recognition.



Flowchart: Learning outcomes





Introduction

A learning outcome is a statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand, and be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning. Learning outcomes may be written for a single module or programme component, a complete programme of study, a qualification level in general (descriptor), or anything in between.

In practice, the expression 'learning outcome' is also widely used in a more general sense to indicate the overall output of a programme, rather than in the narrow sense of a technical statement as described here. It is relevant to note that while descriptions of programme learning outcomes are not always provided, they can often be constructed from the overall input.

Various systems for writing learning outcomes are currently in use. Learning outcomes play an important role in national and overarching qualifications frameworks (for more information, see [Chapter 15, "Qualifications frameworks"](#)).

For instance, generic learning outcomes are linked to the cycles or levels of the overarching EHEA-QF and EQF. National qualifications frameworks make use of: qualification descriptors (learning outcomes used as generic descriptions of the various types of qualifications); level descriptors (learning outcomes

used as generic descriptions of the various levels); or national subject benchmark statements (learning outcomes describing the subject-specific characteristics and standards of programmes).

Learning outcomes may be divided into subject-specific learning outcomes, which are related to the subject discipline, and generic learning outcomes, which are transferable from one academic discipline to another.

Learning outcomes at programme level have various uses:

- They are important for academic staff when designing study programmes, as they provide clear goals for the programme;
- They are useful for prospective students, providing transparent information on what may be expected from a particular study programme;
- After obtaining a qualification, graduates are able to provide relevant information to employers and competent recognition authorities regarding their abilities.

Information on learning outcomes at programme level might be found in the:

- Diploma Supplement;
- Description of the study programme (usually available on the websites or in the catalogues of higher education institutions);
- Degree Profile (if available).



General information on learning outcomes of specific types and levels of qualifications might be found in the following features of national qualifications frameworks:

- National qualification descriptors;
- National level descriptors;
- National subject benchmark statements.

Although the information sources listed above refer to learning outcomes at different levels of specificity, they are all important in the process of recognition of a foreign qualification.

In many cases, no direct information concerning learning outcomes is found in the accompanying documentation, such as the list of subjects or transcript. Even Section 4.2 (programme learning outcomes) of the 2018 Diploma Supplement Template (see [Chapter 14, “Diploma Supplement”](#)), which is intended to provide “details of learning outcomes, knowledge, skills, competences”, does not always contain a clear list of learning outcomes.

When learning outcomes are taken into account in the evaluation of a foreign qualification, the recognition procedure is more directly focused on the outcomes reached and competences obtained, instead of only relying on the input criteria of the programme such as workload and contents.

The principal question asked of the graduate will no longer be, “What did you do to obtain your qualification?” but rather, “What can you do, now that you have obtained your qualification?”.

Recommendations

1. Identify if learning outcome descriptions are available for the qualification. This information may be found in:
 - The Diploma Supplement (section 4.2) or comparable documents such as transcripts;
 - The description of the study programme (usually available on the websites or in the catalogues of higher education institutions);
 - Qualification registers (for example the Lithuanian aikos (www.aikos.smm.lt/en));
 - Other sources such as the degree profile.

Note: Do not automatically conclude that non-matching lists of learning outcomes between two programmes signify substantial differences.



Interpret information contained within lists of learning outcomes with care, as their writing and listing remain a relatively new development for higher education institutions in many countries. For instance, an important learning outcome of a programme might have been overlooked by compilers of the list, despite being evident from other programme information. The learning outcomes assigned to a particular programme should always be examined within the context of the general learning outcomes assigned to qualifications at that level (as expressed in national qualification descriptors and level descriptors).

Example 7.1 - Use of learning outcomes to discover additional elements of the qualifications

An applicant has submitted a Degree Profile which gives a student-centred description of a specific physics bachelor's programme, focusing on the outcomes of the programme. Typically, Degree Profiles do not contain a list of subjects studied, which are usually found in the academic transcript or Diploma Supplement. Instead, the listed programme competences and learning outcomes provide detailed information on the abilities of the student. This information is especially useful for competent recognition authorities who are themselves knowledgeable in the field of physics, such as university staff responsible for master's programmes in physics. Recognition offices which only provide general evaluations of qualifications can use this Degree Profile to conclude that this is a general and broad bachelor's programme in physics, with a strong emphasis on theory and research, suggesting the qualification is more academically than professionally oriented. Access to any type of physics master's programme, including heavily research-oriented master's programmes, should in principle be no problem.



2. In the absence of learning outcome information, infer the output of a qualification from other more readily available information, such as:

- The place of the qualification in the national education system or qualifications framework;
- The purpose of the programme;
- The content of the programme;
- Compulsory elements (e.g., a thesis or dissertation);
- The rights attached to the qualification; and
- The workload of the programme.

Example 7.2 - Use of subject-specific learning outcomes for access to a particular study programme

An applicant has submitted a qualification for admission to a master's programme in physics. Based on the list of subjects in the transcript, the admissions officer has the impression that the programme might be mainly professionally oriented. The application file also contains information about the programme profile (see [Chapter 2, 'The five elements of a qualification'](#)), focusing on the learning outcomes of the programme.

The admissions officer uses this information and concludes that the applicant has completed a general and broad bachelor's programme in physics, with a strong theoretical emphasis and an element of research. These factors suggest that the qualification is more academically than professionally oriented. Therefore, no substantial differences are reported for access to any type of master's programme in physics. As this example illustrates, subject-specific learning outcomes may be particularly useful in determining if a student has the skills and competences required for the next step of education.

Example 7.3 - Use of generic learning outcomes to understand the qualification

An admissions officer receives a certain qualification from Malta for the first time and is referred to the level descriptors of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). The MQF provides an overview of the outcomes of all eight Maltese levels in terms of knowledge, skills, competences and learning outcomes. Thus, the admissions officer obtains a first impression of the generic learning outcomes of this Maltese qualification, and of the differences between the levels.



Example 7.4 - Use of learning outcomes to understand how qualifications relate to each other

In some education systems (including Ireland), there is a distinction between honours bachelor's degrees and ordinary bachelor's degrees. However, these distinctions vary from one country to another. By studying the national qualification descriptors of the Irish ordinary bachelor's degree and Irish honours bachelor's degree, the admissions officer can obtain an overview of the learning outcomes of both types of Irish bachelor's degrees in order to understand how these qualifications differ from each other. For example, based on this information, the admissions officer can determine whether either of the awards may, in principle, provide access to master or PhD programmes in the host country.

Example 7.5 - Use of learning outcomes to recognise qualifications for different purposes

A degree in medicine which is formally a first cycle degree in the issuing country (the title Bachelor is awarded on completion) gives access to the profession of physician in that country. The holder of the qualification moves to another country where programmes in medicine are split into two cycles and only the second cycle (Master) gives access to the profession of physician. However, the learning outcomes achieved by the holder of this bachelor's degree are comparable to the learning outcomes achieved with the second cycle (Master) qualification in the receiving country. In this situation, where the national legislation of the receiving country permits it, the degree can be recognised for professional purposes.



8. Credits, grades, credit accumulation and credit transfer

This chapter provides an overview of the concept of credits and how they relate to the workload and learning outcomes. It also outlines the main elements of the processes of credit accumulation and credit transfer and how credits should be interpreted during an assessment. Grading and its impact on recognition are also discussed with recommendations on how to apply these concepts in practice.



Flowchart: Procedure credits, grades, credit accumulation and credit transfer

Credits

Consider the following when interpreting credits obtained:

1. **Accept quality assured credits as indication of a successfully completed amount of study and/ or achieved learning outcomes**
2. **Use the basic principles of the foreign credit system: minimum amount of credits for completion of programme and academic year**
3. **Use of multiple credit systems: determine how to convert these systems**
4. **At what level have the credits been achieved?**
5. **Does it represent a cohesive programme or part of a programme?**
6. **If no credit system is available, consider:**
 - time required to complete the programme
 - number of units/subjects per semester
 - level of the programme

7. **Interpret credits obtained**

8. **Determine the workload of the qualification or the separate teaching achievement**

Grades

Consider the following:

1. **Interpret grades in the context of the education system in which a qualification or learning outcome was achieved**
2. **Use grades merely as an indication of a student's academic performance in general**
3. **Compare foreign grades with own based on statistical distribution of grades**

4. **Interpret grades achieved**

5. **Determine the quality of learning achievements and rate the performance**



Introduction

Credits

Credits are used to measure the volume of learning based on the achievement of learning outcomes and/or their associated workload measured in time. They are awarded to the learner upon successful completion of a given unit of a study programme and/or a complete programme.

In competence-based systems, credits do not necessarily have the quantitative aspect of workload, but rather attest to achievement of a set of learning outcomes, as credits can be acquired not only in the classroom, but also on the basis of assessment and validation of prior learning. Such credit systems allow recognition of flexible learning pathways and support lifelong learning.

Credits do not normally take the level of performance (grades) into consideration unless otherwise specified, but passing grades demonstrate that the learning outcomes leading to the award of credits have been assessed as achieved.

Different credit systems exist across various systems and levels of education worldwide. A credit system may be limited to a single institution, to a specific national context or may be applied across different national education systems, such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

It should be noted that not all systems and/or institutions have developed credit systems and might still measure student workload in hours or may not include any indication of workload for individual units. This should not be considered a substantial difference leading to refusal to consider recognition of a qualification and/or periods of study.

Credit Accumulation

Credit accumulation is the term used to describe the process of collecting credits allocated to the learning achievements of units within a programme. Upon the successful accumulation of a specified amount of credits in required subjects, a learner may successfully complete a semester, academic year or a full study programme or a short stand alone course (for example in case of a micro-credential). The process of credit accumulation is determined by the credit system in which it operates and often allows for a flexible learning path. The process of credit accumulation may differ across different credit systems. Credits accumulate at different levels, a credit level being an indicator of the relative demands of learning and learner autonomy. Normally, the greater the degree of learner autonomy, the higher the credit level will be.

Credit Transfer

Credit accumulation refers to the collection of credits within one credit system. In most cases, credit transfer refers to the process of transferring credits gained in one credit system or institution



to another, with the same goal of achieving a given amount of credits in order to obtain a specific qualification. Thus, credit transfer may facilitate the recognition of prior learning and can be a fundamental tool when it comes to lifelong learning and mobility.

Successful credit transfer across educational systems can be achieved through agreements between different awarding bodies and/or education providers. Credit frameworks can help facilitate the mutual recognition of measurable learning. This can encourage further learning, allowing students to transfer between or within institutions without interrupting their studies or having to repeat examinations, and to maintain a clear record of achievement.

A number of credit systems have been designed to facilitate credit transfer across different education systems, such as ECTS for higher education and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) for vocational education in Europe. One of the key benefits of using a common or similar credit framework is that it can ease a student's entry into the international education arena and enhance mobility.

Qualifications frameworks focus on credits being assigned to a specific qualification level and allow for flexible learning paths by facilitating both credit accumulation and transfer at a national level.

Grades

Grades describe the quality of learning achievements and rate the student's performance at a particular level. A grading system usually includes a range of numbers, percentages, letters or descriptors indicating a level of achievement such as fail, pass or merit. Grading systems and marking criteria vary among education systems and often between different levels of education. Grades can be awarded based on internal (institutional) assessment or external examination, or both. They are either criterion-referenced (where the grade reflects the score of the student in relation to an absolute scale), or norm-referenced (where the grade reflects the score of the student relative to the scores of previous cohorts of students). The very nature of grading systems and grading cultures makes it difficult, if not impossible, to accurately convert grades from one system to another.

Within the ECTS framework, the European Union has tried to relieve this issue by suggesting a grading table that provides information about the applicant's performance regarding comparison to a reference group (cohort). A description of the procedure can be found in the 2015 ECTS Users' Guide, pages 80-81.



Recommendations

Credits and Credit Transfer

1. Accept quality assured credits as an indication of the amount of study successfully completed and of the workload of modules within the study programme.
2. If a foreign programme uses a different credit system, use the basic principles of the foreign credit system, such as the minimum amount of credits required for completion of the programme and for completion of an academic year. With this information you can determine how the foreign credits may be converted to or interpreted in your own credit system.

Example 8.1 - Linking foreign credits to your own credit system

An applicant presents a Bachelor degree from country Q consisting of 120 Q-credits. It appears that 30 Q-credits represent 1 year of academic study. With this information, a recognition professional in country P (which uses ECTS credits) examines the amount of Q-credits spent on subjects in the bachelor's programme and roughly converts 1 Q-credit to 2 ECTS. These estimations should be sufficient to provide an indication of the workload of the various parts of the programme, without breaking up the credits into smaller units such as study hours or contact hours.

3. Check for different credit systems within a country and if the system was changed in a particular point in time. If so, determine how these systems can be converted to each other and to your own credit system.

Example 8.2 - Conversion of older credit systems

An applicant submits an older qualification from country N, where the credit system changed from 'study points' (in which one study point represented one week of work, and the academic year consisted of 42 weeks) to ECTS. The admissions officer finds out that the credits used in this qualification are the former study points and that in country N a conversion factor of $60/42 = 1,4$ was used to convert study points to ECTS. Working within the ECTS system, the admissions officer then applies the same factor to the submitted by the applicant.

4. Consider at what level credits have been achieved: for instance, credits obtained at undergraduate level may differ from those obtained at postgraduate level (see Example 8.5).



Example 8.3 - Taking into consideration the level of credit

An applicant from country X applies for credit transfer in a master programme at an institution in country Y. Upon examination of the applicant's transcript it becomes clear that the applicant seeks credit transfer for courses taken both at master's and bachelor's level. The bachelor's level credits can be accepted if this is permitted by the regulations of the master's programme offered by your institution. The opposite is also true: you can choose not to accept these credits if your institution does not permit applying credits obtained at the bachelor's level towards a master's degree.

5. Check if a collection of credits does actually represent a cohesive programme (or part of a programme), comparable to credits that domestic students would be allowed to combine. You do not have to accept any collection of credits acquired by a student, especially if credits have been obtained from various higher education institutions without being part of one programme.

Example 8.4 - Accumulation of credits

An applicant presents his degree course transcript indicating 180 ECTS achieved at undergraduate level, which is the equivalent of three years studying. However, there is no final certificate and it is thus not clear whether or not the student has actually passed the final examination. Possibly, the student may have acquired some additional credits for noncompulsory subjects, whereas some compulsory subjects are still missing. This might result in a transcript which shows that 180 ECTS have been accumulated, but which does not represent a fully completed programme. Accordingly, the recognition decision is suspended until the final degree certificate or other acceptable evidence of degree completion has been received.



Grades

Depending on the specific educational system, grades may or may not have a direct impact on the assessment of a given qualification. When considering grades obtained in a foreign system, you should:

1. Consider grades in the context of the education system in which a qualification or learning outcome has been achieved. Keep in mind that both grading criteria and grade distribution can vary to a great extent and that the comparison of grades from different grading systems can be problematic.

It may, therefore, be wise to use grades merely as an indicator of a student's academic performance in general and not as a numerical tool that is easily translatable into one's own grading system.

Example 8.5 - Grades and recognition

An applicant presents a qualification and a transcript. According to the information on the grading system used in the applicant's country, the student's performance is quite poor.

However, the student has passed the overall requirements of the programme and has been awarded the final qualification. Thus a recognition decision can be made accordingly. The competitiveness of the admissions process, and -whether you take grades into consideration, will determine if the student can be admitted.

2. Determine if grades have a direct impact on the rights of a foreign qualification in the education system of the home country. According to the situation in your own system, you may take this into account in your evaluation and recognition decision.



Example 8.8 – Grading: impact in home country

In country P a bachelor's degree with an average grade of at least 12 out of 15 is required for access to master programmes. An applicant seeks admission to a master programme in country Q and presents a bachelor's degree from country P with an average grade of 11. The admissions officer may inform the applicant that there is a substantial difference, since the qualification does not give access to master programmes in country P. On the other hand, if the access and admission regulations of the institution in country Q are not based on grades obtained, the admissions officer may decide that the bachelor's degree in itself forms sufficient preparation for the master programme and admit the applicant to the programme.

3. In cases where conversion of the grading system is necessary for your evaluation, you should base your comparison of the foreign grades with your own grades on the statistical distribution of grades, rather than on linear comparisons of grading scales.

In cases where the documentation of an applicant contains reliable information on the statistical distribution of grades of the programme completed (e.g. in the form of an ECTS grading table or a similar tool) you may use this information to obtain a more accurate assessment of the grades achieved by the applicant. This requires that a similar grading table

is available at your institution, in order to compare the foreign grades with your own grades. If you have such grading tables available, it is also recommended that you make them available to your own students. The EGRACONS project developed a user-friendly web-based tool for grade conversion.



Example 8.7 - Use of a Grading Table (taken from the ECTS users' guide 2009)

Grade system A	Percentage*	Grade system B	Percentage*
30 lode	5.6%	1	20%
30	15.7%	2	35%
29	0.5%	3	25%
28	12.3%	4	20%
27	11.8%		
26	9.0%		
25	8.2%		
24	11.3%		
23	2.7%		
22	6.0%		
21	2.3%		
20	5.7%		
19	1.9%		
18	6.9%		
Total	100%		100%

* Based on the total number of grades awarded in the degree programme concerned

From this example, we see that a 30 awarded in the scale of A should be converted to a 1 in the scale of B. The grade 2 of B will translate into the grades 26-29 (average 27) of the country or system A.



Sources and references

- European Commission, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS. Link: <http://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system>;
- European Commission, ECTS Users' Guide 2015. 2009, 2015 (revision). Link: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/da7467e6-8450-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1>; Link: https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/ecvet_en.htm;
- EGRACONS (European Grade Conversion System) Link: <https://egracons.eu> (website) and <https://tool.egracons.eu/> (tool, registration and password needed);
- CEDEFOP, The European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET). Link: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/european-credit-system-vocational-education-and-training-ecvet>

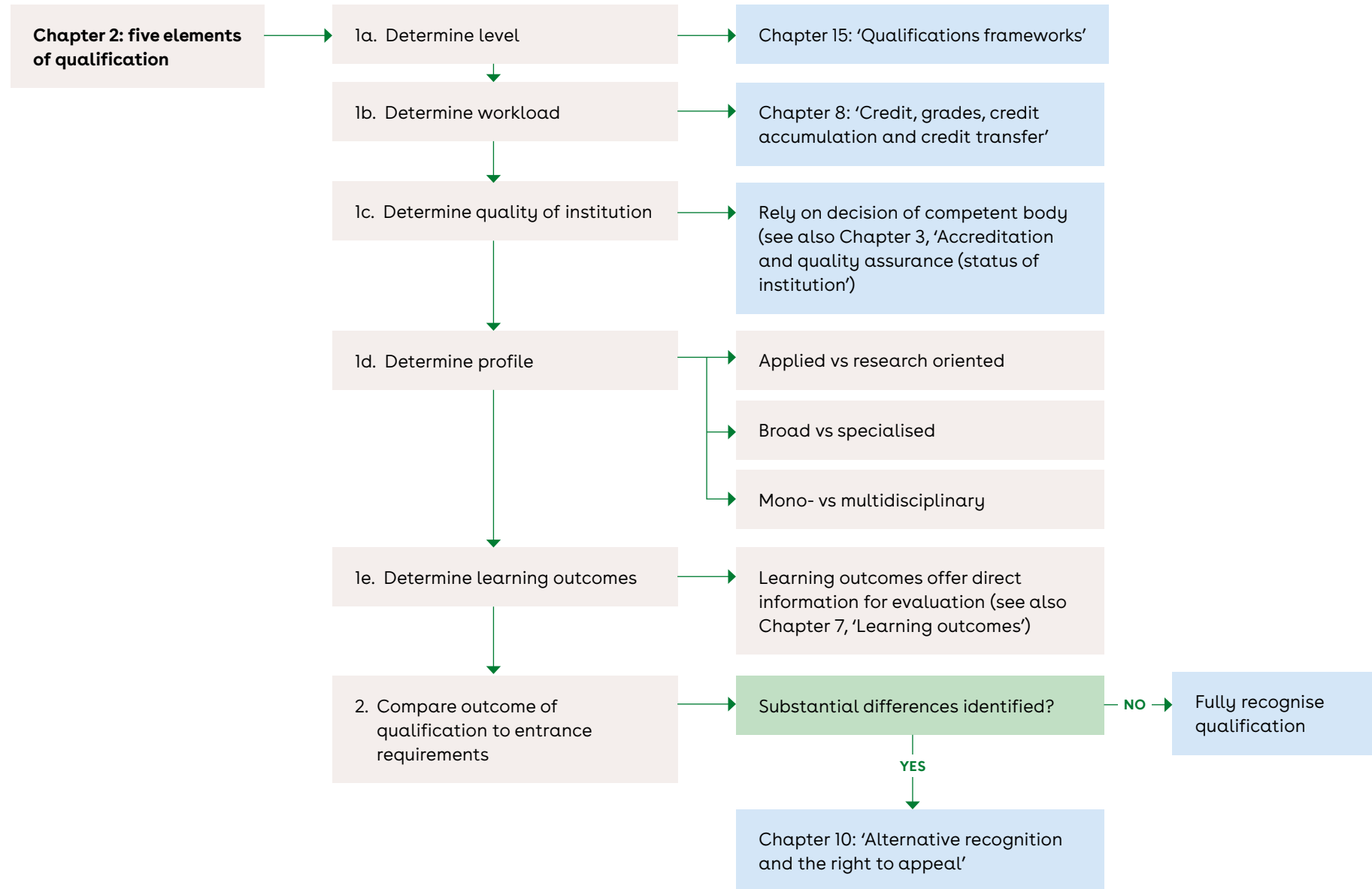


9. Substantial and non-substantial differences

One of the cornerstones of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) is that recognition should be granted, unless there is a substantial difference between the foreign qualification and the required national one. In this chapter you will find guidelines to help you judge whether differences between qualifications are substantial or not, alongside recommendations on how to report such differences to the applicant.



Flowchart: Substantial and non-substantial differences





Introduction

Explanation of substantial differences

One of the fundamental principles of the LRC is: 'Foreign qualifications shall be recognised unless there is a substantial difference between the foreign qualification for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification of the host country'. This means you should not insist upon foreign qualifications being identical to those offered in your country. You should rather accept non-substantial differences.

Definition of substantial differences

Substantial differences are differences between the foreign qualification and the national qualification that are so significant, that they would most likely prevent the applicant from succeeding in the further study or research activities they are seeking recognition for.

Burden of proof

The burden of proof of a substantial difference lies with the higher education institution to which the individual submits their application. Uncertainty about specific components or outcomes of the qualification is not enough to refuse recognition.

Having examined the case and having spotted some differences, please remember that:

- Not every difference should be considered 'substantial'. Due to the great diversity of higher education systems and programmes differences are inherent;
- The difference must be substantial in relation to the function of the qualification and the purpose for which recognition is sought (see [Chapter 6, 'Purpose of recognition'](#));
- A difference may appear substantial but could be acceptable within the context of admission to a particular programme;
- You have no obligation to deny recognition of the foreign qualification even if a substantial difference exists. However, this does not imply that unqualified applicants should be admitted. The applicant must be afforded a fair chance of succeeding (e.g., by providing a student support system enabling rapid integration and progress within the programme) and the programme's quality must not be compromised.

Interpretation of substantial differences

The interpretation of substantial differences is intrinsically linked to the learning outcomes of a qualification, programme, and/or programme components, as these determine whether the applicant is adequately prepared for further study. A difference related solely to input criteria (e.g., the programme's workload) is unlikely to directly affect the applicant's abilities and should not, therefore, be automatically considered a substantial difference.



Recommendations

In judging whether differences between qualifications are substantial, it is recommended that you:

1. Determine the key elements of the qualification and relate them to the entrance requirements of the programme.
In considering whether substantial differences exist, the five key elements of a qualification should be taken into account: level, workload, quality, profile, and learning outcomes (see [Chapter 2, 'The five elements of a qualification'](#)). Even if a substantial difference is found in one of these key elements, it is essential to determine whether this also leads to a substantial difference in the overall outcome of the qualification, or if it is compensated by another key element. The evaluation of the qualification should focus on learning outcomes.

The following questions may be helpful when assessing the qualification:

- a. What is the level of the qualification, and does it provide access to further study in the country of origin?
The level of the qualification refers to its position within the national education system and/or qualifications framework (see [Chapter 15, 'Qualifications frameworks'](#)). Typically, qualifications at different levels (i.e. bachelor, master and doctoral degrees) have substantially different outcomes.
- b. What is the workload of the programme?
The workload of the qualification is usually expressed in credits (see [Chapter 8, 'Credits, grades, credit accumulation and credit transfer'](#)) and may be used to provide an indication of the learning outcomes achieved. It should be stressed that credit systems differ between countries and within one country. Judgements on differences in this respect should, therefore, be based on a thorough examination of the context of the credit system used. A substantial difference may arise if a differing workload leads to a difference in the overall outcome of the qualification. If this is not the case, the qualification should be recognised. See Example 9.4.
- c. What is the quality of the institution/programme through which the qualification was awarded?
If the programme is quality assured or accredited by a competent body you should trust that it fulfils the minimum quality standards (see [Chapter 3, 'Accreditation and quality assurance \(status of institution\)'](#)). If national authorities clearly distinguish between institutions and/or qualifications of differing quality within their own education system, you may factor this into your evaluation. However, the recognition of a qualification should not depend on whether it was awarded by an institution highly ranked in one of the many international ranking lists currently being published.



d. What is the programme's profile?

Does the programme prepare the student for work in a particular profession or for research? Is it a broad programme with many unrelated subjects, or is it a specialised programme? Is it mono-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, or inter-disciplinary?

A substantial difference may arise if a qualification has a profile significantly different from that required of domestic students, as the qualification might lack essential components. See Example 9.5 below.

e. What are the programme's learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes describe what a graduate knows, understands, and is able to do after obtaining a particular qualification. In principle, this should provide the most direct information on which to base the presence or absence of substantial differences (see [Chapter 7, 'Learning outcomes'](#)).

Example 9.1 - Relevant outcomes should match

An applicant has obtained a qualification in engineering, which prepares for admission to Doctorate programmes in engineering and also provides professional rights in the field of engineering. The applicant applies for admission to a doctoral programme in engineering at your institution. You should evaluate the qualification only on the basis of the outcomes required for admission to the doctoral programme, and not on the basis of the professional rights.

2. Determine whether the main requirements for admission to the programme are sufficiently covered by the outcomes of the foreign qualification.

You should compare the foreign qualification to the relevant national qualification (or set of qualifications) that is required for entry to the programme. This national qualification spans a wide range of outcomes, from purely theoretical knowledge to practical skills. In virtually all cases, the foreign qualification covers a different range of outcomes. Not all of the outcomes have to match, only those essential for successfully pursuing the study programme.

a. If no substantial differences have been identified, accept the qualification.

You should fully recognise the qualification if no substantial differences are found that would present a major obstacle to succeeding in the given programme.

Example 9.2 - Accept (non-substantial) differences in the outcomes of the programme

If an applicant submits a qualification that, in terms of learning outcomes, is appropriate for admission to the next level of education (such as admission to a master's programme in history on the basis of a bachelor's degree in history), there will most likely be no substantial differences between the foreign qualification and the required one.



Naturally, differences in the content of history programmes offered in two different countries are expected; for instance, in subjects covering national history. However, such differences should not be considered substantial. During their studies, applicants will have developed the competencies to easily extend their historical knowledge to any particular period or country.

Example 9.3 – Accept (non-substantial) differences in profile

If an applicant wants to pursue a master's degree in a different field than their bachelor's, this doesn't automatically mean a substantial difference exists, as long as the overall academic goals of both programmes are coherent. For example, a bachelor's degree in physics could adequately prepare someone for admission to a master's programme in the history of science or philosophy of science.

If the applicant seeks admission to a graduate programme in a more distant field, they can fairly be required to complete additional requirements, such as specific prerequisite courses. This would also apply to national students choosing to continue in a more distant field at the graduate level.

Example 9.4 – Accept (non-substantial) differences in workload

In many countries, the combined workload of consecutive bachelor's and master's programmes totals 300 ECTS (typically 180 ECTS for the bachelor's programme and 120 ECTS for the master's programme). However, some countries offer a bachelor's programme of 180 ECTS, followed by a master's programme of 60-90 ECTS. The purposes and learning outcomes of these shorter master's programmes may be comparable to the 120 ECTS master's programmes, such as specialisation in one of the main research areas of the chosen field of study, research training, and preparation for admission to doctoral programmes. Therefore, a difference of 30-60 ECTS between two master's programmes should not be automatically considered as a substantial difference.

All aspects of the master's degree should be taken into account (level, workload, quality, profile and learning outcomes), and only substantial differences in the programme's overall outcome (those that would prevent the applicant from succeeding) should be reported.



- b. If you have identified substantial differences that form a major obstacle for successfully pursuing further studies in a particular programme, you should not grant full recognition.
 1. Consider if alternative, partial or conditional recognition applies (see [Chapter 10, 'Alternative recognition and the right to appeal'](#));
 2. Inform the applicant about the reason for the denial of recognition and the nature of the substantial differences found, and if alternative, partial or conditional recognition applies. This gives the applicant a chance to compensate for these differences or to file an appeal against the evaluation of their qualification.

Example 9.5 – Deny full recognition – substantial differences in level and learning outcomes

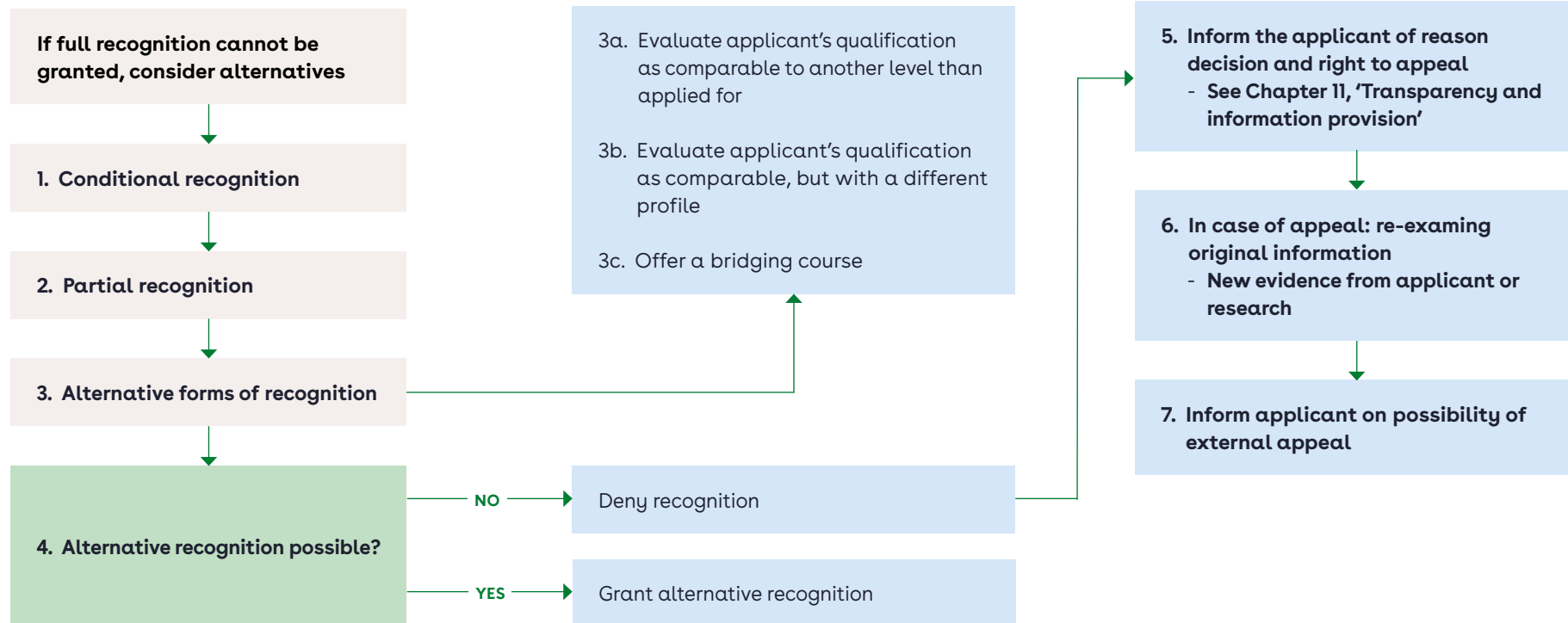
An applicant holding an ordinary bachelor's degree in chemistry from country X applies for a research master's degree in biomedical sciences in country Y. In country X, an honours bachelor's degree is required for admission to a similar master's programme. In the applicant's home country, the additional year of education for the honours degree provides the research training lacking in the ordinary degree.

The admissions officer in country Y identifies there are substantial differences in level, purpose and learning outcomes of the foreign qualification, and determines that admission to the master's programme is not feasible.

10. Alternative recognition and the right to appeal

This chapter deals with alternative types of recognition that can be given in cases where full recognition cannot be granted, as well as the applicant's right to appeal a recognition decision.

Procedure alternative recognition and the right to appeal





Introduction

When substantial differences between the foreign qualification and the required qualification have been found, the admissions officer should decide what options are available to the applicant. This may range from full denial of recognition (which is the appropriate response in case of qualifications from diploma mills and fraudulent documents), to alternative recognition (which in most cases means admission to another programme of the host institution) to advice on how to compensate the substantial differences (e.g. by referring the applicant to programmes and qualifications that would provide access to the programme of choice).

Recommendations

Alternative recognition

If full recognition cannot be granted due to substantial differences, you should consider alternative ways of recognising the qualification. These alternative forms of recognition should be clearly based on the substantial differences found and may be applied as follows:

1. Recognise the qualification on condition that certain requirements are met by the applicant at a later stage (conditional recognition). For example, allow the applicant to enrol in the programme on the condition that they fulfil

certain requirements first, such as obtaining a number of credits in obligatory courses. These courses should be essential to the programme and missing from the programme already completed by the applicant.

Example 10.1 - Conditional recognition

A holder of a bachelor's degree in physics applies for admission to a master's programme in mathematics. The programme in physics lacks some of the learning outcomes assigned to a first cycle degree in mathematics. Its core elements, however, match those of a degree programme in maths. Since the applicant performed very well in a demanding first cycle programme in physics, you may reasonably expect that the applicant is likely to succeed in mathematics at the master's level. Your institution may consider admitting the person to the master programme's on condition that he or she achieves the learning outcomes which were lacking to begin with, for example by completing additional courses during the first year of study.

2. Grant partial recognition. For example, accept some of the credits earned by the applicant during the foreign programme. The applicant would then have the opportunity to enrol in the corresponding programme offered by your institution and receive exemptions for the accepted credits.



Example 10.2 - Partial recognition

A holder of a first cycle qualification applies for admission to a second cycle programme. The qualification lacks some essential learning outcomes of the corresponding first cycle degree at the host institution, which would make it very difficult for the applicant to succeed in the second cycle programme. The admissions officer can offer the applicant admission to the corresponding first cycle programme with exemptions for the credits already obtained in the foreign programme.

3. Apply alternative forms of recognition:

- a. Evaluate the applicant's qualification as being comparable to another level of your country's educational system than the level applied for;

Example 10.3 - Recognise the qualification at a different level

An applicant with a Bachelor of Arts degree applies for admission to a PhD programme. The admission's requirement is a master's degree. Instead of admission to the PhD programme, the applicant is offered admission to a master's programme.

- b. Evaluate the applicant's qualification as being comparable to a programme at the desired level, but with a different profile;

Example 10.4 - Admission to a programme with another profile

An applicant is seeking admission to a research-based master's programme in chemistry, for which a research-based bachelor's degree in chemistry is required.

The applicant has obtained a bachelor's degree in the applied field of chemical technology that does not sufficiently prepare the student in research methodology, a key element of the research-based master's programme. As a form of alternative recognition, the foreign qualification is evaluated by the admissions officer as comparable to a professional bachelor's degree in chemical technology. This makes it clear to the applicant where the foreign qualification stands in the national education system of the host country. The admissions officer can then offer admission to a professionally oriented master's programme in chemical technology, which would be a more suitable choice for this applicant.

- c. Offer a bridging course to the applicant to make up for the substantial differences.



Example 10.5 - Admission to a bridging programme

A technical university provides a preparatory course for national students who wish to improve their knowledge of mathematics, physics and chemistry before entering a bachelor's programme in engineering. If an admissions officer of this technical university finds substantial differences in these subjects in a foreign qualification, the applicant may be admitted to the preparatory course to qualify for admission to the bachelor's programme. Note that some institutions use microcredentials and other forms of learning to bridge deficiencies

4. When no alternative form of recognition (alternative, partial or conditional) can be found, you may deny recognition to the applicant. Inform the applicant of the decision, and explain why recognition cannot be granted and which criteria have not been met (see [Chapter 11, 'Transparency and information provision'](#)). In addition, refer to the appropriate regulations or legal framework. This provides transparency to the applicant about the reason for the denial of recognition, how to proceed to obtain a qualification that would satisfy the admissions requirements, or decide to appeal the decision.

Not granting any form of recognition may also constitute 'fair recognition', particularly when the applicant submitted fraudulent documents, a qualification issued by a diploma mill, or a degree awarded by a non-recognised institution.

Example 10.6 - Deny recognition - diploma mill

An applicant submits a bachelor's degree in an application for admission to a master's programme. It is concluded that no studies were required to obtain the qualification and that the awarding 'institution' is a diploma mill. In this case, you should not consider any alternative form of recognition. You should refuse recognition and give the applicant the reasons for the decision.

Right to appeal

5. In all cases where applicants disagree with your institution's decision on any aspect of the recognition process, they should have the possibility to appeal. Your institution should inform the applicant about the reason for the decision (see previous recommendation 4) and the possibility of appeal.

Example 10.7 - Inform about the possibility of appeal

An applicant with a bachelor's degree in French language and literature applies to a master's programme in psychology. The admissions officer decides that due to substantial differences in profile and learning outcomes, the student is not eligible for admission. The decision is explained in a letter to the applicant and information is provided about the possibility to appeal the decision.



6. In the case of an appeal, your institution should again examine the information originally provided. When necessary you may ask the applicant for evidence that has not yet been provided (or insufficiently provided) or conduct more in-depth research.

This recommendation only describes the first instance of appeal (which is usually an internal procedure of the institution. The second instance is usually regulated in a separate law (e.g. in an administrative code).

Example 10.8 – In case of appeal: re-examine the application

An applicant seeking admission to a master's programme disagrees with the decision made by the educational institution. The applicant submits an appeal, providing arguments to support his or her case and encloses new documents (detailed description of the study programme, issued by the institution awarding the bachelor degree, a letter from the Ministry of Education giving information on this type of qualification). The education institution deals with the appeal according to the existing regulations. It considers the arguments raised by the applicant, examines the new documentation and again evaluates the qualification.

If the original decision is upheld, the educational institution answers the applicant's arguments in its explanation and upholds the original decision.

7. If an external appeal procedure exists in your country, the applicant should be informed about this possibility. Note only some countries have an external appeal body for disputes on recognition decisions, which may consist of representatives of different stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education, higher education institutions, the national ENIC-NARIC, student unions, employers, etc. If this exists in your country, the applicant should be informed about this possibility of external appeal.

Example 10.9 - Inform the applicant about external appeal possibilities

An applicant applies for admission to a bachelor's programme in country X and is admitted. Having previously completed two years of a bachelor's programme in country Y, the applicant seeks admission to the third year. The university grants one year of advanced standing, admitting the student to the second year of the bachelor's programme. The applicant disagrees with this decision.

The university informs the applicant about external appeal possibilities. The applicant appeals the university's decision to the external appeal body in country X. The external appeal body decides that the applicant should be granted advanced standing for an additional semester.



Part II. Institutional recognition practices

Part III of the manual focuses on what is needed for the recognition process to run smoothly and fairly. This part describes, on the one hand, the 'recognition infrastructure' that needs to be in place to facilitate the recognition process and ensure the quality assurance of the procedure. In addition, it aims to provide a better understanding of the institution's recognition procedure within the national framework, as well as within the institution itself (as part of the admissions procedure). It also sets out the responsibilities of the institution towards the (potential) applicant regarding transparency and information provision.



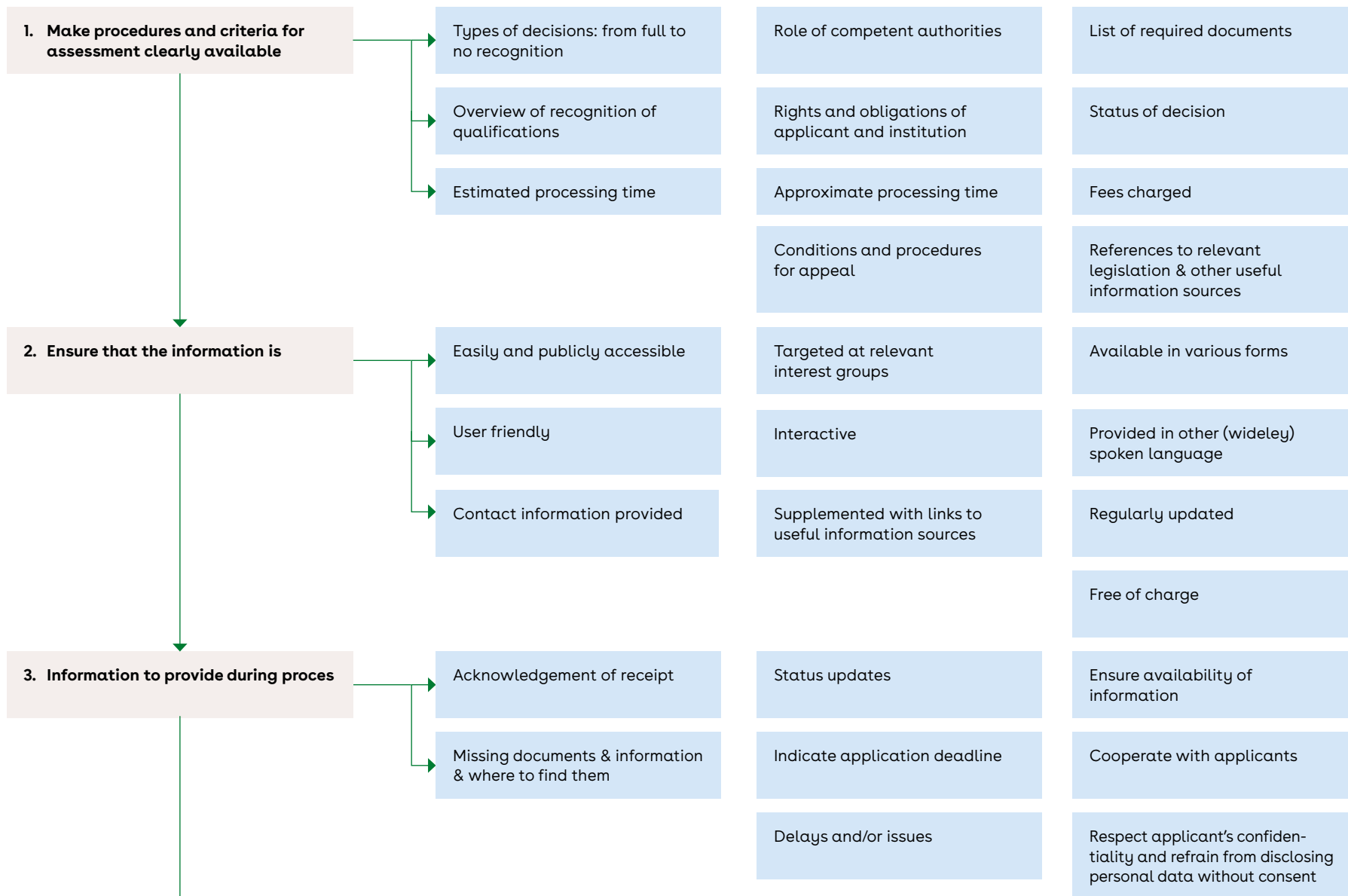


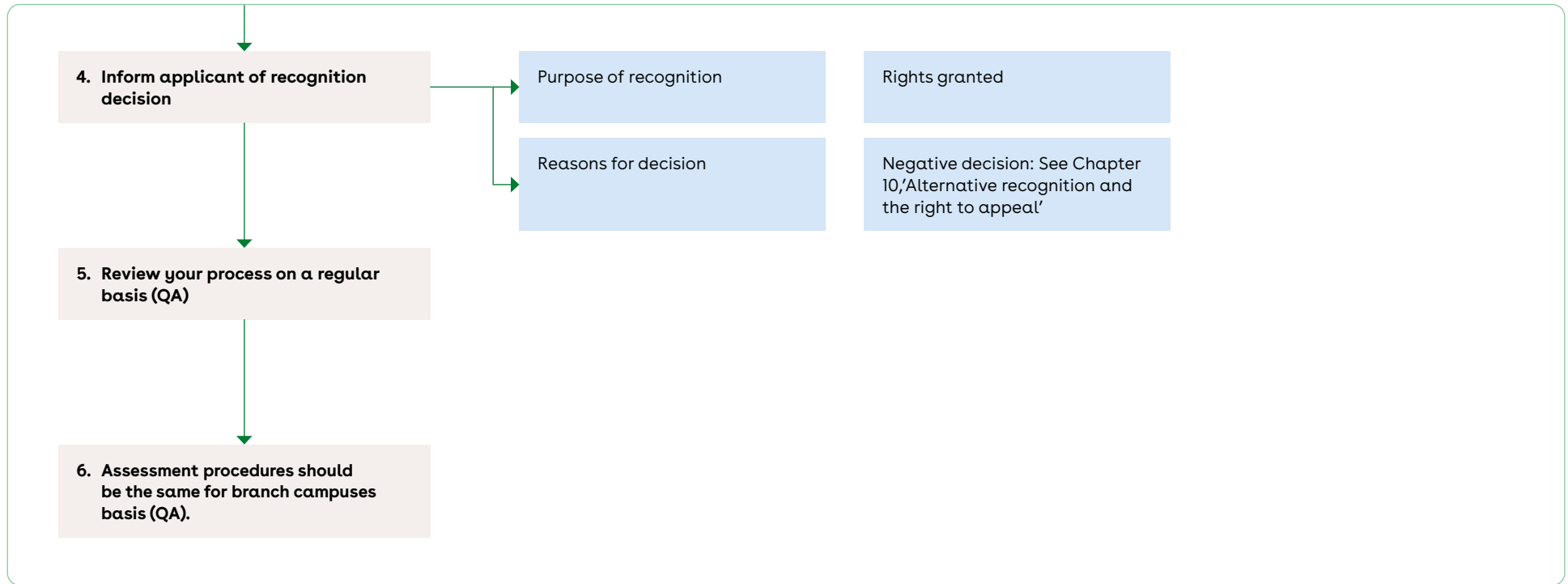
11. Transparency and information provision

When students apply to your institution, it is in both their interest and yours that they have access to clear and comprehensive information about the application and recognition procedures. Without readily available information, valuable time may be lost, career plans delayed, and the institution's reputation potentially compromised. Keep in mind that not only students but also their sponsors—such as employers, funding bodies, or parents—may require this information.



Flowchart: Transparency and information provision







Introduction

Transparency is one of the main principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). It ensures that applicants get the most accurate, clear and reliable information on recognition procedures and criteria applied in the host country. It is a precondition for the fair treatment of all applications.

As an admissions officer, transparency should be one of your primary concerns - from the receipt of an application, throughout the selection process, and up to the final decision. At the same time, you must safeguard applicants' personal data. Transparency in procedure and personal data protection are complementary, not conflicting, principles.

Apart from transparency, this chapter also provides recommendations on the information your institution should offer, as this is crucial to establishing transparency. Generally, the focus should be on the relevance, clarity, and accessibility of the information rather than on its quantity.

Furthermore, transparency and information provision are both linked to the applicant's right to appeal recognition decisions made by the higher education institution (see [Chapter 10, 'Alternative recognition and the right to appeal'](#)).

An applicant can only exercise this right effectively if they are able to accurately identify procedural shortcomings on the part of the higher education institution. This emphasises the importance of clear transparency and adequate provision of information.

The recommendations in this chapter complement those of your national recognition agency, which you are advised to consult for specific guidance.

Recommendations

To establish transparency in the recognition process, your institution should:

1. Make its procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications and periods of study clearly available. This should at least include the following elements:
 - a. An overview of how it handles the recognition of foreign qualifications;
 - b. The role of the competent recognition authorities and the decision-making body in the recognition process;
 - c. The rights and obligations of each of the parties (institution and applicant);



- d. The list of required documents (where possible, adapted to the specifics of each country) and how they should be submitted;
- e. The range of possible decisions: full recognition, partial recognition, no recognition, etc.;
- f. The status of a decision: recommendation or legally binding;
- g. The approximate time required to process an application (there should be a clear commitment to respond to all information requests within a reasonable time frame);
- h. Any fees charged for processing the application;
- i. References to relevant legislation (regional, national and international);
- j. Conditions and procedures for appealing against a recognition decision;
- k. References to other useful local, national or international information sources on recognition (e.g. the national ENIC-NARIC office).

Example 11.1 - Publishing a list of required documents on your website

The list of required documents to be submitted by the applicant may depend on the country in which the qualification was obtained. Required documents may include:

- a copy of the qualification in the original language, or a digital verifiable document, if applicable;

- a sworn translation of the qualification (if it is not in a widely spoken language);
- a copy of the Diploma Supplement or similar information source (e.g. a transcript);
- a copy of passport or ID card.

As mentioned above, in addition to the list of required documents, information should also be provided on how the documents must be submitted: by post, electronically, uploaded to a database, etc.

2. Ensure that the information provided on the recognition process and procedure is:
 - a. Easily and publicly accessible on the institution's website;
 - b. User-friendly (e.g. relevant and designed for non-expert users in terms of content and language);
 - c. Complemented by contact details for further enquiries (telephone numbers and e-mail addresses);
 - d. Targeted at all relevant types of applicants to your institution;
 - e. Interactive – for example, through a Q&A forum and clear contact details for further queries. All information requests should be answered within a reasonable timeframe;
 - f. Supplemented with links to useful local, national or international information sources;
 - g. Available in a variety of forms (e.g., electronically, by telephone, by post, face-to-face and/or in hard copy);



- h. Provided not only in the national language but also in a second widely spoken language, preferably English;
- i. Regularly updated;
- j. Free of charge.

Example 11.2 - User-friendly information: an overview of assessment outcomes

On its website, a higher education institution publishes a brief overview of earlier assessment outcomes by their admissions officers regarding a selection of foreign qualifications that it regularly receives from applicants. This overview may serve as guidance for applicants to get an idea of the likely outcome if they apply for admission to the higher education institution.

The overview is regularly updated, and only outcomes that align with current assessment standards are included. It is clearly stated on the website that the information provided is for general guidance only.

- 3. Provide the following information to the applicant during the application procedure:
 - a. Acknowledge receipt of the application;
 - b. If applicable, indicate documentation and/or information that is missing, using the terminology of the applicant's country of origin;

- c. Provide informal advice on how to obtain the required documents and/or information;
- d. Inform the applicant about any updates to the status of the application;
- e. Indicate a deadline to the applicant;
- f. Inform the applicant of any delays or issues encountered while dealing with their application;
- g. Ensure that information is always accessible to the applicants by any means (in printed or electronic form or by telephone);
- h. Cooperate with the applicant and provide all required information within your sphere of competence;
- i. Respect the confidentiality of the applicant and do not disclose any personal data without the applicant's consent.

Example 11.3 - Informing and cooperating with the applicant

Your organisation strives to complete all applications within 25 working days. You are working on an application from country Z. In order to complete the assessment, you require confirmation of the status of the institution that awarded the qualification. You contact the relevant authorities in country Z to verify the status of the institution, but it takes longer than expected to receive a reply.



You contact the applicant and explain that the status of the institution needs to be confirmed. Explain what type of confirmation you require (e.g., a statement from the competent authority) – the applicant might be able to cooperate with you and help the competent authorities provide the required information.

4. Inform the applicant of the recognition decision and supplement this with the following information:
 - a. The purpose for which recognition was sought;
 - b. The reason(s) for the decision;
 - c. The rights granted by the recognition decision in the host country;
 - d. In the case of a negative decision, information on the appeals procedure, including the process to follow and the deadline (see [Chapter 10, 'Alternative recognition and the right to appeal'](#));
 - e. If applicable, advice regarding alternative forms of recognition or measures the applicant may take in order to obtain recognition at a later stage.

Example 11.4 - Consistency of recognition decisions

Some admissions offices maintain an overview of guidelines and explanations for common reasons why full recognition may not be granted, to be used when substantial differences in the applicant's qualification have been found. These reasons relate to the assessment criteria of the higher education institution, based on the LRC. Admissions officers may use the appropriate phrases as a starting point when sending a negative recognition decision to an applicant. The overview document helps ensure consistent and efficient case processing.

5. Review the procedures and criteria for assessing foreign qualifications and periods of study on a regular basis. Adapt them to developments in higher education and to evolving good practice in the field of recognition, while ensuring they remain non-discriminatory.



Example 11.5 - Review of procedures and criteria (1)

The most logical way to implement this recommendation is to include such a review in your institution's quality assurance system. This could take the form of conducting an annual management review, where you analyse the effectiveness and main outcomes of your procedures. The review may draw on internal and external audits, management reports, customer satisfaction surveys, product evaluations, and complaints from applicants and stakeholders.

The review should lead to action points and measures to improve your procedures and criteria, which should be implemented and followed up in the following year.

6. Your institution should ensure that, when admission procedures and/or recognition decisions are devolved to branch campuses or contracted agencies, the same degree of transparency is ensured, the same procedures are followed, and quality assurance officers maintain the same level of scrutiny.

Example 11.6 - Review of procedures and criteria (2)

Your institution may have two or more locations, possibly in different countries, each with separate admissions offices. Admissions to your institution's programmes may also be handled by external agencies. In such cases, it is very important to have a centralised information provision system for all parties involved and to ensure consistency in applying the recognition criteria, possibly by using a central evaluation database.

Sources and references

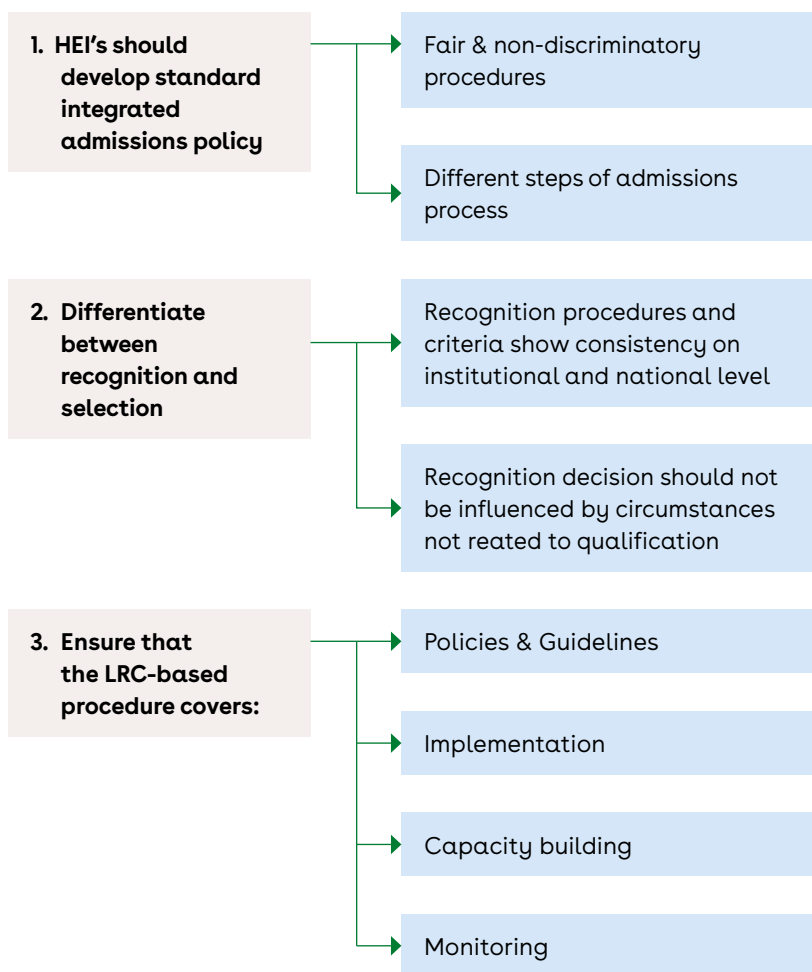
- Council of Europe/UNESCO, Guidelines for National Online Information Systems (2019).
Link: www.enic-naric.net/Upload/Documents/Guidelines_National_Online_Information_Systems_ENGLISH.pdf;
- CIMEA - EUA, Information provision on recognition of qualifications. A practical guide for higher education institutions (2021).
Link: www.cimea.it/Upload/Documenti/52_Brochure_information_provision_A4.pdf.



12. Institutional recognition practices & procedures

This chapter describes good recognition practices in higher education and provides recommendations on how to improve institutional recognition procedures, by focusing on the context of institutional recognition, clarifying access and admissions, and discusses what elements should be considered for your institution to arrange for a fit for purpose procedure, in compliance with the international standards of the LRC and - in doing so - with the ESG standard 1.4.

Flowchart: Institutional recognition practices



Introduction

Recognition of foreign qualifications is directly linked to the overall quality of a higher education institution. Prospective students must enter programmes at the appropriate level - neither under- nor over-qualified - to succeed and contribute effectively. Proper recognition enables institutions to benefit from international competences and knowledge, while poor practice risks undermining quality, reputation and funding.

To ensure proper recognition of foreign qualifications, it is essential for your higher education institution to have proper practices in place for the recognition of foreign qualifications as part of the admissions to the various study programmes. These practices should be described in procedures and be periodically reviewed and adjusted where needed.

Furthermore, your procedure must be in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, since all state parties -including higher education institutions- agreed to implement its principles (see Chapter 1, 'Introduction to recognition'). LRC compliant recognition is also a requirement for your institution under the 'Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (ESG), specifically ESG standard 1.4.



Quality assurance of the recognition procedure – ESG 1.4

In the EHEA Bucharest Communiqué of 2012, higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies were encouraged to bring institutional recognition procedures within the scope of internal and external quality assurance.

This resulted in the inclusion of recognition as a standard in the ‘Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area’ (ESG). It means that recognition procedures are now part of internal quality assurance mechanisms, monitored by external quality assurance agencies. The approach allows institutions to develop their own methods for ensuring compliance with the LRC, thereby maintaining institutional autonomy.

This solution has since been endorsed in the revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Standard 1.4 of the ESG requires institutions to “consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all aspects of the student life cycle”, including recognition and admission. The relevant guideline states:

‘Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students’ progress in their studies, while promoting mobility. Appropriate recognition procedures rely on:

- *institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention;*
- *cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country.’*

For those unfamiliar with the LRC, the requirement to comply with the LRC may initially seem formal and rule-based. In practice, however, its principles are appropriate and straightforward to apply, while ensuring fairness.

This chapter provides guidance about what elements to consider to establish proper recognition practices and procedures. Therefore it first focusses on the national context in which institutional recognition operates. Next the chapter discusses the relationship of admissions, recognition and selection, and lastly provides recommendations on what elements should be included in an admissions procedure to achieve compliance with the LRC and fulfill the requirements of the ESG standard 1.4.

Institutional recognition in the national framework

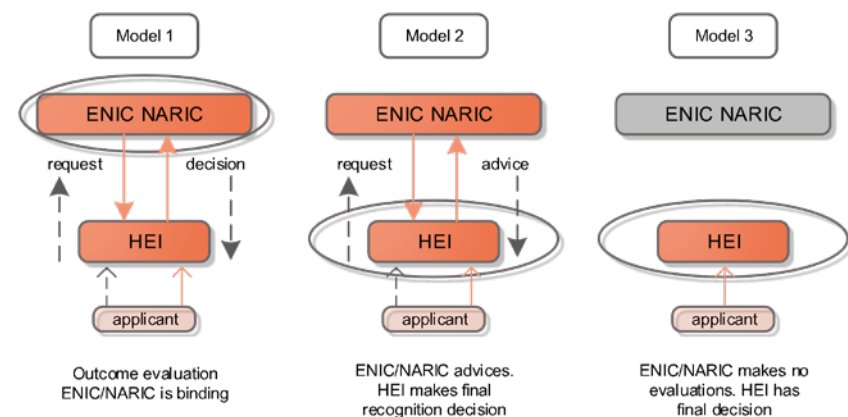
Institutional recognition practice is determined by the way recognition is organised within the national context. In developing institutional practices and procedures, it is essential to have a thorough understanding of the applicable national legal and operational framework. Note that the recognition of foreign qualifications is structured differently across countries.

The national legal and operational framework is usually defined in national education law. An important factor within the operational framework is the institution's cooperation with the national ENIC-NARIC centre, in particular whether the centre's evaluations are legally binding or advisory. In practice, three main types of situation may be encountered:

7. Authoritative model. The ENIC-NARIC centre issues binding recognition decisions. The higher education institution must follow the decision made by the ENIC-NARIC centre;
8. Consultative model. The ENIC-NARIC centre provides recommendations. The ENIC-NARIC centre provides recommendations. The higher education institution makes the final recognition decision, which may or may not fully align with the recommendation;

9. Methodological guidance model. The ENIC-NARIC centre does not evaluate individual foreign qualifications but provides general information about them. The higher education institution carries out the evaluation and makes the recognition decision. In some cases, institutions may also request evaluations from an external evaluation service not linked to their national ENIC-NARIC centre.

Three common models for the cooperation between ENIC-NARIC centres and higher education institutions in recognition decisions: Authoritative, Consultative and Methodological Guidance.





It is important that higher education institutions and ENIC-NARIC centres understand and respect each other's roles and maintain a clear division of tasks and responsibilities. Applicants should also be informed which organisation to contact with questions regarding the evaluation and which body to approach for an appeal concerning the recognition decision.

Note that when a higher education institution makes a recognition decision on the basis of an evaluation received from its national ENIC-NARIC centre (model 2), it usually takes into account its subject-specific expertise and knowledge of programme requirements. This may result in a final decision that does not fully correspond to the initial evaluation from the ENIC-NARIC centre, which often consists of standardised comparisons and may therefore not fully reflect the requirements of a specific programme or the specific skills or expertise of the applicant. The outcome may be a decision that is more or less favourable than the generic evaluation provided by the ENIC-NARIC centre. As long as the decision of the higher education institution is consistent with the LRC and can be justified, such divergence does not present a problem.

It is good practice for higher education institutions and ENIC-NARIC centres to communicate on problematic recognition cases and to provide feedback on cases where their evaluations differ. Such feedback may then be used by the ENIC-NARIC

centre to review its evaluation practice in relation to particular qualifications or higher education systems and to adapt its evaluations accordingly.

The following examples illustrate the different perspectives admissions officers and the ENIC-NARIC centre in a country may have.

Example 12.1 – Academic content versus learning outcomes

An applicant from country A with a bachelor's degree in sociology applies for admission to a master's programme in country B. The ENIC-NARIC evaluation indicates a substantial difference in profile, as the qualification contains a considerable number of credits outside the major subject.

The sociology faculty considers the applicant qualified. They are familiar with the bachelor's degree from country A and note that the credits earned in other subjects are relevant preparation for advanced study in sociology.

The admissions office accepts this faculty assessment and admits the applicant, ruling out a substantial difference. It informs the ENIC-NARIC of its reasoning and the use of academic discretion.



Example 12.2 - ENIC - NARIC advice

An applicant from country X with a bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences applies for a master's in engineering at a research university in country. The ENIC-NARIC advises conditional recognition based on the profile of the bachelor's programme, requiring the applicant to complete a research methodology module due to the applied profile of the degree.

Upon contacting the engineering faculty, the admissions office discovers a deeply divided set of opinions. Some academic staff are in favour, others are adamantly opposed to any applicant from a university of applied sciences. The admissions office decides to accept the advice on conditional recognition received from the ENIC-NARIC, since such a decision is in line with the LRC and offers the applicant a fair chance of succeeding.

Recognition in the context of admission

Admission: Recognition and Selection

In the admission process, a candidate's eligibility for access to specific programmes or types of programmes is determined. The process consists of elements that are within the realm of recognition, but may also include additional selection criteria. In order to apply the LRC, it is important to know which elements

within the admissions procedure concern recognition and which one selection. The focus of this paragraph is to create a better understanding of these two elements.

First, the admissions procedure typically distinguishes between general access and programme-specific admission:

1. 'General access' concerns establishing whether the applicant has the necessary qualifications required for access to the level on which the programmes are taught (for example, an access qualification which would allow access to bachelors' programmes).

General access is also referred to as recognition on system level. It concerns determining the quality, level, and workload, as well as considering access rights. These are all parts of the admissions process that are the realm of the LRC;

2. 'Access to specific programmes' is about establishing whether the applicant has the necessary qualifications to meet specific requirements for access to a programme, such as a certain qualification profile, competency in certain subjects or subject clusters (for example, a combination of subjects, which would allow access to the bachelor's programme in medicine). In addition, selection criteria can apply.

Thus, access to a specific programme can consist of requirements that are in the realm of recognition (these concern the profile and learning outcomes) and to which the LRC applies, as well as criteria that are outside the realm of



recognition to which the LRC does not apply. This distinction is further explained below, under open and selective admission systems.

For now remember:

Admission = recognition + selection

“Recognition and selection (if applicable) opens the door to admission”.

Open and selective admissions systems

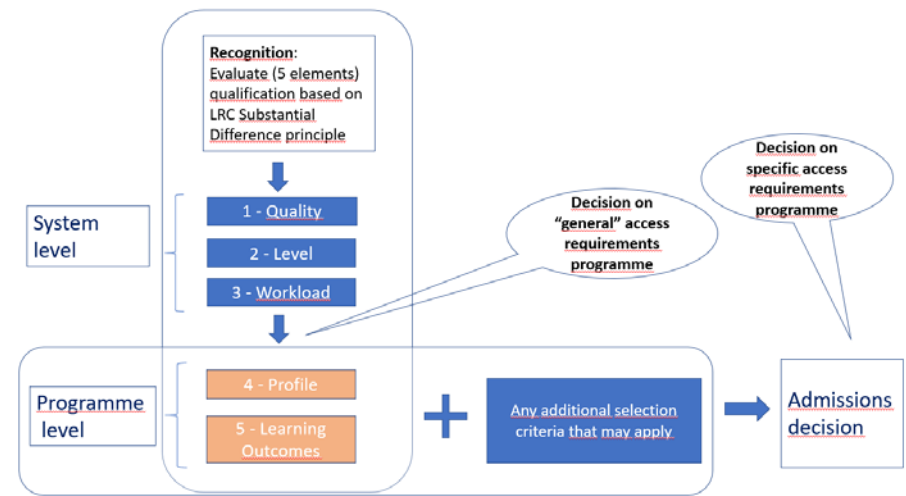
In an open admissions system, there are no criteria in addition to the requirements to access the programme; all eligible candidates who meet the specific programme requirements are granted access to the programme. Thus, in an open system, recognition of a qualification, and admission to a programme, typically overlap.

In a (partially) selective or closed admissions systems, higher education institutions are allowed to set additional criteria to select students for (part of) their programmes. The purpose of selection can vary, and is linked to the characteristics of the education system. For example, a central entrance exam can be used to select students that meet a certain threshold. Another example is the use of selection to regulate the number of study places (i.e. via numerus fixus).

Selection criteria may also vary according to institutional policy and may include academically related and other criteria, such as grade average (see chapter 8, ‘Credits, grades, credit accumulation and credit transfer’), selection tests, character-related criteria (motivation letters, references, interviews, etc.), as preconditions for admission. Note that sometimes, setting requirements, for example for the level of mathematics, from access qualifications to a bachelor programme, does not equal selection and would be part of an open system.

The national law and context typically determine what type(s) of admission system -open or selective- is allowed within the country. Some countries may combine both approaches, i.e. allowing exceptions depending on the programme and/or the source of funding. The result is a wide range of admissions practices between and within countries.

In practice, recognition and selection (if applicable) are often interwoven within the same admissions procedure. However, it is important to clarify as much as possible what elements concern recognition and which ones concern selection criteria, in order to ensure the recognition part of your procedure is in compliance with the LRC.



As you can see from the image above, recognition criteria include a substantial part of the overall admissions procedure. Part of these elements may be covered and/or supported by your ENIC-NARIC centre and for others your institution is responsible.

Essential elements of an LRC compliant recognition procedure

This paragraph focusses on the elements of what an LRC compliant admissions procedure should cover. Note that while for practical reasons we refer in the following of an admissions procedure, we only intent to refer to the recognition elements within the admissions procedure. As explained above, if you have an open admissions system, your admissions and recognition procedure are the same. In a closed admissions procedure, you will also apply selection.

Example 12.3 - Starting from scratch

If you have no procedure in place, it is recommended to develop one considering these steps:

- Map how recognition and admissions is currently done in your institution and identify all units and actors involved;
- Evaluate the procedure against the LRC and identify what is necessary to make the procedure LRC compliant. Follow and use the recommendations in this manual;



- Draft a transparent procedure for admission to the bachelor's, master's and doctoral programmes of your institution, as well as for the recognition of study credits within exchanges, based on Standard 1.4 of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG);
- Ensure involvement of all actors involved for commitment;
- Clearly identify and secure financing and approval for the resources required, such as qualified personnel and databases;
- Ask your ENIC-NARIC or other institutions to share examples for inspiration how they have organised recognition and admissions;
- Have management of all units involved commit to the procedure and the resources required (secure management approval during the various above steps).

1. Policies & Guidelines

An essential part of the procedure is to clarify the legal framework and guidelines your institution follows. This includes:

- An overview of the legal and regulatory framework applying to your institution's recognition practices. List all relevant national, regional and institutional laws, guidelines and policies governing recognition in your institution;

Treaties on automatic recognition

Bi- or multilateral legally binding agreements on automatic recognition are an example of treaties – in addition to the LRC and Global Convention- that may apply to your institution. These can be between countries, or, in case of the Baltic – Benelux treaty, between a set of countries. Where such agreements are in place, institutions are required to comply.

- A commonly applied definition of “substantial difference” throughout your institution and how its implementation is ensured throughout the institution. For the general LRC-compliant definition, see Chapter 9, ‘Substantial and non-substantial differences’. Note that your institution can further detail what constitutes a substantial difference and if you do, this should be part of the procedure.
- The five elements of a qualification (level, workload, quality, profile and learning outcomes) listed as the main elements to be considered in the recognition procedure. See Chapter 2, ‘The five elements of a qualification’, Chapter 7, ‘Learning outcomes’, and Chapter 9, ‘Substantial and non-substantial differences’. Additionally, access rights shall also be considered, see Chapter 6, ‘Purpose of recognition’.



2. Implementation of processes

Your procedure should outline how the following procedural aspects are implemented within your institution:

- Organisational implementation;
- Special procedures;
- Decisions;
- Information provision;
- Tools and resources.

2.1 Organisational implementation

Outline the roles and responsibilities in the recognition process within your institution;

- Specify which admissions procedure(s) the document describes and which programmes (and what levels) are covered. To provide context, explain the relation with the other admissions procedures in your institution (if applicable), how they relate and how consistency is ensured. Ideally your institution ensures all admissions procedures in your institution are covered, either in one document or in separate ones. In case of separate procedures, ensure they are aligned on key aspects;

Centralised and decentralised admissions procedures

Institutional admissions procedures can vary between countries and within institutions. One general distinction is between centrally and de-centrally organised procedures. For example, admissions to bachelor programmes can be organised centrally, while admissions to masters can be decentralised. While there is no one size fits all model, centralising tasks to avoid duplication is in general considered good practice to support consistency and efficiency. Moreover, a centralised admissions office can support the overall information management and expertise sharing within the institution, whether admissions is fully centralised or decentralised.

- Outline the admissions process and specifying for each step:
 - Which units and departments are involved;
 - What task(s) they perform;
 - What resources they use (see “tools and resources below”);
 - Who is responsible.

While doing so:

- Define clearly which steps relate to recognition and which steps relate to selection criteria (if applicable);



- Indicate how staff separates recognition from selection. Where different units are involved, ensure mechanisms are in place to prevent overlap, duplication, or contradictory outcomes;
- Demonstrate how the procedure in its totality is LRC compliant; each step of the procedure and the procedure in its totality;
- Outline the measures in place to ensure that procedures and decisions remain consistent and accurate across the institution.

2.2 Special procedures

Your admissions procedure should outline the process(es) in place at your institution for applicants in a refugee-like situation who cannot provide complete documentation of their qualifications (article VII of the LRC). In such cases, alternative assessment methods may be required, which should be described in detail. For recommendations, see [Chapter 23, 'Qualification holders without documentation'](#).

Additionally, your procedure must outline:

- Any other special or deviations of procedures in place. Examples are automatic recognition see [Chapter 16, 'Automatic recognition'](#), and the recognition of prior learning, see [Chapter 18, 'Qualifications gained after flexible learning paths - Subtopic Micro-credentials'](#). Note chapter 18 does

not cover RPL procedures. If your institution provides RPL procedures, it should be clarified how this is dealt with as part of admissions;

- How you deal with specific types of qualifications. See [Chapter 17, 'Access qualifications'](#), [Chapter 20, 'Qualifications awarded by joint programmes'](#), [Chapter 21, 'Non country specific qualifications \(international degrees\)'](#), [Chapter 22, 'Qualifications awarded by institutions not recognised by national education authorities'](#), [Chapter 23, 'Qualification holders without documentation'](#), and [Chapter 24, 'Language tests'](#);
- How you deal with the recognition of credits in the context of student exchange, see [Chapter 25, 'Recognition of periods of study abroad'](#).

Recognition of credits

While we usually speak about the LRC in the context of admissions to full programmes, the LRC also applies to recognition in the context of periods of study or 'credit mobility'. In practice, credit mobility is differently organised and more decentralised, and may involve other actors than admissions. Yet, it is advisable to ensure there is a single guideline across the institution on how to deal with the recognition of credits as part of exchange programmes and include this in your procedure, to avoid deviations between or even within programmes. The role of a centralised admissions office can be to support and advise on the guidelines to ensure your practices are in line with the LRC.



2.3 Decisions

Your procedure should clearly outline the type of recognition decisions your institution uses and how these comply with the LRC. See [Chapter 10, 'Alternative recognition and the right to appeal'](#).

2.4 Information provision

The procedure should outline all the information provision measures in place to inform applicants about the admissions procedure, by specifying:

- The requirements for admissions to the programme(s);
- The documents you accept for admissions for the programme(s);
- The expected time lines for each step of the process, including the maximum time between submission of an application and communication of the decision (throughput time). Outline how you monitor this and ensure efficiency without compromising quality or fairness;
- The appeals procedure in place for applicants;
- How you provide accessible information to the applicant about the requirements for admissions and the procedure (i.e. documents, expected timelines, and subsequent procedures);
- At which stages of the process you provide individualised communication to inform the applicant of the steps ahead and via which channels (i.e. e-mail, automatic generated messages from databases, etc.);

- The information included in the admissions decision – positive, partially and negatively- and how this is communicated to the applicant;
- How the applicant is informed about the reasons of the decision and the possibility of appeal, only in case of a partially positive or negative decision.

Key chapters to consult for more information are: [Chapter 11, 'Transparency and information provision'](#), and in addition [Chapter 6, 'Purpose of recognition'](#), [Chapter 9, 'Substantial and non-substantial differences'](#), [Chapter 10, 'Alternative recognition'](#).

2.5. Information management: tools and resources

Information management is an essential element to enable fair and smooth recognition decisions. A systematic organisation of sources and references will benefit the efficiency of the overall recognition process in your institution. The procedure should therefore:

- List the tools and sources available to staff to:
 - Verify the legitimacy, authenticity and quality of a qualification, see also [Chapter 3, Accreditation and quality assurance \(status of the institution\)](#), [Chapter 4, Diploma and accreditation mills](#), [Chapter 5, Authenticity](#), [Chapter 22, Qualifications awarded by institutions not recognised by national education authorities](#);



- Determine the level, workload, profile, quality and learning outcomes of a qualification, as well as access rights of the qualification, see also [Chapter 7, Learning outcomes](#), [Chapter 8, Credits, grades, credit accumulation and credit transfer](#), [Chapter 13, How to find and use information](#), [Chapter 14, Diploma Supplement \(and other information tools\)](#), and [Chapter 15, Qualifications frameworks](#).
- List the tools and information measures in place to ensure consistency (see databases below);
- Describe how these tools and sources best fit your needs and enable you to comply with the LRC.

Note that tools and sources available can also be provided by your ENIC-NARIC. It is recommended that you include how and how frequent your staff receives support from your national ENIC-NARIC centre in the form of information sources databases, advice or training on the above (see for training also Capacity Building below).

Databases

It is recommended that the following databases (which may also be combined into a single system) are created and used:

- A database for consistency purposes that includes all previous recognition outcomes of your institution. The ability to consult previous recognition decisions minimises arbitrariness and supports consistency in recognition decisions made by your institution. It also saves a lot of time if previous decisions can easily be applied to new application cases;
- A database for verification purposes which includes examples of incoming qualifications that have been checked and found to be genuine, examples of fraudulent documents, a glossary of common terms in foreign languages (see [Chapter 5, 'Authenticity'](#) and [examples of qualifications from Diploma Mills \(see Chapter 4, 'Diploma and Accreditation Mills'\)](#)). Such a database can be used to compare incoming qualifications and help to establish whether these are genuine or possibly fraudulent.

Note that in order to remain useful, these databases should also be kept up to date. One way to guarantee this is to make these databases an essential part of your evaluation process. Remember that the privacy of applicants included in the database should be guaranteed at all times.



Example 12.1 - An efficient recognition database for consistency

An admissions office has developed a tailor-made database with the following features:

- Applicants may enter their application form and upload the required documents into the database via a website;
- From the database, e-mail messages are sent (automatically, or by the admissions officer) to the applicant on the status of the application (such as acknowledgement of receipt, file is complete, additional documents are required, recognition decision);
- A standard evaluation format is available, containing relevant criteria (such as quality, level, workload, profile, learning outcomes) to be filled in by the admissions officer, leading to a recognition decision in terms of substantial differences;
- The database provides a suggestion for the evaluation, based on previous evaluations of comparable qualifications, in order to ensure consistency;
- The admissions officer may also search the database for previous evaluations via a suitable search function (using parameters such as country, level, name of institution, name of qualification, name of programme);

- The database provides a list of applications to be evaluated, sorted by deadline, which can be used to divide the work among admissions officers and to monitor whether the deadlines are met.

Various types of management reports may be extracted from the database (on numbers of evaluations, throughput times, qualifications by country, etc.).

3. Capacity & Capacity building

Your staff requires knowledge and skills to perform recognition of qualifications. Therefore the procedure should describe how you ensure that:

- New staff members receive relevant training to perform their tasks;
- All staff members have opportunities to enhance their capacities or refresh their knowledge and skills;
- Staff members regularly exchange information about cases and good practice;
- Staff members have opportunities for internal and external peer exchange.



Capacity building

It is essential for your admissions procedure to ensure your staff is sufficiently equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills to perform recognition. This includes expertise on education systems, quality and qualification frameworks, applying the LRC, recognition policies and more. Therefore:

- **Train new staff.** There are different options to train new staff in the methodology of the LRC and how to apply this in practice. Some ENIC-NARIC centres offer beginner courses for this purpose to admissions officers. Another example is structured internal on the job training. In this case you need to ensure your training is LRC compliant and is sufficiently updated with new emerging good practice.
- **Elevate and nurture expertise.** It is advisable that relevant staff can deal with more advanced cases, i.e. special types of qualifications, or qualifications from specific countries, and monitors and translates relevant policies and laws to practice. There are different avenues to further develop this expertise, including training courses, webinars, conferences, and time for analysing relevant publications and policies. The education constantly evolves, as well as do recognition procedures, for example due to policy changes and new education laws and/or treaties, but also due to developments like digital student data and AI.
- **Peer exchange.** Exchange with peers (other admissions officers within the institution or between institutions) can be a means for strengthening expertise. Examples are advice and reflection on specific cases or implementation of policies. Peer exchange may also take place through annual seminars, conferences, joint projects, or participation in online forums and professional networks. Such exchanges enable staff to compare practices, learn from experiences elsewhere, and stay informed about international trends. Some countries have national admissions officers networks that allow for more structured dialogues on topics between admissions staff. These networks also make it easier to contact peers and allow for develop common approaches specific to the national context. Where staff rarely or never engage in such exchanges, institutions should make sure that they are at least aware of the available opportunities.
- **Protocol.** To sustain and transfer expertise, you are advised to use a protocol which can be used by all admissions staff to describe how to deal with cases. Staff can update the protocol over time whenever necessary, for example after training or webinars. This way protocol safeguards the transfer and continuity of expertise over time. The protocol can be part of the procedure or an additional work document to which the procedure refers.



4. Monitoring and improving

Monitoring and improving are both elements to ensure your procedure remains fit for purpose. Your procedure should outline:

- The measures your institution has in place to ensure the procedure remains fit for purpose and up to date;
- What data and analysis is used and collected for this purpose and who is involved;
- How your institution ensures the admissions procedure is in line and remains in line with institutional, national and international laws and regulations;
- The system in place to review and update your procedure, including the time frame and who is involved.

Evaluation

It is considered good practice to evaluate your admissions procedure at least once a year together with all relevant parties. Use the standards of the Spotlight self-assessment tool as a source of inspiration.

Ensure that the student and the quality of education remain central, and that all recognition aspects comply with the LRC, improving them where necessary.

Use data to support your evaluation. For example indicators such as the number of applications received, the proportion of positive and negative decisions, processing times, student success, or appeals lodged. These data help to evaluate the efficiency, fairness, and consistency of recognition procedures.

Note that the LIREQA project provides useful guidance on integrating recognition practices within institutional quality assurance systems.

Recommendations

1. You need to develop a standard integrated admissions policy. Use the guidelines in this chapter to establish an admission policy in line with the LRC and (if applicable) the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area, Standard 1.4.
2. Differentiate in your procedure between decision on recognition and selection;



Example 12.4 - Differentiate between recognition and selection decisions

A candidate is applying to a study programme in Political Sciences in both institution A and institution B in the same country with the same general access requirements. Institution A, which has an open admissions system, takes a positive admission decision. Institution B, which selects candidates according to their grade average, takes a negative admission decision. However, both institutions take the same recognition decision because both institutions have similar access requirements and are following fair recognition practice. In institution A, the positive recognition decision guaranteed admission, in institution B, it guaranteed access to the selection procedure.

3. Ensure your procedure is fair, non-discriminatory and outlines all steps of the procedure as described in this chapter and manual, and covers the following aspects:
 - Policies and guidelines;
 - Implementation;
 - Capacity and capacity building;
 - Monitoring and evaluation.



Part IV. Information instruments

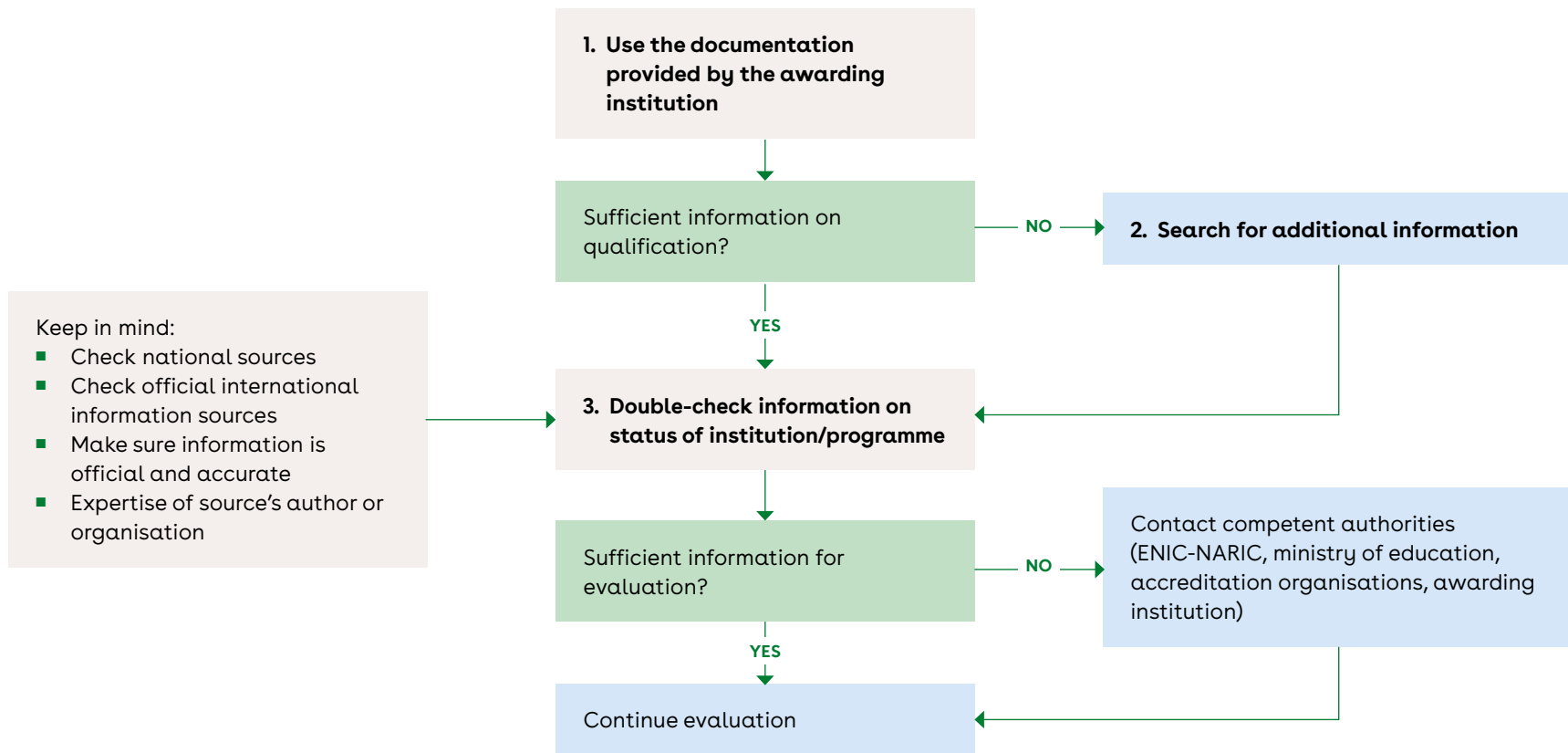
Part IV of the manual discusses sources that support the evaluation process. It explains how and where to find reliable information, and specifically presents the Diploma Supplement and Qualifications frameworks as key information tools.



13. How to find and use information

This chapter provides information sources that may be useful for assessing foreign qualifications and offers guidance on their use.

Flowchart: How to find and use information





Introduction

To correctly evaluate a foreign qualification, you need to establish the status of the awarding institution, verify the authenticity of the documentation submitted by the applicant, and assess the qualification itself – that is, check the level of education, workload, access to further studies, the profile of the programme, and the learning outcomes.

To do this, you need relevant, accurate, and authoritative information on all the aspects mentioned above. You can find this information in:

Documentation provided by the awarding higher education institution

- Qualification;
- Statement/certificate issued as temporary proof of completion (when the actual qualification is issued later);
- Transcript;
- Diploma Supplement (see [Chapter 14, 'Diploma Supplement'](#));
- Degree programme profile (if available);
- The institution's website.

National official sources

- Website of the Ministry of Education;
- Official national publications regarding the education system;

- Website of the accreditation/quality assurance bodies;
- Websites of the national associations of accreditation/quality assurance agencies;
- Website of the national ENIC-NARIC office.

International official sources

- Websites of credential evaluator networks, such as the ENIC and NARIC Networks
Link: www.enic-naric.net;
- Websites of international organisations, such as UNESCO.
Link: <https://www.uis.unesco.org/DataCentre/Pages/regions.aspx>;
- Publications containing information about national education systems, accreditation and recognition.

Recommendations

1. First, use the documentation issued by the awarding higher education institution. The documentation submitted by the applicant can provide information on:
 - The qualification awarded (including degree or title);
 - The status of the institution;
 - The curriculum;
 - The credit system;
 - The grading system;



- Access to further education based on the qualification obtained;
- Learning outcomes;
- Description of the education system.

Example 13.1 – Information issued by the higher education institution: the Diploma Supplement (DS)

An applicant is seeking admission to a master's programme. The admissions officer wants to know whether the student's qualification gives access to master's programmes in the country where it was obtained. The documentation submitted by the applicant includes a DS. According to point 5.1 in the DS, the qualification gives general access to postgraduate study, including master's programmes. The admissions officer decides to rely on this information, after checking the status of the institution.

2. Optional: searching for missing information.

If vital information on the qualification obtained by the applicant is lacking (according to the requirements of your admissions procedure), you should require the applicant to submit the missing details. However, if the application file is technically complete but you need more information about certain aspects of the qualification, you may try to find this information yourself, usually on the website of the awarding

higher education institution. The advantage of searching online is that you can also verify the information provided by the applicant and the institution.

Example 13.2 – Searching for additional information

After analysing the documentation submitted by the applicant, the admissions officer cannot determine the learning outcomes achieved, and requires additional information to decide whether the applicant can be admitted to the master's programme. The website of the awarding higher education institution contains detailed information about the programme, which helps the admissions officer assess whether the learning outcomes are sufficient for admission.

3. Double-check the information about the status of the institution, programme, or education system provided by the higher education institution, using other official sources.

For example, diploma mills or other illegitimate institutions may include information in the documentation they issue that suggests the institution is legitimate (for more information, see [Chapter 4, 'Diploma and accreditation mills'](#)).



Therefore, it is recommended that you:

a. Check national official sources.

The Ministry of Education and accreditation or quality assurance bodies are highly reliable sources for confirming the status of an institution. In most cases, they also provide general information about the education system, including lists of recognised higher education institutions;

Example 13.3 - Checking information on the education system with national official sources

An applicant seeking admission to a PhD programme submits a master's degree and transcript. One of the admissions requirements is that good grades must have been obtained. After thorough analysis of the submitted documentation, it remains unclear how the qualification is positioned within the national education system and how to interpret the student's average grade. This information is found on the Ministry of Education's website, which publishes both a detailed description of the education system and an explanation of the grading scale.

b. Check international official information sources.

These sources are useful for confirming the status of an institution and obtaining general information

about education systems. International databases and publications may provide information on education systems and lists of recognised institutions from numerous countries.

Example 13.4 - Checking information on the education system with international official sources

An admissions officer processing an application for admission to a bachelor's programme with certificates from a foreign country is unfamiliar with the education system of the country of origin. The only national information available on the website of the Ministry of Education is in the original language, which is not widely spoken.

The admissions officer consults official international information sources (see below) and finds information that assists in making an informed decision.

c. Always ensure that the source of information is official and clearly indicates the period during which the qualification was awarded (this may be recent or some time in the past), as education systems and the status of institutions can change.



Also, check that the author or organisation responsible for the publication has appropriate expertise in the field.

Remember that information available online about education systems and recognised institutions and programmes is generally accurate only for current or recently completed studies. When assessing older qualifications, you may need to consult additional sources. If you use publications (printed or electronic), verify that they cover the period during which the qualification was awarded.

4. If the information you need cannot be found in the available resources, contact the competent authority in the relevant country, such as the ENIC-NARIC centre, the Ministry of Education, the accreditation agency and/or the awarding institution. If applicable, you may also contact the ENIC-NARIC centre in your own country for assistance.

Example 13.5 – Maintaining a list of reliable contacts

It is good practice to compile the contact details of all relevant and reliable contacts and their organisations, organised by country and by type of information provided, in an easily searchable document that is accessible to all colleagues in the admissions office.

This document should be updated whenever contact information changes, and new contacts should be added as soon as they are established.



Sources and References

Websites of regional recognition networks

- The ENIC and NARIC Networks.
Link: www.enic-naric.net;
- The Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres (APNNIC).
Link: www.apnnic.net/.

Publications containing information about national education systems

Global focus

- UNESCO's Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER) provide systematic and comprehensive information on national education legislation, policies and programmes
Link: <https://education-profiles.org/>
- International Association of Universities (IAU):
 - List of Universities of the World.
Link: www.whed.net/home.php;
- World Education Profiles are published by World Education Services (WES) in Canada. These country profiles include information on all educational levels and grading systems for selected countries.
Link: www.wes.org/ca/wedb/ecountrylist.htm;
- Anerkennung und Bewertung ausländischer Bildungsnachweise (ANABIN). Assessments of higher educational qualifications, access qualifications and information about grading systems from many countries with the purpose of entering higher education in Germany. Information about recognised institutions is also included. All information is provided in German. Link: www.anabin.kmk.org/;
- KWALIFIKATOR is a database that allows you to automatically check general information about selected types of higher education diplomas obtained abroad, and how these are recognised in Poland. Link: kwalifikator.nawa.gov.pl;
- NUFFIC country modules provide information about educational systems in more than 90 countries. These modules include assessment guidelines comparing foreign qualifications to Dutch qualifications.
Link: www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/foreign-education-systems/;
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI): International Qualifications Database. Provides advice on the comparability of various foreign qualifications to qualifications in Ireland.
Link: www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/qualification-recognition-service-database.html;
- UK ENIC International Comparisons. Provides information about educational systems, grading systems and comparisons to British qualifications for a large number of countries. It also contains a graphic overview of the educational system for each country. Subscription is required.
Link: www.enic.org.uk (fee based);



- NOOSR Country Education Profiles. Provides detailed information about educational systems in more than 100 countries, along with assessment guidelines comparing them to Australian qualifications. Subscription is required. Link: <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/Services-And-Resources/Services/Country-Education-Profiles/Access-CEP/Pages/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2fcep%2fPages%2fdefault.aspx>.

European Focus

- Eurydice's Eurypedia, the European Encyclopaedia on National Education Systems, presents information on educational systems and reforms in Europe. The site covers 38 European education systems. Link: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia>

Latin American Focus

- Organisation de Estados Iberoamericanos, listing education systems in the Latin American region. Link: www.oei.es/quipu/.

Websites containing information on national accreditation/ quality assurance bodies and associations

- The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) provides an overview of quality assurance networks worldwide. The member lists of these

networks can be used to find national accreditation and quality assurance agencies.

Link: www.inqaahe.org/members/;

- ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) Link: www.enqa.eu;
- European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education provides a database of quality assurance agencies in Europe. Link: www.egar.eu;
- DEQAR (Database of External Quality Assurance Reports) is a database developed by EQAR containing reports on higher education institutions and programmes that have been externally reviewed against the European Standards and Guidelines by an agency registered with EQAR. Link: www.egar.eu/qa-results/deqar-project/

Other resources

- Internet Archives/Wayback Machine: Enables you to access archived websites when you need information on older qualifications, programmes of study, etc. Accessibility depends on whether the website has been archived, but it can be a very valuable tool. Link: <https://archive.org/web/>.

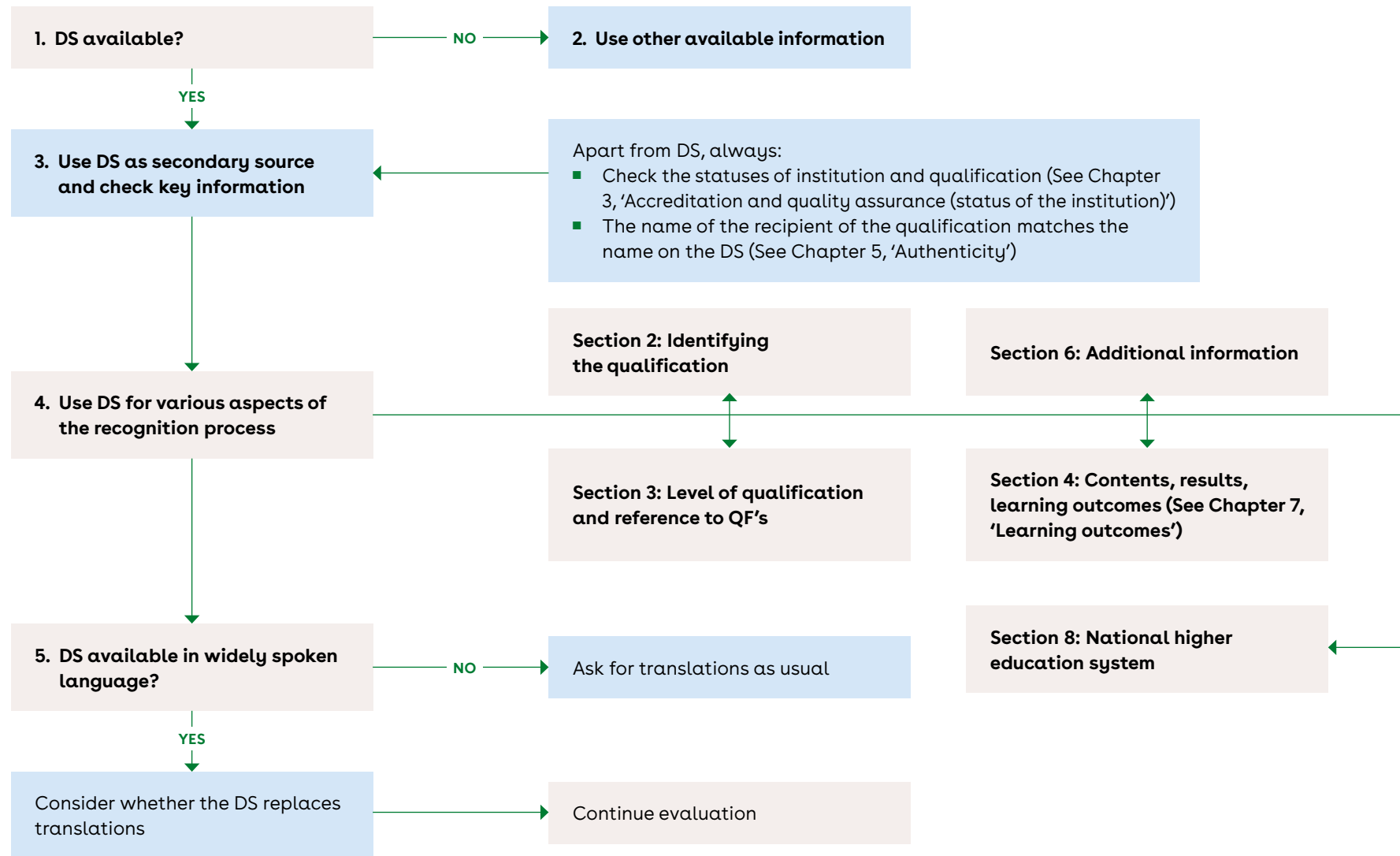


14. Diploma Supplement

This chapter introduces the Diploma Supplement (DS) as an instrument to facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications and provides guidance on how to use it, as well as other information tools with similar purposes.



Flowchart: Diploma Supplement





Introduction

The DS is a document that describes a higher education qualification and the education system to which it belongs. It is a transparency tool intended to facilitate the understanding and recognition of qualifications and is considered one of the most important sources of information on the qualification and the system in which it was awarded.

The DS is issued automatically upon completion of a degree or subsequently upon request by higher education institutions in countries within the European Higher Education Area. However, not all Bologna signatory countries issue the DS.

The DS accompanies the qualification and should include the transcript of records, listing the courses and other elements of the programme completed (see below).

Another information tool with a similar purpose to that of the DS is the Certificate Supplement, which is used in EHEA countries to provide information on Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications. In countries outside the EHEA, higher education institutions may also issue additional documentation with the awarded qualification to clarify its characteristics.

Recommendations

1. Request the DS from applicants whose qualifications were awarded by higher education institutions within the EHEA.

The DS should not be requested from applicants whose qualifications were awarded outside the EHEA, or from those whose qualifications were awarded before the DS was implemented in their country, as they will not possess one. Also, note that the absence of a DS should never be grounds for a negative recognition decision.

Example 14.1 – Requesting a Diploma Supplement (DS) from an applicant

An admissions officer receives applications from two applicants whose qualifications were awarded by the same higher education institution in the same year. Applicant A's file contains a copy of the DS, whereas applicant B's file does not. The admissions officer emails applicant B requesting a copy of the DS. Applicant B replies that the DS has been lost and that the higher education institution will not issue a replacement. The admissions officer contacts the institution and is informed that applicant B did indeed obtain the qualification, but the institution does not provide duplicate copies of the DS. The admissions officer proceeds to evaluate the qualifications of both applicants A and B.



2. If no DS is available, use all other information accompanying the qualification.

Many higher education institutions issue supplementary documentation containing information at least partly similar to that found in the DS, such as degree profiles, transcripts of records, or records of examinations for each subject studied (e.g., credit books, indexes of exams, etc.). When assessing the foreign qualification, the information contained in these documents should be treated in the same way as similar information included in the DS.

Example 14.2 – Other information tools

An admissions officer receives an application from a country outside the EHEA. In addition to the required documents, the application file contains a document issued by the higher education institution which includes the following information:

- Mission of the higher education institution;
- Objectives of the programme;
- Possibilities for further study;
- Employability of graduates.

After verifying the authenticity of the documents and the status of the institution and programme, the admissions officer uses the information provided in the additional document to gain insight into the profile and learning outcomes of the qualification. This information is then used in the recognition process.

3. Use the DS as a secondary source and verify key information.

Be aware that the existence of a DS does not guarantee the status of an institution, its awards, or whether it is recognised as part of a national higher education system. Even if the DS includes this kind of information, you should:

- a. Always carefully verify, using other sources, the status of the institution and whether the qualification is recognised in the awarding country (see Chapter 3, 'Accreditation and quality assurance (status of the institution)');
- b. Check whether the name of the person who obtained the qualification matches the name on the DS. In some educational systems, qualifications have a number also recorded in the DS. You should verify whether these numbers correspond. If you find any inconsistencies, continue the evaluation by applying the procedures outlined in Chapter 5, 'Authenticity'.



Example 14.3 – Checking a Diploma Supplement (DS)

An applicant submits a qualification from country E, including a well-structured DS containing clear information on the status of the institution and programme. According to this information, the institution is recognised by the Ministry of Education (MoE) of country E, and the programme has recently received accreditation for a period of six years from the National Accreditation Organisation (NAO) of country E.

This information is checked by the admissions officer on the websites of the MoE and the NAO of country E. However, the admissions officer is unable to find the institution or programme on any of the lists provided by these bodies and decides to contact the national recognition information centre of country E. The centre informs the admissions officer that the qualification was issued by a degree mill specialising in selling bogus qualifications accompanied by authentic-looking fraudulent DSs. Consequently, the application is rejected.

4. If a DS is available, use the information it provides for various aspects of the recognition process.

The DS offers a structured overview of information relevant to the evaluation and recognition process in a single document. The following sections and sub-sections of the DS are particularly useful in providing information:

- a. Section 2. Information identifying the qualification, and in particular the paragraphs:
 - 2.1 Name of qualification and (if applicable) title conferred (in original language);
 - 2.3 Name and status of the awarding institution;
 - For more information on this, please turn to [Chapter 3, 'Accreditation and quality assurance' \(status of the institution\)](#);
 - 2.4 Name and status of institution (if different from 2.3) administering the studies.

This is especially important when the institution awarding the qualification is not the same as the institution(s) administering the studies, for instance in the case of a joint programme or cross-border or transnational education. For more information on this, please turn to [Chapter 20, 'Qualifications awarded by joint programmes'](#);
- b. Section 3. Information on the level of qualification, and reference to national and international qualifications frameworks.

This can be used to place the foreign qualification within its national educational context and then compare it to a qualification in the host country. For more information, please refer to [Chapter 15, 'Qualifications frameworks'](#);
- c. Section 4 and especially section 4.2. Information on the contents and results gained, with a focus on learning outcomes.



When learning outcomes are clearly documented, assessments should take them into consideration, and recognition should be based on a comparison of learning outcomes and competences. For more information, please refer to [Chapter 7, 'Learning outcomes'](#);

- d. Section 6. Additional information. This section should be consulted on a case-by-case basis;
- e. Section 8. Information on the national higher education system. This section provides information on the higher education system, including general access requirements; the national qualifications framework (where applicable); types of institution; and the quality assurance or accreditation system.

Example 14.4 – Using the Diploma Supplement (DS)

An admissions officer receives a complex application from country X, with which the admissions office has limited experience. The application concerns a joint programme delivered by two different types of institutions in country X, accredited by a small private agency. The degree awarded is not termed a 'bachelor' or 'master' degree (nor an easily recognisable variant). The admissions officer is unfamiliar with the credit system and grading scales used.

Rather than sending a lengthy and complicated email with numerous questions to the national recognition information centre of country X, the admissions officer methodically reviews the relevant entries in the DS included in the application file. The DS provides clear information on the organisation of the joint programme, the accreditation system and agencies involved, the NQF and EQF levels, learning outcomes of the qualification, and the education system (including credits and grades). It also specifies sources where this information can be verified. Within minutes, the admissions officer has obtained all necessary information to complete the evaluation.

- 5. If the DS is issued in a widely spoken language, consider whether it may replace translations of key documents.

The information in the DS should be provided in the language of the awarding country and in another widely spoken language (usually English). For languages where a sworn translation of key documents is normally required, you may consider using the translated information in the DS. This saves the applicant the cost of a translation and can expedite the recognition process.



Example 14.5 – Accepting translated information from a DS

An admissions officer receives a qualification in a language for which a sworn translation is usually required, according to the recognition procedure of that higher education institution. The application file is almost complete, but the official list of subjects taken (which forms part of the awarded qualification) is provided only in the national language. The application file also includes a DS in English, which contains a list of subjects. As there are no concerns about the authenticity of the qualification, the admissions officer decides to use the translated list of subjects from the Diploma Supplement, without requiring the applicant to submit a sworn translation of the official list.

Sources and references

- Template DS on website European Commission.
Link: https://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/diploma-supplement_en.htm;
- Website National Europass Centres.
Link: <https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/about/national-europass-centres>.

15. Qualifications Frameworks

Qualifications Frameworks are a useful tool for considering qualifications in relation to the different levels of a national system, workload, quality and learning outcomes. This chapter provides guidelines on how to apply qualifications frameworks in recognition practice.

Flowchart: Qualifications Frameworks

1. Use NQF to understand

Note: Qualifications referenced to the overarching QF are broadly compatible

2. In case of European qualifications, check whether the NQF of the qualifications is referenced to the EQF/EHEA-QF

Note: QF ≠ instrument for automatic recognition

3. In case of former/older qualifications, check if they are included in NQF

4. Absence of QF should not prejudice recognition of qualifications



Introduction

Purpose of National Qualifications Frameworks

A National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is an instrument for classifying the qualifications of a national education system. An NQF describes the relationship between the different levels of a national education system and its main types of qualifications, and sets out generic learning outcomes for all NQF levels. A comprehensive qualifications framework covers all levels and types of education, both academic and vocational. Other types of NQF may cover only a limited range of levels, such as higher education. NQFs may also be developed at a sub-national level.

Using National Qualifications Frameworks in recognition

NQFs provide a means of comparing qualifications in terms of their level, workload, quality and learning outcomes. They also help to identify similarities between qualifications. In this sense, they can be used in the cross-border recognition of qualifications. As such, they are a useful tool for understanding foreign qualifications, particularly in relation to opportunities for further study.

Overarching Qualifications Frameworks and classification systems

Apart from national qualifications frameworks, there are also international overarching frameworks, such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which provides a common

European reference framework, and the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (also known as the Bologna Framework or EHEA-QF). The EQF and the EHEA-QF are overarching frameworks whose aim is to facilitate the mutual understanding of qualifications within the European Economic Area and the EHEA countries respectively, enabling easier comparison of systems and levels of education.

NQFs may be referenced to such international overarching frameworks, thereby showing which levels in the national and overarching frameworks correspond to one another (see Example 15.4).

There are also general international classification systems, which should not be confused with qualifications frameworks. An example is ISCED, the International Standard Classification of Education, which can be used as a transparency tool to indicate the levels and fields of education in a given country. Such classifications can be helpful at a general level to understand the various levels of an education system and its qualifications.



Recommendations

Application of Qualifications Frameworks in credential evaluation

When applying qualifications frameworks in recognition practice, you should follow the principles outlined in the subsidiary text to the LRC (*Recommendation on the Use of Qualifications Frameworks in the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications*). In practice, the following is recommended:

1. You should use NQFs as transparency tools to help determine the level, learning outcomes, quality and workload of foreign qualifications in general terms.
If qualifications have been referenced or self-certified to the same level in overarching frameworks, you should consider them broadly compatible.

Example 15.1 – Using an NQF as a transparency tool

An admissions officer receives, for the first time, a qualification from Wales. The admissions officer searches online for the NQF of the United Kingdom and discovers that Wales has developed a separate CQFW (Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales). An attractively designed fan diagram shows the eight CQFW levels (plus an entry level) as well as the learning and progression routes, while a handbook provides detailed information on the learning outcomes for all levels.

It is also important to bear in mind that a qualifications framework should not be regarded as an instrument that provides automatic recognition of foreign qualifications.

Example 15.2 - Interpretation of NQF levels

There are several reasons why assessing foreign qualifications solely on the basis of their NQF level – which might appear to offer an attractively simple form of ‘automatic recognition’ – is not a recommended approach for fair recognition:

- Within each NQF, different types of qualifications with varying purposes and outcomes may be grouped together at the same level. These may include qualifications awarded for short in-company training courses that have been linked to a higher education level in the NQF.
- Even if a foreign qualification at a given NQF level appears to align with a national qualification at a similar level, the admissions officer should still assess whether the profile of the foreign qualification meets the requirements for the specific recognition purpose (e.g. admission to a research master’s in nuclear physics).

Application of EQF and EHEA-QF for evaluation of European qualifications

2. For qualifications from European countries, you should check whether the NQF of the country where the qualification was obtained has been referenced to the EQF or to the EHEA-QF. The European Commission has launched an EQF-portal, where NQF's from countries that have referenced their NQF to the EQF can be compared by using the EQF as a translation device (see example below). It is therefore advisable to monitor these developments as the situation evolves over time.

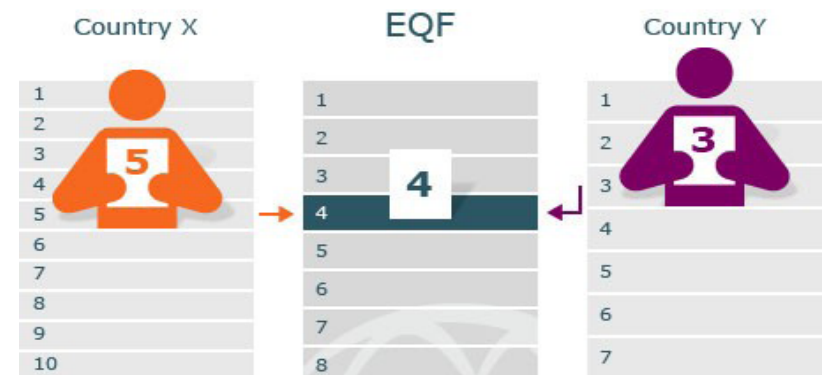
Example 15.3 - Comparing levels of different national qualifications frameworks

Countries have developed national qualifications frameworks with different structures and a different number of levels suited to their national educational systems. For example, a qualification in social work can be placed at level 5 in country X's national qualifications framework and at level 3 in country Y's framework. Since level 5 in country X and level 3 in country Y have both been referenced to level 4 of the EQF, both can be considered to represent the learning outcomes associated with EQF level 4. In this way, the EQF can be used to compare the levels of the two different frameworks, provided the NQFs of both countries have been referenced to the EQF:

Example 15.4 - Using meta frameworks to translate levels in national frameworks

A British bachelor's honours degree is placed at level 6 of the British national qualifications framework, which has been referenced to level 6 of the EQF. An Irish bachelor's honours degree is at level 8 of the Irish NQF, which has also been referenced to level 6 of the EQF. Therefore, if admissions officers have to assess and compare these two qualifications, using the EQF can be helpful in understanding their respective levels.

Illustration for example 15.3





Evaluation of qualifications issued under previous structures

3. Where qualifications were issued under previous structures and thus are not part of the current NQF, you should refer to the status of the qualification in the issuing country. If an NQF exists in the country where the qualification was awarded, it should be established whether previous qualifications are included in it.

Example 15.5 - Qualifications issued under previous structures

Admissions officers should examine whether these qualifications are included in the national qualifications frameworks of the respective countries. If this is the case, admissions officers should consider the level of the qualification as an important parameter in the final assessment. If the qualifications are not included, it should be established whether other official documentation regarding the level of these qualifications exists, and the assessment should be based on this documentation.

Absence of qualifications framework

4. In cases where no sub-national or national qualifications framework is available, this should not in any way prejudice the recognition of qualifications from the country concerned.

Example 15.6 - Qualifications from countries without an NQF

An admissions officer in country B receives an application for admission to the third year of a professionally oriented bachelor's programme in business studies on the basis of a post-secondary qualification from country C. Country B has an NQF in which the required qualification is at level 5 (associate degree). Country C does not have an NQF, so the admissions officer examines the information on the national education system provided by the recognition information centre of country C (including a diagram of the education system). It appears that the post-secondary qualification from country C has comparable purposes and outcomes (it is a short-cycle programme qualifying for the labour market and progression to year 3 of a bachelor's programme) to the level 5 associate degree. Therefore, the admissions officer decides that the level of the foreign qualification fulfils the requirements, even though an official level on the NQF has not been assigned.



Sources and references

You are advised to follow developments on qualifications frameworks as these are continuously developing.

National qualifications frameworks

Sources listing multiple national qualification frameworks in the European region and / or globally:

- CEDEFOP, 'NQF online tool' www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/nqfs-online-tool providing information on the qualifications frameworks and systems of the countries participating in the European qualifications framework (EQF) process.
- Website ENIC-NARIC networks.
Link: www.enic-naric.net (country information);
- Europass, EQF Referencing Reports.
Link: europass.europa.eu/en/eqf-referencing-reports
- UNESCO, CEDEFOP, ETF, Global inventory of regional and national qualifications frameworks 2022, volume II: national and regional case studies.
Link: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386929>;
- Other information on qualifications frameworks on a global level can be found at the website of the European Training Foundation (www.etf.europa.eu).

Examples of regional qualifications frameworks

- African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF).
Link: <https://acqf.africa/>;
- ASEAN qualifications framework.
Link: <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/services/aqrf/>;
- Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Qualifications Framework;
Link: <https://caricom.org/documents/the-caricom-qualifications-framework-a-model-for-enabling-regional-seamless-human-resource-development/>;
- Economic Community of West African States - ECOWAS Regional Qualifications Framework (ECOWAS RQF).
Link: https://acqf.africa/resources/mapping-study/ecowas-report/@@display-file/file/ECOWAS%20EN_ACQF%20Mapping%20Report_WEB.pdf;
- Europass. About the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and comparing national qualifications frameworks with EQF: <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/compare>;
European Higher Education Area – Qualification Framework (QF EHEA). Link: <https://ehea.info/page-qualification-frameworks>;
- IGAD Qualification Framework (IGADQF).
Link: <https://igadsupportplatform.org/education/>;
- The Pacific Qualifications Framework.
Link: <https://eqap.spc.int/resources/publications/pacific-qualifications-framework>.



Part V. Specific types of procedures and/or qualifications

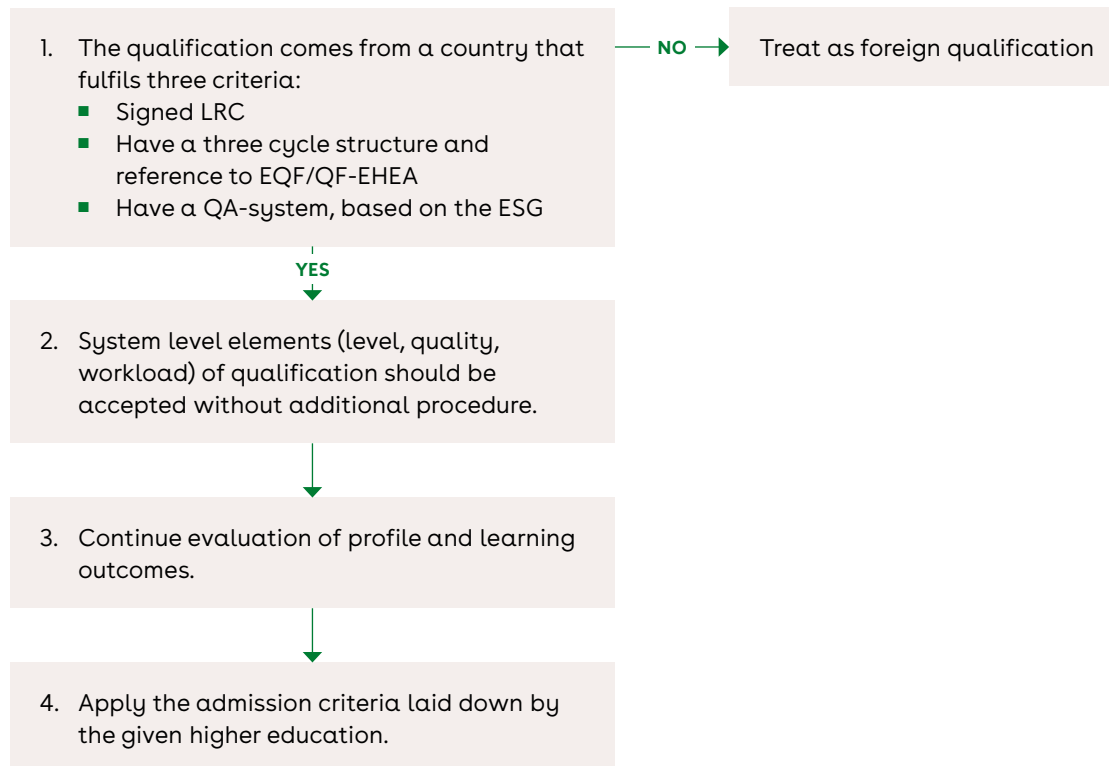
Part V of the manual presents specific types of qualifications that may be encountered in the recognition process, such as joint degrees and qualifications involving flexible learning paths or transnational education. Such qualifications should be regarded and treated as 'normal qualifications', but may require some additional investigation during the evaluation procedure.



16. Automatic recognition

This chapter discusses how to apply the concept of automatic recognition within your admissions procedure, to support fair and smooth admissions decisions.

Flowchart: Automatic recognition





Introduction

“Automatic recognition” is an objective in both the European Union and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to ensure fast, fair and consistent recognition procedures. The idea behind the concept dates back to the foundations of the Bologna Process and the creation of the Bachelor Master structure in the EHEA. The concept that all students with a bachelor’s or master’s degree should automatically be considered for access to the next level was later referred to as “automatic recognition”. More recently, the 2020 Rome Communiqué committed to implementing automatic recognition by 2030, and the European Commission has embraced “automatic recognition” as an objective to be implemented by 2025 in all European Union Member States.

Automatic recognition means that the level, quality and workload are accepted without an additional procedure, as long as the qualification originates from a country that qualifies for automatic recognition. It grants a degree holder the right to be considered for entry (access) to a program of further study at the next level in any other EHEA country. In other words, you should treat information about the foreign qualification the same way you would treat a qualification from your own country. You can still verify whether the qualification is accredited and determine its level, but you should not need to establish the level of the qualification again.

When applied correctly, automatic recognition can facilitate faster and fairer admission decisions by automating steps in the recognition procedure.

Understanding the concept of automatic recognition requires familiarity with the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), which this manual aims to provide. Therefore, you may wish to revisit ‘The Five Elements of a Qualification’ in Part I, and the chapters in ‘Part II – The Evaluation Process’.

System versus programme level

An easy way to understand automatic recognition is to make the distinction between system and programme level recognition, using the 5 elements of a qualification (see [Chapter 2](#)):

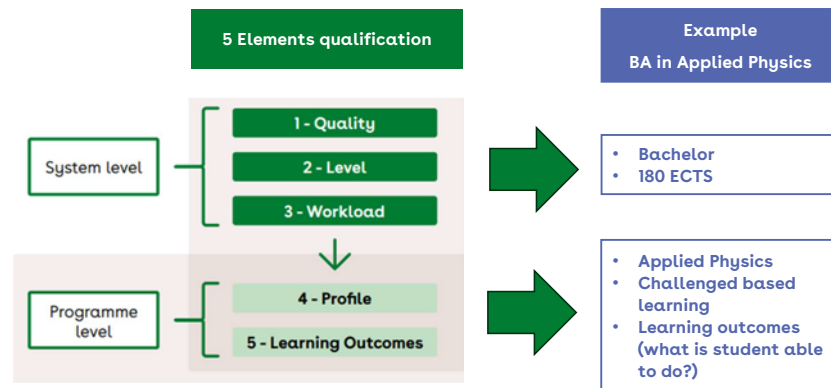
- System level: the level, quality and workload are elements that can be considered regardless of the content of the programme. These three elements are the same across for example bachelor degrees, independent of the major subject of the degree.
- Programme level: profile and learning outcomes, on the other hand, are programme-specific and cannot be generalised. The contents of bachelor’s degrees in physics and in history are very different.

Automatic recognition is always recognition at system level. It “only” gives the applicant the automatic right to be considered for access to the next academic level. The actual

recognition decision would still take into account the profile of the qualification, with regard to the purpose of recognition. Additionally, admissions requirements may apply.

Illustration 16.1: Example system and programme level

This illustrates the elements of a bachelor's degree in Physics (180 ECTS) that are the same for all bachelors across the system, and those that are specific to the programme. Automatic recognition is always system level recognition.



Conditions and models

Automatic recognition can be applied if certain conditions are met. These conditions, common to all automatic recognition models (see below), include that a country:

- Has signed the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC);
- Implemented the three-cycle structure and has an education system referenced to the Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) or the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and;
- Has a quality assurance system based on the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG).
Note: In cases of regional accreditation, the compliance of the regional accreditation agency with the ESG needs to be considered.

These conditions ensure that degrees from countries complying with them are equivalent. Therefore, qualifications from countries that meet these conditions should be automatically recognised at the 'system level' and general access to the next level should be granted.

There are various models to implement automatic recognition in use within the EHEA, including:

5. Automatic recognition through bilateral and multilateral legally binding agreements between countries;
6. Automatic recognition based on a list of countries determined by a competent recognition authority (unilateral legally binding lists);
7. Non-legally binding bilateral and multilateral agreements (e.g., Baltic-Nordic manual);

8. De facto application of automatic recognition criteria in your recognition process based on pre-set criteria as mentioned above.

These models can be applied simultaneously. Note that each model may have slight variations in the criteria mentioned above.

Access versus admissions

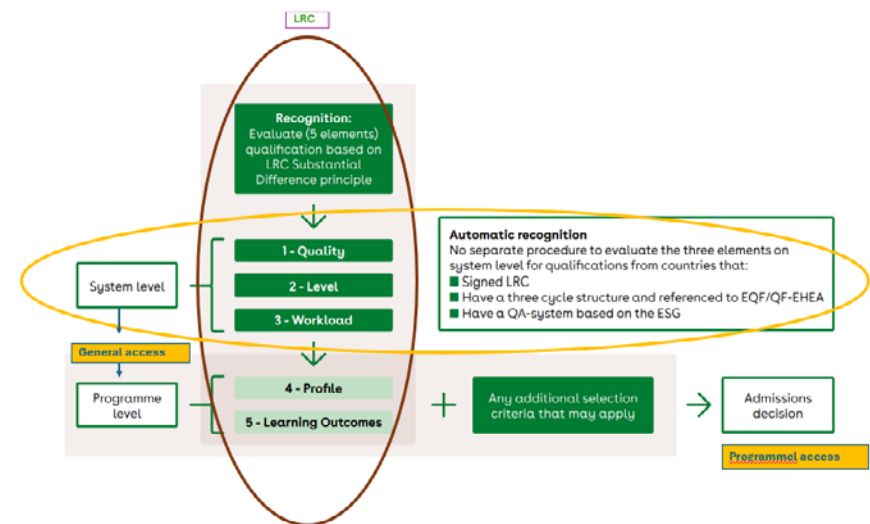
In the context of automatic recognition, 'access' refers to general access to the next level (e.g., for example from bachelor to master). This differs from entrance (admissions) into a specific program, which is based on an evaluation of the profile and learning outcomes (scope of the Lisbon Recognition Convention). Additionally, as part of the admissions process, further selection criteria such as minimum grades, motivation, etc., may apply (outside the scope of the LRC and part of institutional admission processes).

A qualification may provide general access to all programmes at the next level of study if it meets the general level requirement for access. It may also provide partial access if the home country specifies that it only grants access to certain types of programmes at the next level or to specific types of institutions (e.g., universities of applied sciences). The access granted in the receiving country should be comparable to the access

provided in the home country. This may require some adjustment or interpretation within the education system of the receiving country, as each system has its own differences.

Illustration 16.2: access versus admissions

This illustrates the relationship between the LRC, automatic recognition and the admissions procedure. It shows how automatic recognition of the elements on system level, gives the automatic right to be considered for entrance (admissions) to a programme. Admissions constitutes the evaluation of the learning outcomes and profile, and possible additional admissions requirements.





Recommendations

1. Determine if the qualification qualifies for automatic recognition;

Example 16.1 - Apply de facto agreement between countries

A student with a bachelor's degree from Sweden applies for a master's programme in Estonia. Both Sweden and Estonia are members of the Nordic Council of Ministers, which has published a manual indicating how each other's qualifications should be recognised. On the basis of the agreement on mutual automatic recognition, you conclude that the qualification qualifies for automatic recognition.

Example 16.2 - Apply legally binding agreement between countries

A student with a bachelor's degree from Lithuania applies for a master's programme in Luxembourg. Both Lithuania and Luxembourg are members of the Baltic-Benelux Treaty on Automatic Recognition. This legally binding treaty stipulates automatic recognition of qualifications between the countries, including at bachelor's and master's level. Therefore, you conclude that this qualification qualifies for automatic recognition

Example 16.3 - Apply de facto instruments

A student with a bachelor's degree from country X applies for a master's programme at your institution. You use the "EHEA Qualifications Table" published by the ENIC-NARIC Networks, which lists the countries and their qualifications that meet the general criteria for automatic recognition. You find that country X complies with all the criteria for automatic recognition and that this qualification therefore qualifies.

Example 16.4 - Applying criteria and information management

You receive a bachelor from country X, with whom the country in which your institution is located has no (legal or de facto) agreements. Your ENIC-NARIC keeps a de facto list, where you cannot find the qualification. However, you do find this qualification meets all criteria for automatic recognition and you decide to accept this qualification qualifies for automatic recognition. You also ensure that this information is shared with your colleagues to update automatic recognition practices within your institution and to ensure consistency in future decisions.



Example 16.5 - Centralised application system

Country X has a centralised system for foreign students applying for studies. Higher education institutions receive the files via this centralised system. The ENIC-NARIC centre has coordinated with the relevant stakeholders to determine the level of the qualification before the application package is distributed to the various institutions. In this way, the level can be automatically accepted, and the institution only needs to check accreditation, verify the document, and then assess the profile and learning outcomes.

Example 16.6 - Protocol automatic recognition

Your institution in country Y receives many applications each year from an institution in country X for your master's programme. Country X is located outside the EHEA and therefore does not have a three-cycle system referenced to the QF-EHEA and EQF, nor accreditation according to the ESG. However, based on information provided by your ENIC-NARIC about the quality assurance system, the qualifications framework and the education level, you establish a de facto automatic recognition arrangement. This allows you to accept the quality, level and workload of qualifications from this country, helping to streamline the overall process.

2. If the qualification qualifies for automatic recognition, accept the quality, level and workload of the qualification and continue the evaluation for admission to your programme as if it were a domestic qualification. This includes checks such as authenticity, the rights conferred, and whether the qualification was accredited at the time of issue.

Example 16.7 - Rights

An applicant from country X applies for a master's programme at your institution in country Y. The bachelor's degree from country X meets all the criteria for automatic recognition and therefore qualifies for automatic recognition. However, you find that the bachelor's degree does not provide access to the master's level in the home country. Therefore, the applicant does not have access to the master's level in your country either. You then consider whether partial recognition is possible (see [Chapter 10, Alternative recognition and the right to appeal](#)) and communicate your decision to the applicant.

Example 16.8 - Accreditation expired

A qualification qualifies for automatic recognition. However, when checking its accreditation status, it becomes clear that the qualification was not accredited at the time it was issued. The absence of accreditation leads to a denial of recognition.



Example 16.9 - Verification check: non – recognised provider

According to a bilateral agreement between two countries, a qualification qualifies for automatic recognition. However, during the standard verification check, it becomes clear that the qualification was issued by a non-recognised provider. In this case, recognition is denied (unless the institution qualifies as a non-recognised but legitimate institution, see [Chapter 22, Qualifications Awarded by Institutions not Recognised by National Education Authorities](#)).

Example 16.10 - Partial access (profile)

A professional bachelor's degree from country X provides access only to a professional master's programme in that country. Its holder applies for a research master's programme in country Y. Only holders of research-oriented bachelor's degrees can be considered for admission to the research programme. Although the level, accreditation and workload are automatically recognised, there is a difference regarding the profile of the degree. This means that the submitted professional degree from country X does not grant access to the research programme in country Y.

Sources for applying automatic recognition

- AR-GO recognition tool. Designed to support practical implementation of the Baltic Benelux countries. Link: <https://ar-go.online/>
- Benelux Baltic Treaty on Automatic Recognition. Link: www.benelux.int/en/publication/info-sheet-the-automatic-mutual-recognition-of-higher-education-diplomas/ and www.benelux.int/en/information-for-citizens/the-benelux-and-you/study/
- EHEA qualifications table. Provides an easy overview of all qualification types from the EHEA countries that could be considered for automatic recognition and give general access to the next level of study in the other EHEA countries. Link: www.nuffic.nl/en/ar25-2023-2025
- Nordic Baltic admissions manual. Link: <https://norric.org/nordbalt/>



17. Access qualifications

This chapter provides information and recommendations on handling access qualifications in the admissions process at your institution. The point of departure is the Lisbon Recognition Convention's (LRC) section on the recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education.

Flowchart: Access Qualifications

1. Check if access qualification gives access to specific type of HEI's or programmes

Grant access to comparable HEI's and programmes unless substantial differences are found (See Chapter 9, 'Substantial and non-substantial differences')

2. Check if the access qualification meets specific requirements

Continue evaluation

3. Define how requirements for admission can be met

4. Make references to national legislation on the admission of applicants with non-national access qualifications to higher education



Introduction

An access qualification is a qualification that provides access to higher education in the country of origin. There are three types of access qualifications:

1. **National access qualifications** (referred to in this chapter as foreign access qualifications) awarded upon completion of upper secondary education in the country concerned.
2. **International access qualifications** awarded upon completion of secondary programmes that are distinct from those offered within national education systems. According to the definition set out in the Recommendation on International Access Qualifications, international access qualifications grant general access to higher education and are administered by one or more bodies external to national education systems. Examples include the International Baccalaureate and the European Baccalaureate.
3. **Access qualifications** which function as a bridge from parts of a national education system other than secondary education (e.g. vocational or technical pathways) or as mechanisms for facilitating entry to higher education for specific target groups such as refugees or returning adult learners.

The diversity of educational systems around the world is reflected in the requirements for access to higher education. This applies to the required length of prior schooling and to the different types of upper secondary qualifications.

For admission to higher education, many countries require 12 years of prior schooling, while others may require 11 or 13 years.

Some countries predominantly award general secondary qualifications, whereas others offer a wide range of vocational secondary qualifications and/or qualifications that combine vocational and general subjects. In some countries, a national entrance examination is mandatory. In others, higher education institutions may organise their own entrance examinations, or no entrance examinations are required at all.

When assessing whether a foreign access qualification grants admission to a particular study programme at your institution, a good starting point is to consider the types of programmes and higher education institutions to which the qualification provides access in the country of origin.

Moreover, it is important to familiarise yourself with your country's legislation on admission to higher education, and to check whether a national authority provides information and guidelines on the admission of students holding access qualifications from other countries. In some countries, national



recognition authorities have carried out general assessments of foreign and international upper secondary qualifications for use by higher education institutions, or applicants may be required to have their secondary qualifications assessed by the national recognition authorities.

Recommendations

Recognition of access qualifications

1. Check whether the access qualification provides admission to specific types of higher education institutions or programmes in the country of origin.

If the foreign access qualification gives access to specific types of institutions or programmes in the country of origin, you should grant access to comparable institutions or programmes in your country, unless you can prove a substantial difference (see [Chapter 9, 'Substantial and non-substantial differences'](#)).

Example 17.1 - Access to specific institutions and programmes

Country X has a differentiated secondary school system with leaving certificates and examinations at different year levels. Some of these give access to general tertiary education, some to post-secondary technical education, and some only to vocational apprenticeships. This country also has differentiated types of higher education institutions and other post-secondary schools that continue the secondary differentiation.

When graduates of such a system apply for admission to programmes in countries with undifferentiated systems, questions may arise as to the appropriate placement of such students. The reverse is also true when graduates from an undifferentiated school system seek to enter tertiary education in a country with a differentiated tertiary system.

Higher education institutions should be aware of these structural differences between educational systems and develop policies or practices to ensure fair recognition of qualifications from differently organised systems.



It is important to remember that your key responsibility is to determine whether an applicant has a realistic chance of succeeding in the programme for which they have applied. If an applicant cannot be granted general admission, they might be eligible for conditional admission or for a programme that corresponds to what would be possible within the home system.

2. Check if the access qualification meets specific requirements. If a study programme at your institution has specific entry requirements, you should check whether the applicant fulfils them. Depending on how the admission process is organised at your institution, this may require input from academic staff. If the applicant does not meet essential specific requirements, you may report that substantial differences have been identified (see [Chapter 9, 'Substantial and non-substantial differences'](#)).

Example 17.2 – Specific access requirements

For admission to a bachelor's programme in chemistry in country C it is required that the subjects mathematics, physics and chemistry are part of the secondary school leaving examination of the applicants of country C. It should be established in the admissions procedure what to require from foreign students with respect to these subjects. The requirements should not be too strict in terms of contents of the curricula and it should be accepted that non-substantial differences exist between educational systems.

In case of deficiencies in one or more of these subjects, applicants may be referred to institutions where they could take a course that would satisfy the access requirements of the programme in chemistry.

Information provision to applicant

Note that the following recommendations specify those of [Chapter 11. 'Transparency and Information Provision'](#) for access qualifications.

3. Define how the applicant can meet the general and specific requirements for admission to a higher education programme at your institution.

You should make information about the general and specific requirements for admission to a given study programme at



your institution easily available to all applicants. You should also define how applicants may meet the general and specific requirements.

If a national authority has listed the minimum requirements for admission to higher education in your country, you should provide a link to these. If not, you should state your institution's general and specific requirements in the information you provide for potential students.

Remember to inform potential applicants if you require supplementary studies, if you do not consider the access qualification from a certain country as being comparable in level to an access qualification from your country.

Example 17.3 - Publish the requirements for access to your higher education programme

In Sweden, the Universitets- och högskolerådet has published a list of access qualifications from selected countries with information about the general access requirements for admission to higher education in Sweden. In addition, the list includes information about how an applicant can meet a specific requirement with regard to level in an individual subject, so that it matches the level in the corresponding subject in Swedish general upper secondary education.

4. Make references to national legislation.
If your country has legislation on the admission of applicants with non-national access qualifications to higher education, you should make a reference to this legislation. If your country's legislation allows the possibility of appealing a decision on admission made by a higher education institution, you should also provide information about this.

Example 17.4 - National legislation on foreign access qualifications

Many countries have bilateral agreements with other countries on the recognition of qualifications. Such agreements may set out specific arrangements for recognising qualifications from the other country, including access qualifications. This information is highly relevant for applicants and admissions officers alike, and should be clearly published on your institution's website.

Example 17.5 Selection of students

In Poland, candidates with foreign certificates that do not indicate grades for the required subjects may take a maturity exam to gain access to higher education. If there are selective admission procedures of this kind, your institution should clearly publish information about them on its website.



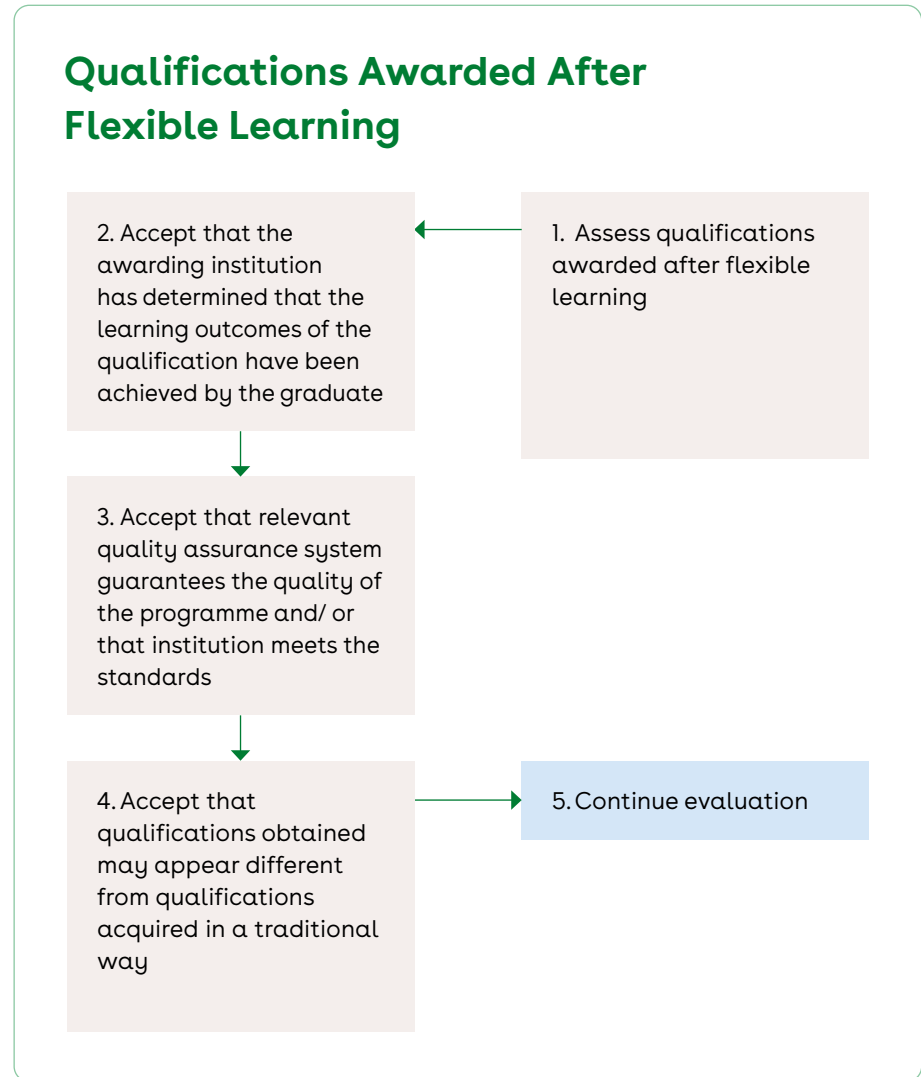
Sources and references

- AIC, ARAQUA. Mapped access qualifications in relation to their automatic recognition.
Link: <https://aic.lv/en/about-aic/project/araqua-project/>,
<https://aic.lv/en/about-aic/project/araqua-2-project/>;
- Eurypedia, European Encyclopedia on National Education Systems.
Link: eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia;
- Nuffic Country Modules.
Link: www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/foreign-education-systems/;
- CIMEA, Q-Entry, database with access qualifications.
Link: www.q-entry.eu/.



18. Qualifications gained after Flexible Learning paths

This chapter discusses the assessment of qualifications acquired through flexible learning pathways. A separate section is devoted to micro-credentials.





Introduction

As flexibility in learning becomes more mainstream, its recognition takes on increasing importance. In the spirit of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, holders of qualifications awarded through flexible learning should benefit from the same principles of transparency, mobility, and fair recognition as those with qualifications gained through traditional pathways.

A flexible learning path refers to any situation in which a person has obtained a qualification by means other than the conventional route. The flexibility of the learning path may be:

- open and distance learning;
- access and admission to the programme, exemptions of part of the programme or the whole programme, based on recognition of prior learning;
- access and admission to the programme, exemptions of part of the programme or the whole programme, based on modular learning, such as micro-credentials.

Traditionally, education has been viewed as an input-based process, defined by workload and length of study (hours, semesters, and years). In a competence-based system, however, education is understood as an output-based process, expressed in terms of the competences achieved by the learner. As a result, qualifications awarded in higher education are

no longer regarded merely as proof of participation and successful completion of a programme, but as certification of having achieved predefined learning outcomes. Therefore, credential evaluators are advised to take into account what the learner knows and can do, regardless of the learning path they have followed.

In the Global Recognition Convention, the following concepts are defined:

Formal learning: learning derived from activities within a structured learning setting, leading to a formal qualification, and provided by an education institution recognised by a State Party's competent authorities and authorised thereby to deliver such learning activities.

Informal learning: learning which occurs outside the formal education system and which results from daily life activities related to work, family, local community, or leisure.

Lifelong learning: a process which refers to all learning activities, whether formal, non-formal, or informal, covers the entire lifespan and has the aim of improving and developing human capacities, knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies.



Non-formal learning: learning achieved within an education or training framework which emphasises working life and which does not belong to the formal education system.

Non-traditional learning modes: formal, non-formal and informal mechanisms for the delivery of educational programmes and learning activities not primarily relying on face-to-face interaction between the educator and the learner.

Prior learning: the experience, knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies which an individual has acquired as a result of formal, non-formal, or informal learning, assessed against a given set of learning outcomes, objectives, or standards.

Distance learning

Distance learning refers to any educational activity in which students are separated from the faculty and other students. The development of both distance and open learning was enabled by the development of information and communication technologies. Students and the faculty may be based in one country or in different countries. In the latter case, distance learning can become an electronic form of transnational education (see [Chapter 19: 'Transnational education'](#)).

Distance learning courses may or may not require a physical on-site presence for reasons such as consultations with teachers, taking examinations or defending a thesis, etc.

Distance learning may be provided both by institutions dedicated solely to distance learning (such as the Open University in the UK or the *Fernuniversität Hagen* in Germany) and by “traditional” institutions that – apart from “traditional” programmes - also provide distance learning programmes.

Distance learning is recognised as a legitimate form of provision in most countries, and it may be provided by public or private higher education institutions or take the form of transnational education due to enrolments from anywhere.

Recognition of prior learning

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) refers to the process by which a competent authority or education institution assesses the knowledge, skills and competence that an individual possesses as a result of:

- Learning acquired in a non-formal or informal setting;
- Learning that did not lead to a qualification;
- Learning acquired through professional experience;
- Learning acquired through unfinished studies at a recognised institution.



There is a wide range of terminology referring to the process of identifying, assessing, and formally acknowledging prior learning and achievements – examples include Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), validation des acquis de l'expérience, and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). In this manual, we use the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to encompass all such terminology.

Prior learning may have resulted in learning outcomes comparable to those acquired through traditional learning. Recognising such learning is important to facilitate admission to further studies or credit transfer.

The general principle is that no one should be required to study what they already know.

Recommendations

1. Assess qualifications partially or fully obtained through flexible learning paths in the same way as a comparable qualification which was obtained in the traditional way with focus on learning outcomes.

2. Accept that the institution awarding a qualification based on a flexible learning pathway has determined that the graduate has achieved the required learning outcomes for that qualification.

Example 18.1 - Assessing a qualification awarded on the basis of RPL

A student applies for admission to a Master's programme on the basis of a Bachelor's degree. The qualification was awarded primarily on the basis of RPL by a recognised higher education institution in the issuing country. The admissions officer should assess the qualification according to the same standards as if it had been obtained entirely through the formal education system.

3. Accept that the relevant quality assurance system guarantees that the predefined (minimum) quality of the programme and/or institution meets the standards, regardless of the flexible learning path completed by the student.

Regular institutional and/or programme accreditation procedures usually cover flexible forms of provision and recognition of prior learning. In some cases, however, there may be specific procedures for certain types of provision, such as distance learning or micro-credentials.



Be aware that competent RPL authorities may not appear on the usual lists of recognised higher education institutions. If in doubt, please contact the ENIC-NARIC centre or the national recognition information centre in the country where the institution is located.

Example 18.2 - Assessing a qualification awarded after distance learning

The holder of a professionally oriented bachelor's degree applies to be admitted to a university programme. The degree was obtained through an online programme at a university providing only distance learning education. It was accredited by a recognised accreditation agency and is authorised to provide undergraduate and graduate studies. Thus, you can consider that the learning outcomes associated with this award have been achieved and the bachelor's degree can be considered in the same way, and of the same level, as any other bachelor's degree from that country.

Example 18.3 - Trusting quality assurance mechanisms

You are assessing a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration awarded by an open distance education provider. The applicant was admitted to the programme without a traditional access qualification and completed the degree through an online programme. You verify that the institution is accredited and authorised to offer online undergraduate and graduate studies. Therefore, you can consider that the learning outcomes associated with this award have been met, and the Bachelor's degree can be regarded in the same way—and as equivalent in level—to any other Bachelor's degree from that country.

4. Accept that qualifications obtained through flexible learning pathways may differ from those acquired via traditional routes, particularly in the type of information provided with the qualification (such as workload, credits, and programme content).



Example 18.4 - Recognising an RPL qualification with a different appearance

An applicant has submitted a recognised qualification that was awarded solely on the basis of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The qualification is not accompanied by a transcript and is not described in the traditional terms of workload or programme content, which you would normally consider in your decision-making.

Provided that the validation process has been carried out in accordance with the legislation on RPL in the country of origin, you should trust that the qualification has been awarded only after the holder has demonstrated the competences required for it. You should base your assessment on the available information about the generic and specific learning outcomes for this level and/or type of qualification.

Example 18.5 - Recognising a qualification with some information missing

“An applicant has submitted a recognised Bachelor’s degree. The Diploma Supplement indicates that the total workload of the programme is 240 ECTS credits, but the courses listed in the supplement amount to only 120 ECTS credits. The remaining credits are recorded as recognition of prior learning. The Diploma Supplement also provides information on the level and learning outcomes associated with the award. You verify the quality assurance status of the institution and the programme, consider the level and learning outcomes of the programme, and assess the qualification in the same way as you would assess a comparable qualification obtained through conventional study.



Subtopic – Micro-credentials

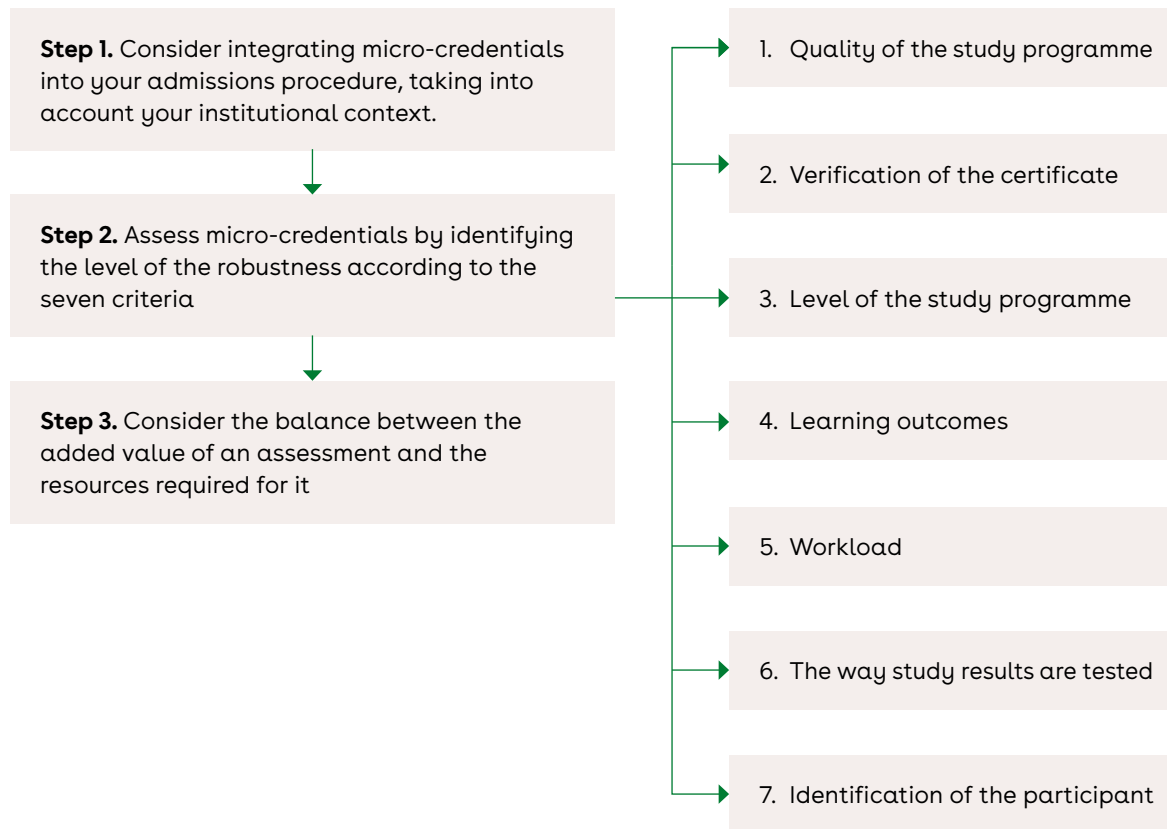
Micro-credentials refer to small units of learning aimed at acquiring specific skills, upskilling, or reskilling offered by various types of providers (such as employers or higher education institutions). It is most often offered as e-learning (also in the form of MOOCs), but can also be blended or face to face. In the 2022 European Council's Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials, the following definition is proposed: "‘micro-credential’ means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes will have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined criteria". Since the 2022 Council Recommendation was adopted, efforts to standardise micro-credentials have been made in various national contexts. For example, by integrating them into regular education structures, such as quality assurance, ECTS and National Qualification Frameworks. In addition, micro-credentials are being developed in many European Universities Alliances, enhancing recognition beyond these networks as well. Even though most micro-credentials may not constitute a conventional qualification, they can often be subject to a more simplified recognition process than the traditional RPL procedures. An evaluation methodology for micro-credentials can be accessed through the open online tool the "[micro-evaluator](#)", which was developed in the Erasmus+ co-funded project STACQ. It involves scoring the 'level of robustness' of seven criteria when evaluating a micro-credential, in order to determine if there are sufficient grounds to recognise

the certificate. The seven criteria are 1. quality of the study programme; 2. verification of the certificate; 3. level of the study programme; 4. learning outcomes; 5. workload; 6. the way study results are tested; 7. identification of the participant.

Recommendations

1. Consider integrating micro-credentials into your admissions procedure.
How this can be done will largely depend on your institution and the programmes it offers. Some possible options include assessing micro-credentials as periods of study and/or taking a holistic approach by using them to complement or compensate for missing elements of a qualification.

Flowchart: Sub-topic micro-credentials





Example 18.6 - Bridging deficiencies

After receiving numerous applications with deficiencies amounting to substantial differences, your programme decided to use micro-credentials to address these gaps, allowing admission on the condition that applicants complete the required micro-credentials before the start of the programme. To this end, and in consultation with academic staff, you agreed on a series of micro-credentials that applicants may use to bridge such deficiencies. Furthermore, you have established a practice of accepting micro-credentials as part of your application procedure, providing specific guidelines on the criteria these micro-credentials must meet for consideration.

2. Assess micro-credentials by identifying the level of the robustness according to the seven criteria and consider recognising those with high level of robustness without additional RPL procedures. This would in particular encompass quality assured micro-credentials with a clear indication of the level and workload, as well as assessed learning outcomes. Be flexible by keeping in mind that, while most micro-credentials may not be part of formal education, they can attest the achievement of a set of learning outcomes.

Example 18.7 - Using the levels of robustness in assessment

You received a MicroMaster's Certificate in Supply Chain Management awarded by University X, which is quality assured, as part of an application. You assess the robustness of the award against the seven criteria of the micro-evaluator and determine that, for all criteria, the level of robustness is adequate. You take into account that:

- the credential was awarded by an accredited higher education provider that undergoes regular institutional accreditation procedures;
- University X describes the award as equivalent to one semester of its graduate study;
- the award involved continuous and final assessments with verified student identity.

You conclude that the award is substantial and can be recognised as equivalent to one semester of Master's level study, without the need for additional RPL procedures.

3. Consider the balance between the added value of an assessment and the resources required for it, keeping the specific purpose in mind. Some modular learning may be very limited, representing only a few hours of study and/or attesting merely to participation or viewing. In such cases, the learning may be included as part of an RPL portfolio but might not be substantial enough for other forms of recognition. To save time and resources, keep a record of your previous decisions for future reference.



Example 18.8 - Consider the added value of assessment

You have received an application for recognition for the purpose of admission to a Bachelor's programme in IT. The applicant has included a senior secondary qualification and a MOOC Lynda Certificate of Completion for an IT-related course. The information on the Lynda Certificate states that the course duration was only a few hours and that it merely attests to the viewing of the course. You determine that the senior secondary qualification already provides general access to all types of Bachelor's degree programmes. Therefore, you assess the senior secondary qualification but decide that, for this purpose, assessing the Lynda Certificate would be unnecessary and would add no additional value for the applicant.



Sources and references

The following information tools can be of help in this process:

- Diploma Supplement, which should provide information regarding flexible learning paths in higher education, if applicable. (See [Chapter 14, 'Diploma Supplement \(and other information tools\)'](#));
- The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) applies to all types of education, and promotes the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The outcomes of non-traditional learning may be compared to the learning outcome descriptors of the eight reference levels of the EQF;
- The European RPL Network, is the association of national networks at European level working on the subject of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The focus of this networking association lies on the exchange of experiences and mutual learning with regard to recognition issues.
Link: www.aq.ac.at/en/recognition/european-rpl-network.php;
- Letters of recommendation/references and mobility documents such as the Europass Mobility Supplement, for instance, which details learning outcomes acquired through a period of training abroad;
- The Micro-Evaluator. A tool for recognising micro-credentials for admission officers, credential evaluators, and anyone interested in the recognition of micro-credentials. Learn how to evaluate micro-credentials with this application.
Link: www.nuffic.nl/en/the-micro-evaluator;
- Nuffic, The Practitioner's guide for recognition of e-learning.
Link: www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2020-08/practitioners-guide-for-recognition-of-e-learning.pdf;
- Self-Certification reports of the countries participating in the Bologna Process which provide information regarding the flexible learning paths and learning outcomes in the higher education systems. The self-certification reports are published on this website:
<https://europass.europa.eu/en/eqf-referencing-reports>.

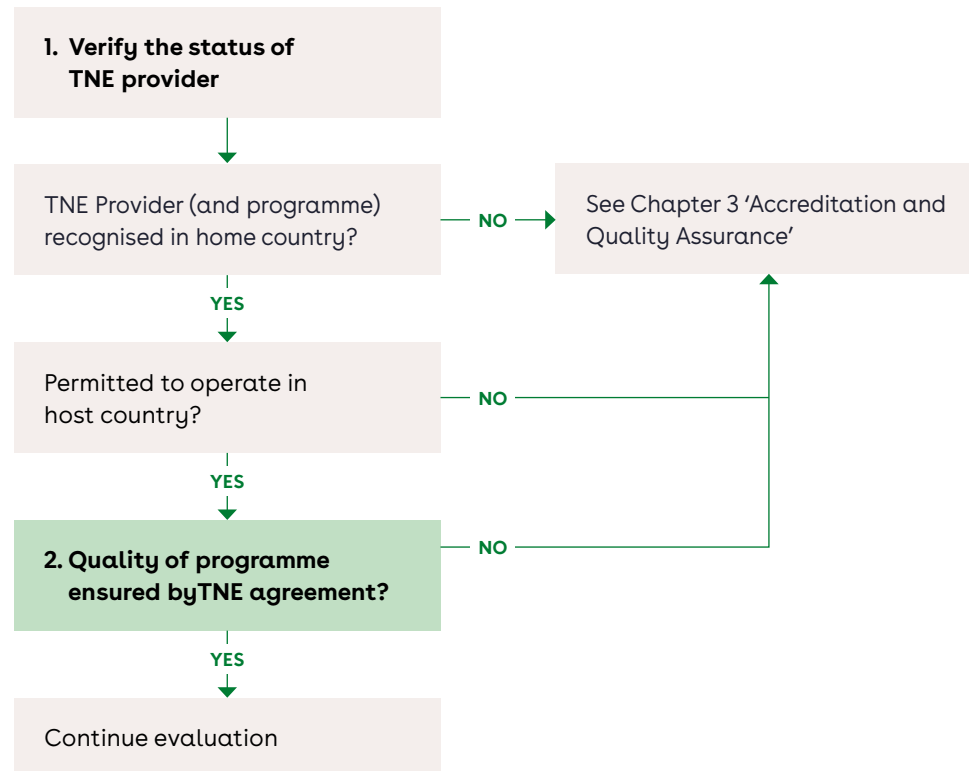


19. Qualifications Awarded through Transnational Education

Growth in transnational education (TNE), or cross-border provision, has been remarkable in recent years, thanks to the increased mobility of educational providers in a globalised economy and the technology facilitating distance education. The principal challenge when deciding whether or not to recognise a transnational education qualification is the verification of its status – not in a single country, but in two or even more.



Flowchart: Qualifications Awarded through Transnational Education





Introduction

Transnational education (TNE, also known as ‘cross-border education’) refers to the delivery of higher education study programmes (including those of distance education), in which the learners are located in a country other than the one where the awarding institution is based. This is distinct from transnational Joint Degree programmes (see [Chapter 20, ‘Qualifications Awarded by Joint Programmes’](#)) where the degree is awarded jointly by institutions in more than one country and study takes place in those countries.

In some cases, it can be difficult to determine the ‘home country’ of the awarding institution and the authority responsible for recognising and/or accrediting the institution and/or its programmes.

Transnational education programmes are established through transnational arrangements, which generally fall into two types:

Collaborative arrangements, where study programmes of the awarding institution are delivered by another partner institution (for example, an institution from country X allows an institution from country Y to deliver its programme and the qualification is awarded by the institution from country X);

Non-collaborative arrangements, where study programmes are delivered directly by an awarding institution on a cross-border basis (for example, a university from country X has a branch in country Y, where it delivers the programme while awarding the qualification from country X).

Recommendations

As explained in Chapter 3 (‘Accreditation and Quality Assurance’), certain types of qualifications may require further investigation to establish whether they are properly accredited or recognised.

When evaluating qualifications obtained through transnational education, it is recommended that you:

1. Verify the status of the institution responsible for developing the transnational education programme and awarding the qualification:
 - a. Confirm that the awarding institution and, where applicable, the programme is/are recognised/accredited in the home country;



- b. Ensure that the awarding institution (which, in the case of non-collaborative agreements is also the provider) has legal permission from both the home and host authorities to operate in the host country.

Example 19.1 - Checking a transnational education qualification (collaborative agreement)

You investigate a qualification awarded by a recognised institution in country A through a branch campus located in country B. The branch campus does not have official status in country B as a recognised higher education institution. You discover that the programmes offered at the branch campus are accredited in country A, which operates an accreditation system at programme level. In addition, you find out that the institution in country A has permission from the authorities in both country A and B to operate in country B.

As a result, you conclude that there is sufficient evidence of the quality of the programme and proceed with the evaluation of the qualification.

Example 19.2 - Verifying the status and quality

You receive a qualification from an institution from country X, operating a branch campus in country Y. You check the national regulations and find that the institution has legal permission in both country X and Y to operate in country Y. However, while the home institution is accredited, the education provided by the branch campus is not part of the internal and external quality assurance cycle of the institution in country X. As a result you conclude there is insufficient evidence of its quality.

2. Check whether the quality of the programme is assured through the transnational arrangement between the institutions involved.

You should verify whether the transnational education programme is accredited in the home country of the awarding institution or recognised/accredited in the host country, whether as a legitimate foreign education or part of the host education system. One of these options should usually be sufficient, provided a competent recognition authority in at least one of the participating countries has evaluated the quality of the educational programme.



Example 19.3 - Rogue providers

Transnational education is generally regarded as a valuable addition to the national education system, particularly in countries where higher education institutions lack sufficient capacity for the domestic student population. However, a lack of transparency and clear legislation for such arrangements can lead to situations in which rogue providers attempt to bypass regulations on the quality of higher education.

For this reason, a careful check on the legitimacy of the transnational arrangement may be necessary. In such cases, the fact that the awarding institution is recognised in its home country does not necessarily guarantee the quality of the programme delivered abroad.

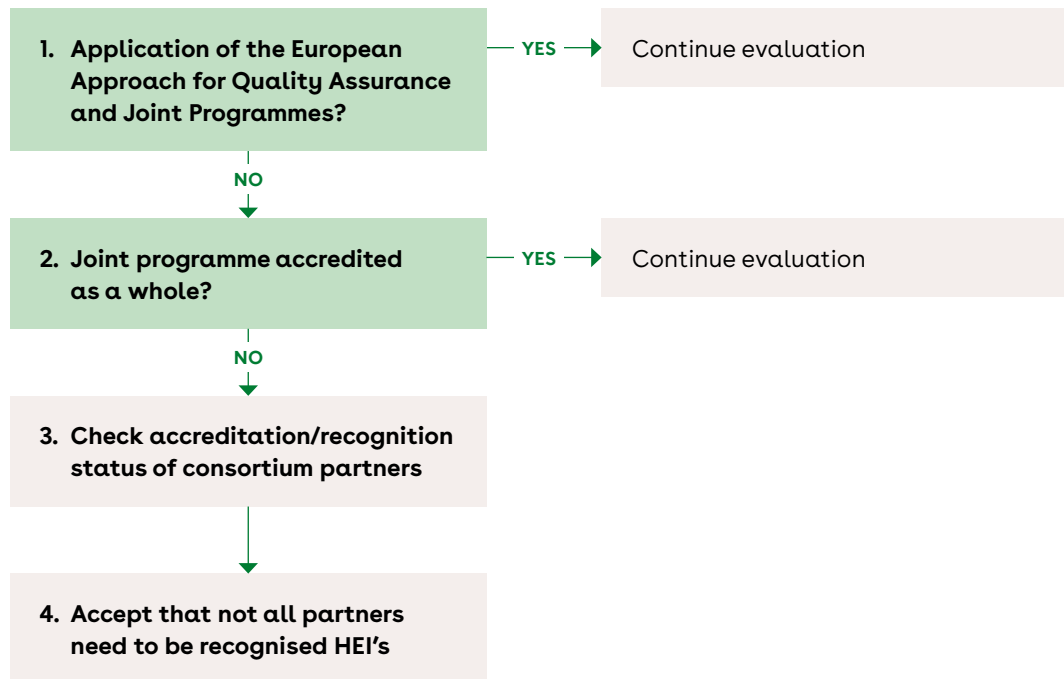
If the provider and/or the programme do not meet the requirements of the two recommendations above, you do not have sufficient evidence of the quality of the transnational education programme. See Recommendation 3 of [Chapter 3, 'Accreditation and Quality Assurance'](#) for the options available to continue the recognition process.



20. Qualifications Awarded by Joint Programmes

This chapter discusses joint programmes that are delivered and awarded collaboratively by higher education institutions in two or more countries. These programmes often require closer examination of the quality assurance and the status of the institutions involved, given their cross border nature. In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes provides a framework to assure the quality of the joint programme, facilitating the recognition of qualifications awarded upon completion of such programmes.

Flowchart: Qualifications Awarded by Joint Programmes





Introduction

A joint programme is a programme offered jointly by several higher education institutions forming a (joint programme) consortium. It does not necessarily lead to a joint degree; this is only one possible type of award. Upon completion of a joint programme, the graduate may be awarded:

- a single national qualification;
- several separate qualifications referred to as a double or multiple qualification;
- and/or a single document awarding a joint qualification.

In this context, note that a dual degree is attesting the successful completion of two separate curricula, and is therefore not awarded upon completion of a joint programme.

Qualifications awarded through a joint programme differ from foreign national qualifications because they are considered to belong to more than one national system, or not fully to any single national system. Therefore, additional elements must be taken into account when assessing these qualifications.

A complicating factor is that the provision of (international) joint programmes and the awarding of joint qualifications may be hindered by the national legislation of the consortium partners. Relevant legislation may either be lacking or may prevent their proper delivery. Another possibility is that the

national legislation of different countries may conflict with certain aspects of the joint programme. To address this, quality assurance agencies advocate that accreditation of a joint programme by one reliable organisation should be sufficient evidence of its quality

In May 2015, European ministers responsible for higher education adopted the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes to ease the external quality assurance of such programmes. The European Approach provides a framework for joint quality assurance by setting out an application mechanism and standards based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, without imposing additional national criteria. It specifies that cooperating higher education institutions should jointly select a suitable quality assurance agency from the list of EQAR-registered agencies. The chosen agency should apply the standards and procedures set out in the European Approach to carry out a single evaluation or accreditation of the entire joint programme – the result of which is expected to be accepted in all EHEA countries.

In the absence of a clear accreditation status under the European Approach, evidence of the quality of the joint programme should be sought in the status of the consortium partners and their respective programmes.



Recognition of joint programmes is also very relevant in the context of the European University Initiative (launched by the European Commission). Since 2019, more than 60 European University Alliances have been created, consisting of more than 570 higher education institutions. These alliances provide joint programmes and joint degrees, which will be supported by the development of a European Degree (which could take the form of a quality label or a new type of qualification).

Recommendations

As explained in Chapter 3 'Accreditation and Quality Assurance', certain types of qualifications may require further investigation in order to establish whether they are properly accredited or recognised.

When assessing qualifications awarded by joint programmes, you are advised to:

1. Check whether the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has been applied to the accreditation of the programme.

This means that an integrated quality assurance process has been carried out, and no further checks are required.

Example 20.1 – European approach

An applicant submits multiple qualifications as proof of completion of their Bachelor of Arts in European Studies, a joint programme delivered by a European University Alliance. You find that the programme has been accredited by a single accreditation agency using the European Approach, accept the quality assurance, and proceed with the evaluation.

2. In the absence of such accreditation, check whether the joint programme as a whole has been accredited by a reliable national accreditation organisation, typically in the country of one of the consortium partners.
If so, this provides sufficient evidence of the overall quality of the programme, and further checks on the status of the consortium partners should not be necessary.



Example 20.2 - Accredited joint programme

An applicant submits a master's degree in European Studies awarded by a consortium of seven higher education institutions. Although the degree was awarded prior to the adoption of the European Approach, the Diploma Supplement (see [Chapter 14, 'Diploma Supplement'](#)) explains that the joint programme is accredited by the national accreditation organisation of one of the countries represented in the consortium. The admissions officer verifies the accreditation status of the joint programme and proceeds with the evaluation of the qualification without needing to check the status of all seven consortium members.

3. In the absence of full programme accreditation, check the accreditation and/or recognition status of the consortium partners or, in countries with programme-level accreditation systems, the accreditation status of parts of the programme, to obtain sufficient evidence of its quality.

This may be a challenging and time-consuming task, particularly if the joint programme is offered by a consortium comprising dozens of institutions. Verifying the accreditation status of individual parts of the programme, provided by different consortium partners, can be especially difficult in many education systems. Therefore, you are advised to adopt a flexible approach when investigating the joint qualification.

It is not necessary to verify every detail of the programme's accreditation, provided there is sufficient evidence of its overall quality.

Example 20.3 - Checking the accreditation/recognition status of consortium partners

An applicant submits a master's degree in neurolinguistics awarded by a consortium of five higher education institutions. The joint programme is not accredited as a whole by a national accreditation organisation. The admissions officer begins by checking the accreditation and recognition status of the consortium partners and finds that two partner institutions are recognised higher education institutions within their national systems, while the other three operate in a national system based on programme accreditation. Although the admissions officer cannot find information on the accreditation status of the parts of the specific parts of the joint programme provided by these three institutions, all have an accredited national programme in the field of neurolinguistics.

The admissions officer concludes that there is sufficient evidence for the quality of the programme and continues the evaluation of the qualification.



4. Accept that consortia providing joint programmes may include institutions that are not recognised higher education institutions, provided that the recognised consortium members take responsibility for the quality of the joint programme. The provision of joint programmes is, in some respects, experimental as it seeks to create new forms of higher education provision. Consequently, consortia may include partners outside formally recognised higher education institutions, such as research organisations or commercial entities possessing specific knowledge or skills relevant to the joint programme.

Example 20.4 - Consortium with a non-recognised partner

An applicant submits a master's degree in international marketing awarded by a consortium comprising two higher education institutions and a large international marketing company. The joint programme is not accredited as a whole by a national accreditation organisation. The admissions officer checks the accreditation and recognition status of the consortium members and finds that the two higher education institutions are recognised within their national systems and offer a range of national master's programmes in business studies, marketing and communication. The international marketing company is not a recognised higher education institution and does not provide accredited programmes.

The joint programme is organised in such a way that the two higher education institutions are clearly responsible for the coherence of the programme and for all examinations, while the international marketing company provides practical training in specific business cases and supervises student internships.

The admissions officer concludes that there is sufficient evidence of the quality of the programme and proceeds with the evaluation of the qualification.

If the joint programme and consortium do not fulfil the requirements of the recommendations above, you do not have sufficient evidence of its quality. See recommendation 3 of [Chapter 3 'Accreditation and Quality Assurance'](#) for the options you have to continue the recognition process.



Information tools

More information regarding the joint programme and the awarded qualification(s), should be available in the Diploma Supplement awarded upon completion of the joint programme, regardless of whether this is a joint degree or are multiple degrees.

Information specific to the joint programme can also be found in the following sources:

- Official website of the higher education institutions offering the joint programme;
- Agreements between institutions establishing a joint programme.

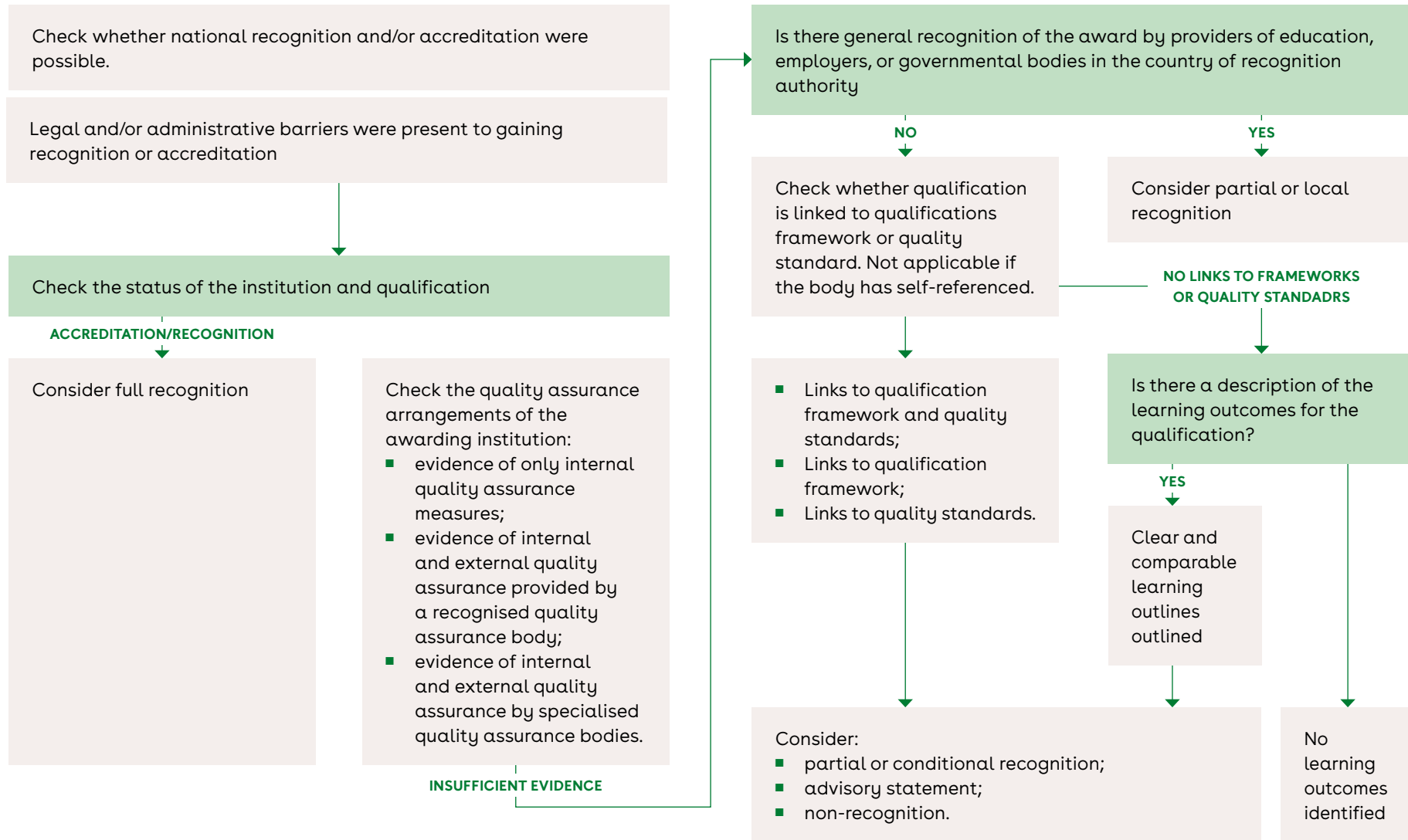
Information about the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes can be found here: www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes.



21. Non-country specific qualifications (international degrees)

Unlike transnational education or joint degree programmes, non-country specific qualifications are a form of international qualifications that do not belong to any national or subnational education system. The legitimacy of these qualifications can be difficult to determine. Even though this type of award is not mentioned in the LRC, good practice has been developed as a subsidiary text within the framework of the Convention.

Flowchart: Non-country specific qualifications (international degrees)





Introduction

A non-country specific qualification is a qualification that is not part of the education system of a country and is consequently outside the scope of any national educational regulatory body. The main difference with other types of qualifications is that non-country specific qualifications are not part of that country's educational framework.

Types of non-country specific awards

A non-country specific qualifications may fall within one (or more) of several categories:

- **Regional:** these qualifications are issued by a non-country specific body which operates across a specific regional area consisting of several countries. An example would be the West African Senior School Certificate issued by the West African Examinations Council;
- **International access qualifications:** these qualifications are issued in multiple countries across the globe and are not specific to a single country, e.g. Diplomas of the International Baccalaureate. Some qualifications within this category may also be referred to as “international access qualifications” since they may give access to higher education studies;

- **Professional/Sectoral:** these qualifications in professional or sectoral/technical fields are not specific to a single national education system and are issued by a non-country specific body e.g. European Engineers by FEANI;
- **Religious:** Whilst certain religious qualifications are formally part of a national qualifications framework, such as Holy See qualifications offered abroad (e.g. in Ireland), other qualifications may be non-country-specific and are not officially part of national education systems;
- **International organisations:** these are qualifications issued by supra-national or international bodies. Examples are the World Maritime University (WMU) in Malmö Sweden and the United Nations University in Tokyo (Japan).

Another example of a non-country-specific qualification that falls under the category of academic qualifications is the prospective European Degree, currently being developed by the European Commission. The European Degree will be issued in the form of a label, with the details yet to be determined. It is therefore not entirely clear which of the other categories mentioned above will apply.

Non-country specific qualifications are not to be confused with qualifications awarded by institutions that are not formally recognised in their national system of higher education but may



still be legitimately offering study programmes. For information about the latter type of qualifications, see also [Chapter 22, 'Institutions not Recognised by National Education Authorities.'](#)

In cases where institutions operate independently of any national education system and offer higher education study programmes across country borders, there may be an intersection between non-country specific and transnational education qualifications. However, these terms should not be used interchangeably. For information about the latter type of qualifications, see also [Chapter 19, 'Transnational Education.'](#)

Possible assessment outcomes

Due to the differences in processes and systems, you may arrive at different outcomes upon assessing non-country specific qualifications. Some possible outcomes to the evaluation may include:

Full recognition:

- The award is deemed to meet the necessary requirements based on the LRC. An example are International access qualifications (European Baccalaureate, International Baccalaureate), based on the LRC recommendations on international access qualifications.

Depending on national regulations you may also consider full recognition for:

- Qualifications offered by international inter-governmental institutions (e.g. the UN Awards);
- Qualifications offered by sectoral (specialised) institutions outside the formal system of education.

Partial or conditional recognition:

In cases where a qualification does not meet the full criteria, consider offering partial, alternative or conditional recognition, based on the skills and knowledge that the applicant has obtained by completing the non-country specific education programme.

Non-recognition:

In some cases, (full/partial) recognition or an advisory statement is not possible if the qualification is deemed not to meet the necessary requirements.



Recommendations

5. Check the status of the institution and the qualification
 - a. Check the background of the body responsible for the non-country specific qualifications:
 - check whether national recognition and/or accreditation were possible for the qualification (and were not sought despite availability) or;
 - whether, conversely, legal and/or administrative barriers were present to gaining recognition or accreditation.In case of doubt, it may also be helpful to ask your ENIC-NARIC Networks for information and experience regarding the institution or qualification in question. Their information may assist in determining whether the issuing body has the opportunity to become accredited within a national system, or whether it is deemed to sit outside that system.

If the qualification in question was delivered by an issuing body which is recognised for the purpose of providing country-specific awards, but which also issues non-country specific awards that are not accorded national recognition due to administrative obstacles, you should take the national operations of the issuing body into consideration when assessing the non-country specific qualification.

- b. In the event that no formal accreditation or other type of quality assurance has been obtained, check the quality assurance arrangements of the awarding institution. You can investigate whether there is evidence:
 - of only internal quality assurance measures;
 - of internal and external quality assurance provided by a recognised quality assurance body;
 - of internal and external quality assurance by specialized quality assurance bodies.

If sufficient evidence of formal accreditation and quality assurance is present, you can determine if full recognition can be considered.

Example 21.1 - Qualification awarded by an international organisation

An applicant holds a Master degree from an university in country X. You review the accreditation status, national considerations, qualifications framework, and learning outcomes. The university is founded by an agency of an international body. The degree was first accredited in 2015 by an EQAR registered accreditation agency in country Y. You may consider full or partial recognition if the Master degree was awarded from 2015 onwards. You may consider to provide partial, alternative or conditional recognition if the Master degree was awarded prior to 2015.



2. In case you find that the institution and/or the programme resulting in the non-country specific award was not properly accredited, you have no objective information on the quality of the qualification. This may be considered to be a substantial difference in terms of the LRC. The following options are available:
- a. Try to establish whether there is general recognition of the award by providers of education, employers, or government bodies in the country of the recognition authority. This information may indicate to the recognition authority whether partial or local recognition might be considered. National considerations may include:
 - Do most or all national educational institutions accept the award?
 - Do any government bodies, particularly sectoral bodies, give formal acceptance to the award for progressing to (for example) licensed status in a profession?
 - Does it have status through national legislation (e.g. European Baccalaureate)?
 - Is it widely accepted by educators (e.g. credit transfer)? Or is it widely accepted by employers?
 - Or, is there no evidence of being accepted?
 - b. Check whether the qualification is linked to a qualifications framework or quality standard. In particular, how these links have been determined is of key importance.

If the body has self-referenced, this may not be of relevance to the recognition decision. Yet, if the body followed a robust referencing process (with external input), you may wish to consider:

- Links to both qualification frameworks and quality standards;
 - Links to a qualification framework;
 - Links to quality standards;
- c. Try to find out if there is a description of the learning outcomes for the qualification in question. The possible results are that there are:
- Clear and comparable learning outcomes outlined;
 - No learning outcomes identified.

If recognition can be offered, you should also consider the general characteristics necessary for an evaluation; such as the content, workload, link to specific occupational roles and other aspects related to the comparison of the award.



Example 21.2 - Secondary education qualification awarded by an international organisation

An applicant holds a Diploma of the International Baccalaureate (IB Diploma) and is seeking access to a first cycle university degree. The IB Diploma is issued by the International Baccalaureate (IB), a non-profit institution based in Switzerland. It is widely accepted for admission to higher education institutions. You are recommended to assess the award, taking into account the LRC recommendations. Therefore, full recognition is recommended.

Example 21.3 - Qualification awarded by an international organisation

An applicant holds a Master degree from an educational institution based in country X. You find that the education institution is founded by an international organisation. While investigating the accreditation status, you find that this particular programme is not accredited by the accreditation agency A in country X even though a few other master's programmes of this institution are accredited. Recognised universities in country X are not obliged to obtain accreditation from this agency. However, you are not able to identify the learning outcomes or possible links to qualification frameworks based on the information available. You are recommended to investigate the possibility for partial recognition.

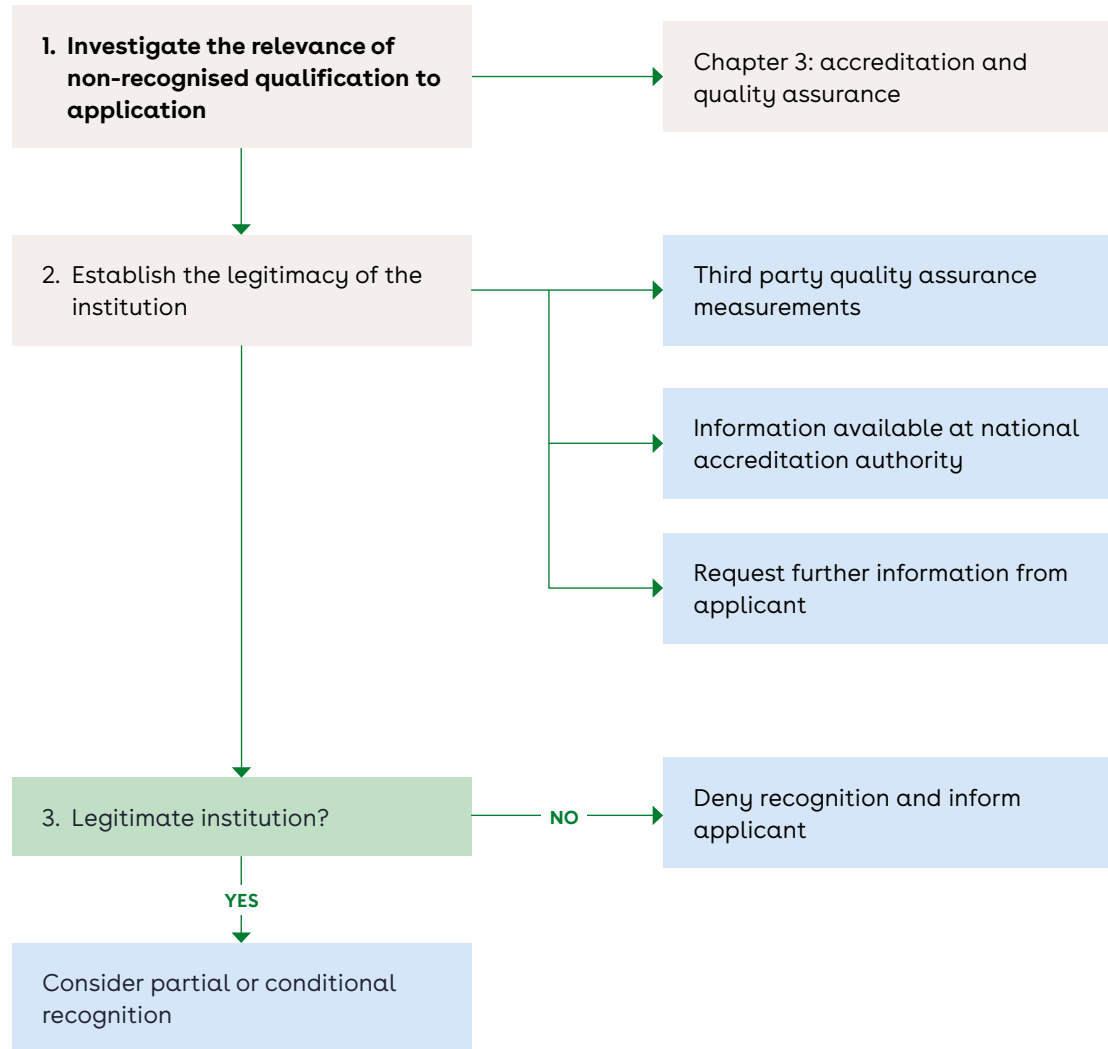


22. Qualifications Awarded by Institutions not Recognised by National Education Authorities

This chapter describes how to deal with qualifications awarded by institutions that are not formally recognised within their national higher education system, but which may still legitimately offer study programmes that can be taken into account for evaluation.



Flowchart: Qualifications Awarded by Institutions not Recognised by National Education Authorities





Introduction

The status of the awarding body (see [Chapter 3, 'Accreditation and Quality Assurance'](#)) is an important element to be taken into consideration:

- When an institution is recognised within its national system, the qualification can be assessed and recognised in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC);
- When an institution is not formally recognised or listed by the educational authorities in its national system, verify whether some other authority gives it legitimacy, or whether there are other circumstances that may justify the assessment of its qualifications.

Non-recognised but legitimate institutions may be categorised into distinct groups, including:

1. Institutions barred from recognition or choosing not to be recognised.

This category covers legitimate institutions whose programmes and qualifications may be officially recognised by public authorities, other higher education institutions, and employers, but which fall outside the remit of education authorities for reasons of law or jurisdiction, not quality. Such institutions typically include government or military education institutions, religious institutions and seminaries, and providers of adult

continuing education. Some may also be transnational education providers (see [Chapter 19, 'Qualifications Awarded through Transnational Education'](#)).

2. Substandard tertiary education providers.

This category includes institutions that fall under the remit of educational authorities and offer genuine programmes, but which, for various reasons, do not meet the criteria required for formal accreditation or recognition. These institutions cannot be assessed as fully recognised institutions, but under certain circumstances higher education institutions and ENIC-NARICs may be able to partially assess their qualifications or provide advice to graduates on how to meet standard recognition requirements.

It is worth noting that national procedures for quality assurance and recognition may vary from country to country, which may result in certain types of institution or programme not being recognised. Even if legitimate differences make full recognition impossible, it may still be possible to offer some form of recognition, or to provide useful comments and advice to applicants holding such qualifications and to other interested parties.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that you make an effort to investigate whether an institution can be considered a legitimate provider, even if it is not officially recognised. However, for reasons of efficiency, you should limit such investigations to qualifications that are relevant to the application in question and that could reasonably be included in your evaluation.

Example 22.1 - Investigation into a legitimate provider

An admissions officer receives a qualification awarded by a police academy that is not a recognised higher education institution. The applicant is seeking admission to a second-cycle programme in crime scene investigation. Since the learning outcomes of the qualification may align with the purpose of the programme, the admissions officer decides to investigate the institution and qualification further, rather than dismissing it on formal grounds.

2. To establish whether a non-recognised institution is legitimate, it is recommended that you:
 - a. Conduct research into the legitimacy of the institution and the qualification. Consider which (national) authorities are responsible for it and what role the qualification plays in the home country;

- b. Take particular note of any third-party quality assurance measures, as well as any information that may be available from the national accreditation authority;
- c. Request that the applicant provide further information about the institution, if necessary.

Example 22.2 - Information obtained about a legitimate provider

The admissions officer in the previous example searches online for relevant information about the qualification awarded by the police academy and finds the following:

- the quality assurance of the police academy does not fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education, but rather the Ministry of Home Affairs;
- admission to the programme is based on the same secondary education qualification that provides access to university programmes in the home country;
- the learning outcomes of the three-year programme appear similar to those of professionally oriented Bachelor's programmes offered by universities of applied sciences;
- some higher education institutions in the home country admit graduates of the police academy to the final year of Bachelor's programmes in a related field.



3. If the provider is found to be legitimate, consider whether partial or conditional recognition of the qualification is possible.

Example 22.3 - Partial or conditional recognition

The admissions officer from the two previous examples concludes that sufficient information has been gathered to determine that the police academy is a legitimate institution and that the quality of the qualification is adequately assured. The admissions officer considers that partial recognition is possible, similar to the situation in the home country, where admission to the final year of the Bachelor's programme in Forensic Science is granted.

4. If no recognition can be granted for the qualification, inform the applicant of the reasons why.

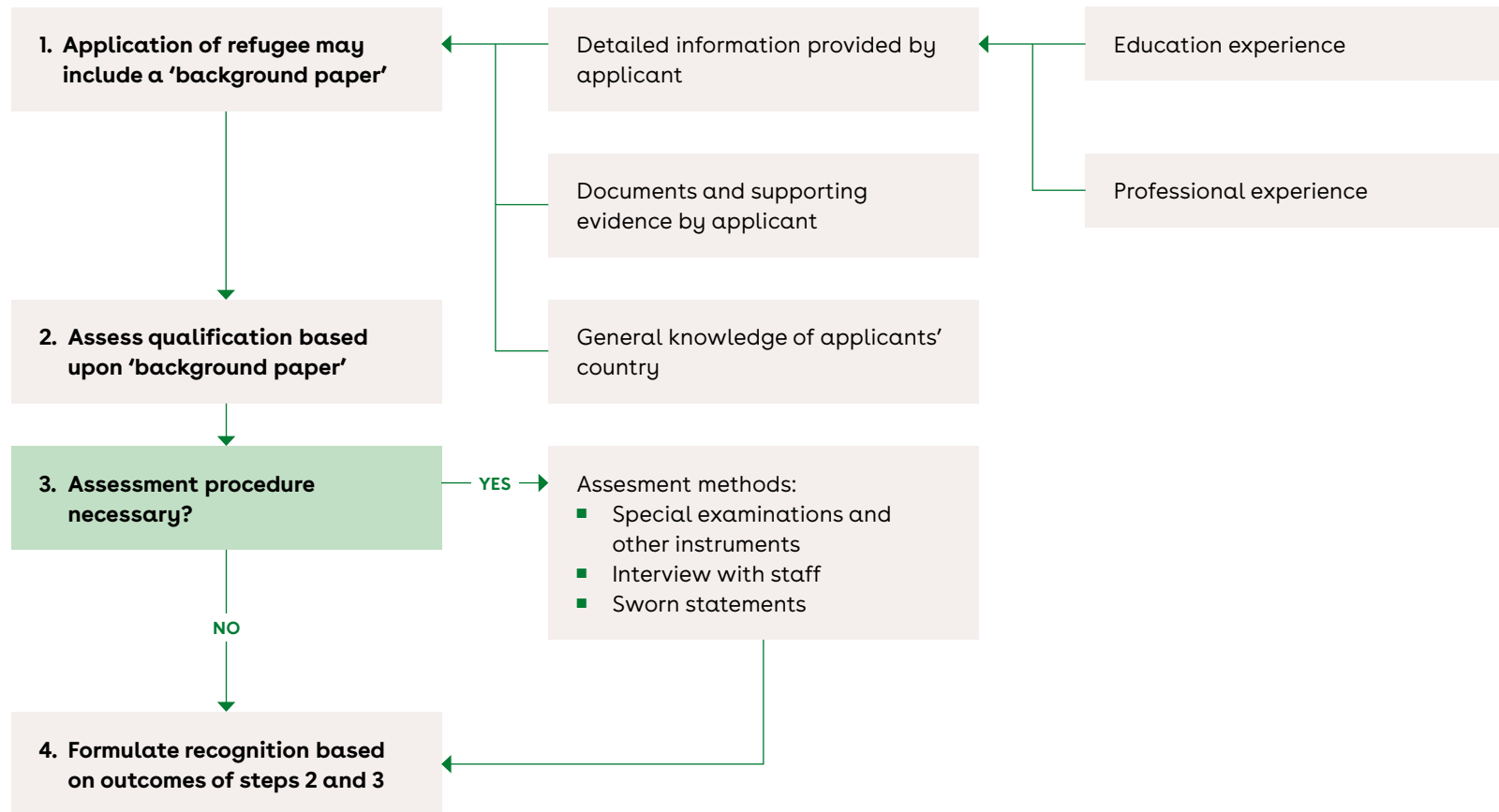


23. Qualification holders without documentation

Refugees or persons in a refugee-like situation may not possess the appropriate qualification documentation for an evaluation. Article VII of the LRC obliges authorities to assess such qualifications.

In the absence of the required documentation, the qualifications can be evaluated through a supported reconstruction of the individual's academic achievements in a so-called 'background paper', which may be followed by an assessment if necessary.

Flowchart: Qualification holders without documentation





Introduction

Refugees or persons in a refugee-like situation who have completed formal education at a recognised and/or accredited educational institution, as well as others who for valid reasons cannot document their qualifications, have the right to have their qualifications assessed when applying for admission to a study programme.

Article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) obliges recognition authorities to develop procedures to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees or persons in a refugee-like situation fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education programmes if their qualifications cannot be documented. The general principles of the LRC apply to these procedures.

The evaluation of refugees' qualifications can be a complex process: documentation may be incomplete, and it may be difficult to verify or clarify information about the education system due to the political situation in the country of origin.

To ensure fairness, your office is advised to describe the assessment procedure clearly and include it in your departmental or institutional recognition procedures.

Recommendations

If you receive an application from a refugee or a person in a refugee-like situation without documentation of their qualification(s), you should determine whether the applicant meets the main requirements for entry to the programme on the basis of their previous qualifications.

1. You accept that the information provided by the applicant is incomplete and attempt to reconstruct their academic achievements using alternative information supplied by the applicant in a 'background paper'. The background paper is a file that may include:
 - a. Detailed information on the content, level and scope of education, provided by the applicant, such as:
 - personal data of the applicant: name(s), date of birth, place of birth, etc.;
 - name of qualification(s) obtained;
 - name of the institution(s) where the qualification(s) were obtained;
 - level(s) of qualification(s) obtained;
 - duration of the study programme;
 - year(s) when the qualification(s) were obtained;
 - name of the programme(s);
 - description of the content of the programme(s), including courses and workload (if a transcript is not available);



- attestation from the applicant that the information provided is truthful.

Further information regarding professional experience may also be included, especially if it is related to the applicant's education.

- b. Documents and supporting evidence provided by the applicant that may help to confirm the information listed under point a above:
- student identification number(s) or code(s) (if available);
 - educational documents (transcripts, school certificate(s), etc.);
 - declaration(s) from the institution(s) confirming that the qualification was awarded;
 - testimonials or references confirming work experience (if applicable);
 - any other evidence, such as instructors' names, descriptions of courses, etc.

NB: Encourage the applicant to include as much relevant supporting documentation as possible.

- c. General knowledge of the educational system(s) from which the qualification(s) originate; your national recognition authority may also be able to provide useful information about the qualification(s) in question.

Note - you may:

- encounter applicants submitting a background paper (for example, prepared by your national ENIC-NARIC) instead of the usual application documents;
- be asked to help create a background paper for the applicant.

Example 23.1 - Design a template for the background paper

In order to save time, an admissions office at institution X designs a template for the background paper to be completed by the applicant.

The admissions office uses the model of the Diploma Supplement (<https://europass.europa.eu/en/learn-europe/diploma-supplement>). (See Chapter 14 'Diploma Supplement (and other information tools)') to design this template, leaving out those subentries that are too technical and cannot be expected to be completed by the applicant.

The admissions office provides clear instructions to ensure the necessary information is provided.

Only the information on the education system and the qualification (1c) is added afterwards by the admissions office to complete the background paper.



Example 23.2 - Template for an educational background paper

Educational background

Qualification	Evidence
Secondary education	Diploma
Higher education-first degree	Student ID + transcript of 1st year
Higher education-second degree	No educational documents, but instructor's statement + employment contract + proof of informal and non-formal learning

Example 23.3 - Using the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees

An applicant submits their European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR). The EQPR is a document providing information about an individual's education and language skills. It is based on a self-assessment questionnaire completed by the refugee, followed by a structured interview. The interview is conducted by a team of two trained credential evaluators from different ENICs (National Information Centres on Recognition), at least one of whom has expert knowledge of the language and education system of the country from which the applicant claims to hold their qualification. You accept the information provided in the EQPR and proceed with your evaluation

2. You should try to assess the qualification(s) on the basis of the information provided in the 'background paper'. Adopt a flexible approach, accepting that not all required documentation and information may be included in the application file. Focus on determining whether the applicant is likely to succeed for the purpose the recognition is sought, based on the five elements of the qualification: quality, level, workload, profile, and learning outcomes.
 - Where possible, use previous applications from the same institution or programme (for example, transcripts) to gather information about the five



elements of the qualification, and/or contact your ENIC-NARIC to supplement this information. You may also use these sources to cross-check the consistency of the information provided.

- Accept that you may not be able to reconstruct all five elements despite your best efforts, and keep in mind that this is often the case even when original documents are available, especially regarding learning outcomes.

NB: It is recommended to maintain a database of previous recognition decisions, as this can assist you in handling future cases.

If you have doubts about the authenticity of any documents submitted, contact your ENIC-NARIC (see [Chapter 5, 'Authenticity'](#)).

Example 23.4 – Adopt a flexible approach towards an incomplete file

A refugee applies for a Master's in Engineering at institution X. The only supporting documentation the applicant has is their transcripts of records from their previous studies. The admissions officer accepts this situation. On the basis of the transcripts, the admissions officer concludes that the applicant holds a qualification at the level of a Bachelor's in Engineering from an accredited institution, which grants access to a Master's programme at the institution. Furthermore, the transcripts provide a good overview of the workload and profile. The admissions officer decides to grant recognition to the applicant.



Example 23.5 - Using a background paper prepared by an ENIC-NARIC to evaluate a refugees' qualifications

A refugee applicant seeks admission to a Master's programme in Computer Science on the basis of a Bachelor's qualification in the same field. The applicant does not have a diploma or certificate confirming completion of the programme. The ENIC-NARIC has prepared a 'background paper' describing the applicant's educational background, based on information about the qualification, course descriptions, work experience and documentation provided by the applicant. Having evaluated the educational portfolio, the admissions officer may decide to recognise the Bachelor's qualification and grant admission to the Master's programme.

3. Whenever possible and/or necessary, the evaluation may also include an assessment procedure. This may depend on the information you were able – or unable – to obtain from the background paper.
 - a. Choose an assessment method that is fit for purpose and feasible. Examples of methods include:
 - existing instruments such as Colloquium Doctum and entrance examinations (specifically for admission to Bachelor's programmes), possibly adapted to avoid overly burdensome examinations;

- interviews with admissions officers (to check coherence) and staff of the relevant faculty at your higher education institution;
 - sworn statements made before a legally competent authority.
- b. When undertaking an assessment, it is important to focus on whether the applicant has achieved the overall learning outcomes needed to enter the field of study.
 - c. Ensure that the assessment methodology is applied consistently throughout your institution and that its quality is assured.
4. Formulate a recognition decision based on the outcomes of points 2 and 3 above.



Example 23.6 - The interview as a specially arranged examination

A refugee applicant seeks admission to a Master's programme at institution X. The only documentation available is an English translation of the Bachelor's degree. The admissions officer interviews the applicant in collaboration with professors at the institution. The applicant is asked about the content and learning outcomes of the study programme, the textbooks used, and the examinations taken. The applicant also provides information about the study methods at the educational institution and the projects completed during the Bachelor's studies. The admissions officer and the professors compile all the information in a background paper and make a decision on this basis.

Example 23.7 - Comparison with earlier application files

A refugee applicant applies for a Master's programme in Sociology at institution X but has no documentation whatsoever. The admissions officer accepts the situation and discovers that institution X received documentation from the same programme in an earlier application. The admissions officer compares the description of the qualification provided by the applicant in the background paper with the information on the transcript, and finds that the information provided by the applicant is consistent. Furthermore, the content and study load of the previously submitted transcript provide the admissions officer with sufficient information to evaluate the credential. Finally, the admissions officer organises an assessment similar to the one in Example 23.5.

Example 23.8 - Authoritative description for Recognition of Prior Learning procedure

A refugee applicant seeks admission to a Master's in History, but the documentation is so limited that it is impossible for the admissions officer to proceed with the standard assessment. At the institution's request, the ENIC-NARIC develops an authoritative description of the qualification the applicant claims to hold. This description is based on:

- information from the applicant about their educational achievements;



- the ENIC-NARIC's knowledge of the education system in the country concerned; and
- any documents provided as evidence of the qualification(s).

The description includes a general assessment of the qualification, or how the ENIC-NARIC would generally assess this type of qualification. The authoritative description may be used as part of an official RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) procedure, in which the applicant's competences may be examined in more detail.

Example 23.9 Focus on learning outcomes

An admissions officer at institution X arranges an interview together with academic staff to assess the information provided in the background paper of a refugee applicant. The admissions officer decides to deny recognition because the programme followed by the applicant used different textbooks compared to the programme at institution X. This decision is not in line with the LRC, as the focus should be on the learning outcomes in order to determine whether the applicant is sufficiently prepared for the programme.

Information tools

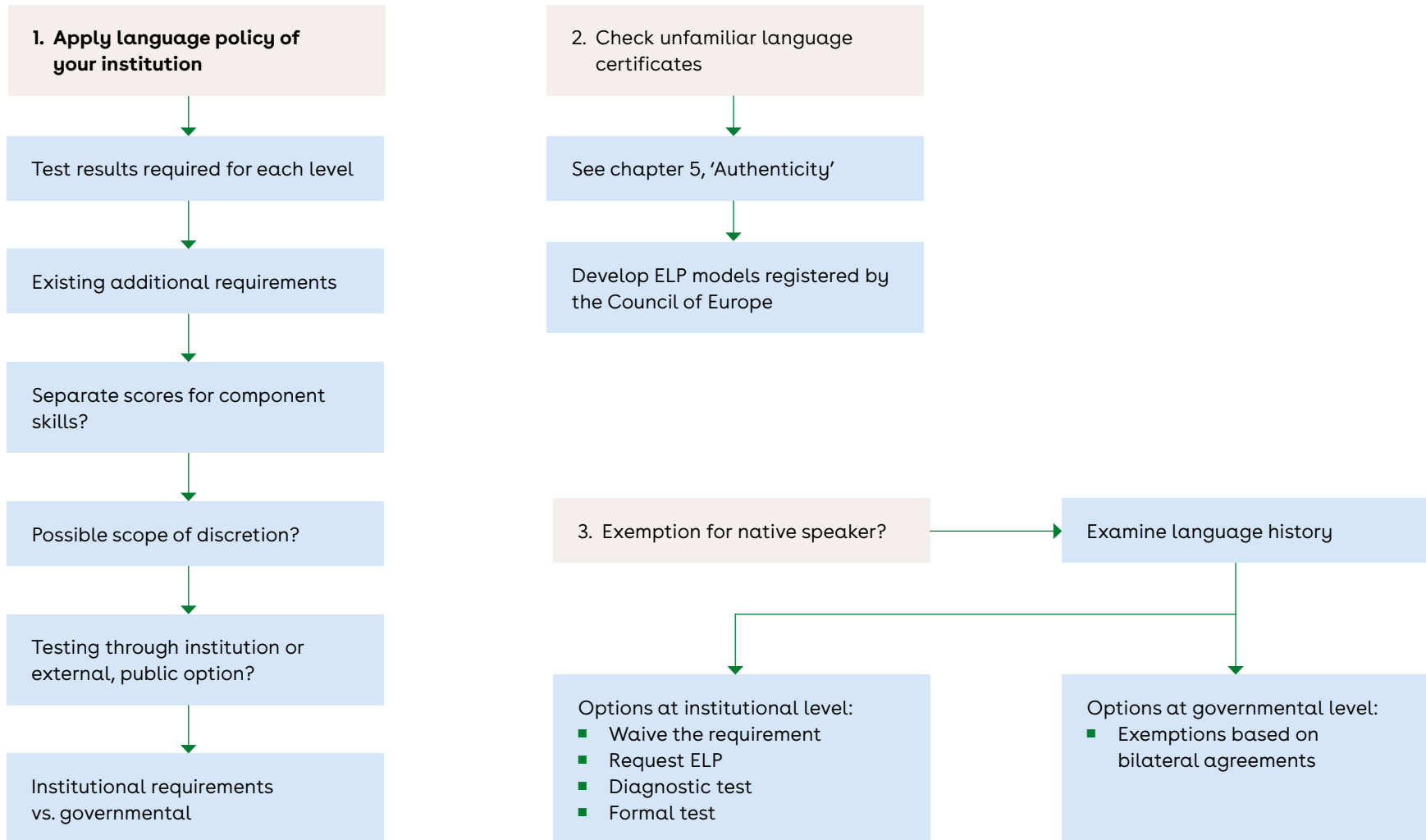
- The Council of Europe, European Qualifications Passport for Refugees.
Link: www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications
- The European Commission has a dedicated webpage on Refugee and Migrant integration into education and training, listing different initiatives.
Link: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/improving-quality/inclusive-education/migrants-and-refugees>
- The European University Association has built an interactive refugee welcome map, on which all higher education institutions are invited to publicise their initiatives to support refugees.
Link: www.eua.eu/our-work/projects/eua-projects/refugees-welcome-map.html
- ENIC-NARIC.net dedicated a webpage to the recognition of qualifications held by refugees.
Link: www.enic-naric.net/recognise-qualifications-held-by-refugees.aspx
- See also the subsidiary text to the LRC on the recognition of refugees' qualifications: www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/1251_Recommendation_on_Recognition_of_Qualifications_Held_by_Refugees_Displaced_Persons_and_Persons_in_a_Refugee_like_Situation.pdf



24. Language tests

Language testing routinely features in higher education admissions procedures. Proficiency requirements can be set by governments, often in the context of immigration control, as well as by institutions as a precondition of the academic selection process. The tests used by the main receiving countries in Europe are designed and administered by bodies that are officially recognised and sufficiently well established to enjoy credibility and trust.

Flowchart: Language test





Introduction

Legal basis of language tests

The Lisbon Recognition Convention states that applicants to academic programmes must not be discriminated against on grounds of language. However, Article 4.7 indicates that it is legitimate to require applicants to demonstrate ‘sufficient competence in the language or languages of instruction of the institution concerned, or in other specified languages.’

Language tests may be set by a government (through its consular service or immigration ministry) as a condition of entry to the country where the intended host institution is located. They may also be set by the institution itself as a precondition for admission to a particular programme. When tests are set by both government and institution, it does not necessarily follow that the requirements are the same.

Characteristics of language tests

In general, language tests are threshold tests and are non-negotiable. They aim to establish whether a candidate has the minimum skills necessary to enter a course of study and complete it successfully. Institutions may, however, expect a student’s language competence to improve during the course of study. For short-term student mobility, such as that funded by Erasmus+, this is one of the explicit aims of the programme.

Some institutions may therefore exercise discretion in allowing students who have not yet reached the threshold level to enter a programme.

These developmental considerations are likely to be less relevant to governments and consular authorities, whose requirements may nevertheless be complex. You will need to be familiar with the language proficiency levels associated with different levels of national qualifications frameworks, as well as with quota systems and any bilateral agreements that may exist with other countries.

Types of language tests

Some language tests have global currency - for example, in English: Cambridge Proficiency, IELTS, and TOEFL. These tests are used not only for admission to programmes in Anglophone countries but also for courses delivered in English in non-English-speaking countries. Other European languages have tests that are widely recognised and recommended by governments and institutions – for example, NT2 (Dutch); TCF and TCF-DAP (French); TestDaF and DSH (German); CILS (Italian); DELE (Spanish); and TISUS (Swedish). Most of these tests provide an overall score for language proficiency, as well as separate scores for the component skills of reading, writing, listening comprehension, and speaking.



Language frameworks

Framework of Reference (CEFR). This is a three-level attainment grid (with sub-levels) designed to support the European Language Portfolio (ELP). The ELP, which is based on self-assessment, has been refined by the European Language Council specifically for use in higher education and consists of a language passport, a language biography, and a language dossier.

Issues involved in language tests

Language tests may pose fewer problems for you than the disciplinary requirements of the course the applicant wishes to join. Complications may nevertheless arise – for example, when a candidate claims to be a native speaker, to have a native-speaking parent, to have completed all or part of their prior education in the relevant language, or when they hold a certificate of proficiency that is no longer valid. The authenticity of certificates, on the other hand, is often less of a problem in practice, as the major testing bodies have the resources, technology, and motivation to combat identity fraud.

Recommendations

1. Be familiar with and apply your institution's language policy for incoming students:

- a. What scores of which test(s) are required for bachelor's, master's and doctoral study?
Are there additional requirements for specific disciplines? Do the requirements specify separate scores for individual skills (such as speaking and writing)? Is achieving the required level an absolute precondition for selection, or is there scope for discretion – for example, may students be allowed to improve their language skills while studying at your institution?
- b. Is the test designed and administered by the institution, or are standard, publicly available tests used?
- c. How does the required score compare with any requirements set by the government? What liaison mechanisms exist between your institution and the immigration authorities?

Example 24.1 - Scope for discretion

A higher education institution requires an overall IELTS score of 6.0 for entry to its Bachelor's programmes. It also offers preparatory programmes that prepare students for entry to Bachelor's programmes. For these preparatory programmes, lower IELTS scores are accepted, as part of the preparation includes English language training. Therefore, for preparatory programmes lasting six to twelve months, a minimum IELTS score of 5.0 applies.



Example 24.2 - Liaison mechanisms with immigration authorities

In country N, the government has made the signing of a Code of Conduct by higher education institutions a precondition for granting residence permits to non-nationals wishing to study at higher education level. Among other things, the required language levels for various types of programmes are clearly set out in this Code of Conduct. Admissions officers in country N should be fully aware of the contents of the Code and comply with its minimum language requirements. Otherwise, non-national students will not be granted residence permits, even if they have been admitted by the higher education institution.

2. If an applicant presents a language proficiency certificate issued by an unfamiliar body, refer to Chapter 5, 'Authenticity'. In particular, encourage your institution and its partners to develop European Language Portfolio (ELP) models registered with the Council of Europe.
3. If an applicant seeks exemption from a language test on the grounds of native speaker competence, examine their language history (including mother tongue and language of instruction at educational institutions) and prior qualifications for evidence.

At the institutional level, you may have the option of waiving the requirement, requesting a European Language Portfolio, administering a diagnostic test where circumstances permit, or insisting on a formal test.

With regard to government requirements, exemptions may apply for candidates from countries with which bilateral agreements exist.

References

- The Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference is available at www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp;
- Details of the European Language Portfolio [ELP] are set out at: www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/.



Part VI. Credit mobility in context of student exchange

Part VI of the manual is devoted to recommendations concerning periods of study abroad. Unlike the preceding chapters, which focus mainly on diploma mobility, this part addresses credit mobility.



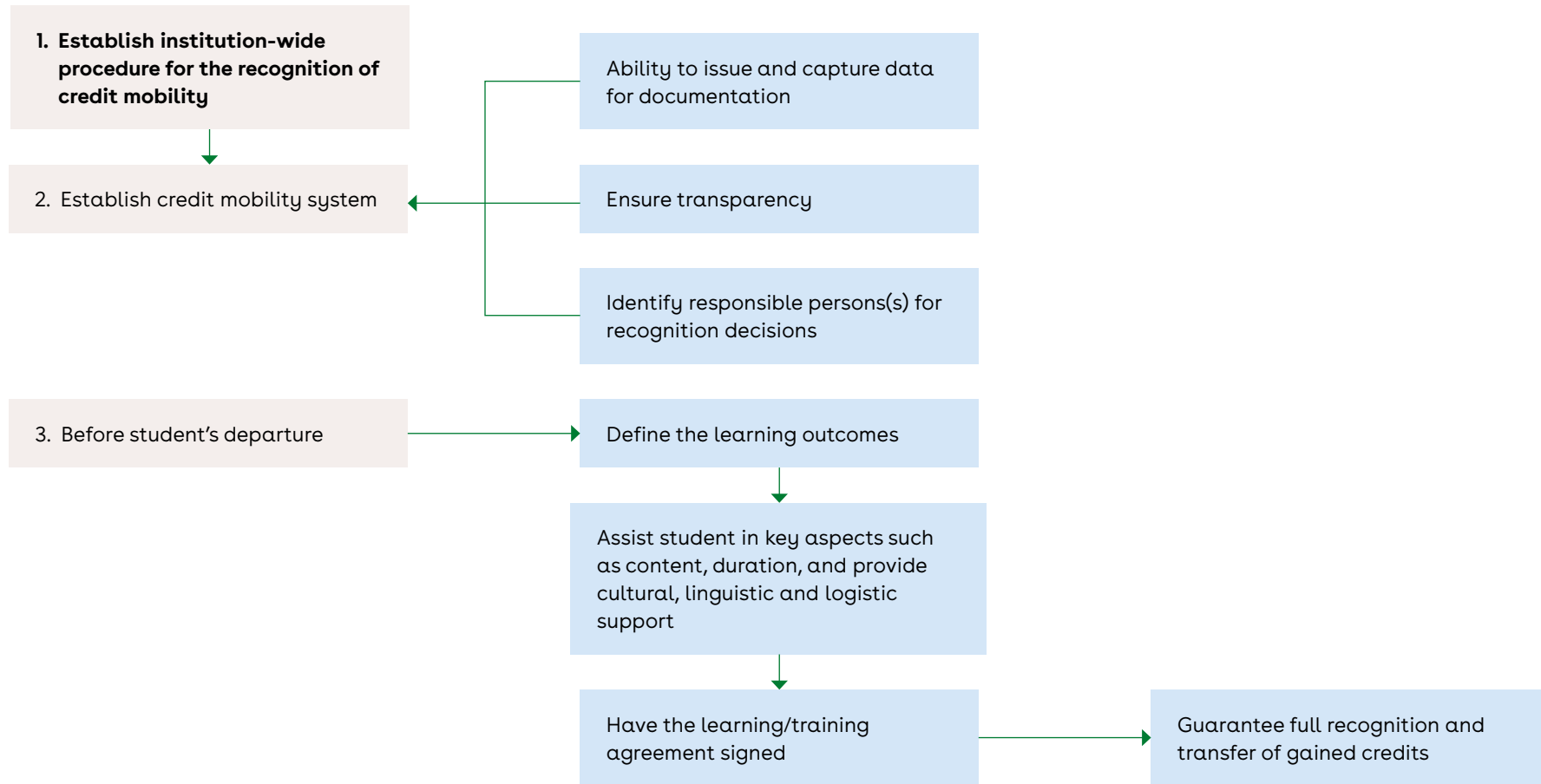


25. Recognition of periods of study abroad

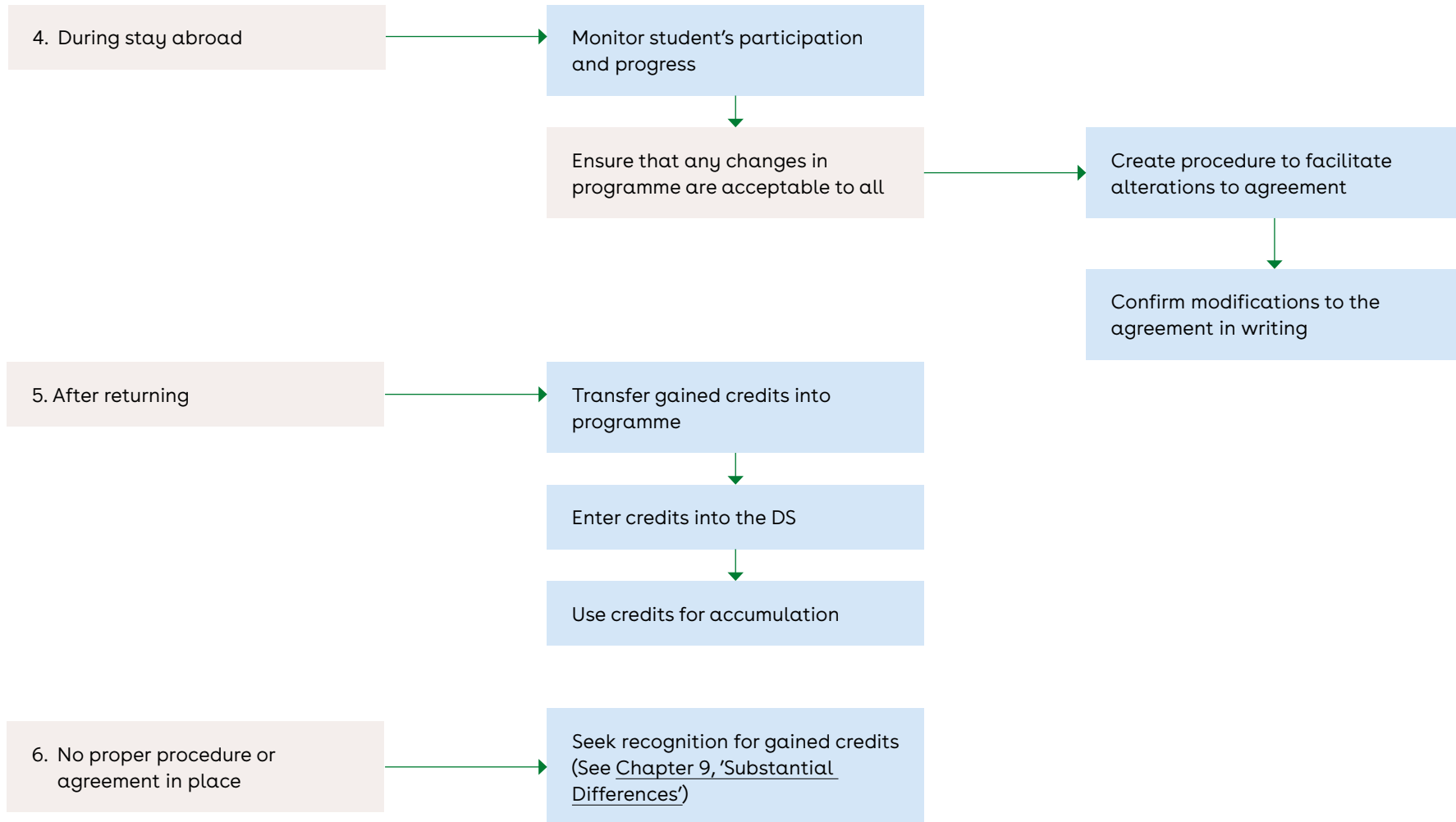
This chapter focuses on the procedures for recognising credits earned through short-term study at another institution, known as 'credit mobility'. To support the recognition of such credits, the recommendations in this chapter cover the phases before, during and after the period of mobility.



Flowchart: Recognition of Periods of Study Abroad (1 of 2)



Flowchart: Recognition of Periods of Study Abroad (2 of 2)





Introduction

Credit mobility involves a limited period of study or a traineeship abroad, undertaken within ongoing studies at a home institution for the purpose of gaining credits. After the mobility phase, students return to their home institution to complete their studies. With the growth of virtual mobility programmes, students can also take courses online at another institution, without physically relocating.

The credits gained at the host institution need to be recognised by the student's home institution. If they are not, the study or work placement will not be fully integrated, and its academic, cultural and linguistic benefits may not be fully realised. This may also delay students in completing their programme of study.

Erasmus+ student exchanges are well-known examples of credit mobility, but they are by no means the only ones. Transatlantic exchange programmes also involve credit mobility, as do student exchanges organised by regional groups of countries, such as the Nordplus Higher Education programme in the Baltic and Nordic countries. Many joint degrees developed by partner institutions in Europe, both within and beyond the Erasmus Programme, also include credit mobility; however, these merit separate consideration (see [Chapter 20, 'Qualifications Awarded by Joint Programmes'](#)), as they tend to support multilateral rather than

bilateral mobility. Finally, short-term mobility can involve work placements (traineeships) as well as study periods: the credits awarded for these, too, should be recognised.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) addresses credit mobility in a dedicated section on the 'recognition of periods of study', which obliges the parties to the Convention to "recognise periods of study completed within the framework of a higher education programme in another Party" (Article V.1).

In other words, formal recognition – either through an established procedure or upon request - is the expected outcome of a short-term period of study at another institution. As with degree mobility, recognition should be granted unless substantial differences can be demonstrated between the period of study completed at the host institution and the corresponding part of the higher education programme at the home institution. [Chapter 9, 'Substantial Differences'](#), provides a full explanation of the concept of substantial differences.

Credit mobility in the Erasmus+ programme

Although credit mobility can, and does, take place outside the Erasmus+ programme, Erasmus+ remains by far the most significant programme for student exchange within the European region. It sets out a series of requirements for the sending and receiving institutions, as well as for the student wishing to



participate in an exchange. These requirements are designed to ensure that the student receives full recognition of the credits obtained during the exchange. Two documents are particularly relevant:

The Erasmus Charter for Higher Education

Any higher education institution wishing to participate in Erasmus+ must hold a valid Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). The Charter sets out the operating principles to which all participating institutions must adhere. By signing the Charter, institutions commit to ensuring the full automatic recognition of all credits gained during a period of study or training abroad, provided these have been agreed in advance in a written learning agreement.

The learning agreement

The purpose of the learning agreement is to provide a transparent tool for preparing the exchange and to ensure that students receive recognition for credits gained during a period of study or training abroad.

The learning agreement sets out the course of study or training the student will undertake at the receiving institution (e.g. course units to be taken) and how these will be integrated into the programme at the sending institution.

It must be approved by the student, the sending institution, and the receiving institution before the start of the exchange. The agreement may be modified during the mobility period with the consensus of all parties.

The learning agreement guarantees that course units taken abroad will be recognised by the sending institution. It also confirms that the course units the student plans to take are offered by the receiving institution and are available to the student.

Although the use of Learning Agreements is obligatory only within the Erasmus+ programme, institutions are strongly encouraged to adopt and use similar tools to ensure that students can obtain credit for mobility outside the Erasmus+ programme (e.g. bilateral exchanges not covered by Erasmus+).

Automatic credit mobility

Within the Erasmus+ programme, credits gained during a period of study or training abroad that have been agreed in a learning agreement by the student and the sending and receiving institutions before the start of the exchange should be automatically recognised by the sending institution and counted towards the student's degree.



In 2018, the European Council adopted the Council Recommendation on promoting the automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas, as well as the outcomes of learning periods abroad. Mirroring the requirements of Erasmus+, EU Member States have agreed to establish procedures to automatically and fully recognise the outcomes of a learning period abroad at higher education level in one Member State, provided these outcomes are agreed beforehand in a learning agreement and confirmed in the Transcript of Records following completion of the study period abroad.

Example 25.1 – Automatic recognition of credit mobility

Student A wishes to go on an exchange to another country. Ideally, her home university has already identified a mobility window (e.g. one to two semesters) in the programme description during which students can go on exchange. The student applies to her home university, which nominates her for an Erasmus+ exchange with the foreign university.

Depending on the exchange agreement between the sending and receiving institutions, the partner universities may have identified a “package” of course modules available to incoming exchange students at the receiving institution, which have been pre-approved for outgoing exchange students by the sending institution. Alternatively, the student will select modules from the receiving institution’s course catalogue that she believes will align with the content of her programme of study at her home institution for the duration of the exchange period.

The student records the details of the selected modules in a learning agreement and seeks approval from the sending institution. If the sending institution agrees that the main learning outcomes achieved at the receiving institution align with those required for the programme at the home institution, the learning agreement is forwarded to the receiving institution. Upon the receiving institution’s approval, the learning agreement is signed by both institutions and the student.



When the student has successfully completed an exchange, the receiving institution should issue a transcript of records detailing the course units that have been successfully completed. Upon receiving a copy of the transcript, the sending institution should check that the course units correspond to those agreed in the learning agreement. Provided that the course units have been successfully completed, there is no need for additional recognition procedures at the sending institution, and the course units should be automatically recognised and counted towards the student's degree at the sending institution.

Basic documentation

Credit mobility relies on a number of important pieces of documentation:

1. The course catalogue of the receiving institution. The course catalogue should include detailed and up-to-date information on the programmes and course units offered (e.g. course contents, learning outcomes and workload) and should be available to students before they begin their studies. Recommendations for the course catalogue are provided in the *ECTS Users' Guide*;
2. The learning/training agreement (see above);
3. The transcript of records. When the student has successfully completed an exchange, the receiving institution should issue a transcript of records detailing the course units they

have successfully completed, the number of credits they have achieved, and the grades they have been awarded. The local grading scale must be clearly explained, ideally with a statistical distribution of local grades, to provide transparency and understanding of grading practices at the host institution. Where appropriate, the ECTS grading table should be used. Recommendations for the transcript of records are provided in the *ECTS Users' Guide*.

4. The Diploma Supplement (DS). After the student has completed their degree programme, the institution awarding the qualification should provide clear information on any exchange periods undertaken during the course of their studies, as well as the credits and grades obtained. See [Chapter 14, Diploma Supplement \(and other information tools\)](#).

Grade transfer

Grading systems vary greatly across Europe, and there is significant variation in the extent to which different countries allow or require the conversion of grades obtained abroad. It is therefore important that any transfer of grades is transparent and conducted according to a methodology agreed upon in advance.

See [Chapter 8, Credits, grades, credit accumulation and credit transfer](#).



Joint degrees

In the case of multilateral joint degree programmes with tightly prescribed curricula, there is often no need for individualised learning or training agreements. A formal agreement drawn up at institutional level will usually be sufficient. There is considerable variety among joint degrees: they may be bilateral or multilateral; mobility may be compulsory or optional; the degree may be awarded collectively by the consortium or separately by each or some of its members; and the curriculum may be more or less integrated. Whatever has been agreed regarding recognition will, nevertheless, be formalised in official documentation.

Obstacles to recognition

Although recognition procedures are increasingly well defined and several tools support the full recognition of short-term study periods abroad, students still encounter problems with the recognition of their credits. Common issues include, but are not limited to:

- Recognition being denied because courses completed abroad are not identical to those that would have been taken at the home institution – that is, equivalence is confused with the comparability of learning outcomes;
- The courses selected and agreed in the learning agreement no longer being offered by the host institution upon the student's arrival;

- The home institution failing to delegate the authority to recognise courses successfully completed abroad to an appropriate staff member, whether at central, faculty or departmental level.

Quality assurance

Problems such as these may be identified and remedied by internal quality assurance procedures, see [Chapter 12, 'Institutional recognition practices'](#).

Recommendations

The following recommendations concern the procedure for the recognition of credit mobility. It is advisable to revisit [Chapter 12, 'Institutional recognition practices'](#), and to consider the recommendations below as complementary:

1. Establish an institution-wide procedure for the recognition of credit mobility that includes the steps set out below and is embedded in the institution's quality assurance system;
2. Establish a credit mobility system for the institution:



- Develop a credit mobility system capable of issuing – and recording data for – the appropriate documentation, such as the Erasmus University Charter, course catalogue, application form, learning/training agreement, transcript of records and Diploma Supplement (DS);
 - Ensure that this system is transparent for all users and operates within the framework of the internal quality assurance procedures;
 - Designate the academic and/or administrative staff member(s) responsible for making recognition decisions for individual students or cohorts.
3. Before the student's departure, the staff member responsible for mobility should:
- Define the intended learning outcomes for each component of the placement;
 - Assist the student in selecting an appropriate host organisation, as well as the placement duration and content;
 - Provide adequate cultural, linguistic and logistical support;
 - Ensure that all relevant parties sign and countersign the learning/training agreement;
 - Guarantee that all credits gained through the approved mobility programme will be fully recognised, transferred into the home programme, and counted towards the qualification requirements.

Example 25.2 – Selection of course units

When selecting the course units to be taken at the host institution and included in the learning agreement, the emphasis should not be on achieving maximum overlap with the curriculum of the home institution. After all, a period of exchange abroad offers students the opportunity to follow courses not available at their home institution. Provided that the main learning outcomes achieved at the host institution align with those required for the home programme, the learning agreement should be acceptable to the home institution.

4. During the placement, the staff members responsible for mobility at both the home and host institutions, together with the student, should:
- Monitor the student's participation and progress;
 - Ensure that any changes to the content of the learning/training agreement are acceptable to all parties, and that a swift procedure for amending the agreement is in place;
 - Confirm any modifications to the learning/training agreement in writing.



The EAR - HEI Consortia

The first edition of the European Area of Recognition (EAR-HEI) manual was developed in the European Area of Recognition - Higher Education Institutions (EAR HEI) project. Updates were subsequently produced in three follow-up projects: STREAM, AR-Net and AR25. All editions of the EAR-HEI manual have been co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme under the Erasmus+ NARIC call.

All EAR-HEI manuals have been developed through projects coordinated by Nuffic. The different editions of the manual were prepared by the following consortia, listed in reverse order:



AR25 project (2023 – 2025), 4th edition

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- Rok Primožič, European Students' Union, vice chair (2012 - 2013) and chair (2013 - 2014).
- Robert Wagenaar, Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, Joint Coordinator.



“This is the first time I have encountered a set of policy guidelines practicable to universities in Europe today. These guidelines will impact on standards and quality of output we commonly strive for in our international programmes.”

“Admissions officers don’t always have access to experienced colleagues whom to turn to ask “stupid” questions when unsure about the most basic things regarding education systems. I’d like to think that this go-to manual represents that colleague in writing!

I think it is very valuable when basic information is compiled together in one manual. I really appreciate that this manual is being developed.”

“The document provides a useful guide to admissions officers when faced with international documents they have difficulties in making sense of. The document highlights the areas they should be looking at and if the information is lacking, they know what questions to ask.

The document also ensures that the evaluation of international qualifications will be assessed and evaluated on the basis of the same parameters.”

Quotes from respondents on the original EAR HEI manual, Spring 2013.