

# 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**

Third edition, February 2020

**nuffic**  
meet the world

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# Usage

This manual is designed to assist and enable credential evaluators and admissions officers in higher education institutions to practise fair recognition 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 credential evaluator or admissions officer who wishes to enrol 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 credential evaluators 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 also be noted that the recommendations in this manual are written from the perspective of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and are therefore most useful for credential evaluators from the 47 countries of the EHEA.

It is acknowledged that users of this manual may have different levels of experience in credential evaluation. 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 third edition of the European Recognition Manual for higher education institutions has its roots in the 'EAR' recognition manual for the ENIC-NARIC networks published in 2009. Therefore I would like to thank the initial EAR project team for producing such a fine manual.

Right from the start of the 'EAR HEI' project in 2012 -which produced the first version of the manual- we envisaged that the higher education institutions and their admissions officers should play an important role in providing feedback on the development of this manual. We realized it would be difficult to reach our target group all across Europe, especially in view of the fact that our main instruments consisted of two rather intensive surveys. We were therefore delighted that around 450 representatives of European higher education institutions took the trouble to respond to the two surveys, and I want to thank them all for their valuable (and sometimes rather lengthy) replies.

During the development of this manual for higher education institutions, the ENIC Bureau and NARIC Advisory Board were consulted several times on key issues. I thank them for their comments, guidance and support, and for putting the manual on the agenda (literally) of the ENIC-NARIC networks.

In addition, I would like to thank the European Commission, not only for funding the EAR projects, but also for the inspiring way in which the EAR manuals have been promoted at network meetings since their publication. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the recognition experts of the Council of Europe and UNESCO for their active and ongoing support of the manual.

The former Bologna Follow Up Working Group on Recognition, which existed up to the Bucharest meeting in 2012, was very helpful in promoting the previous EAR manual. Mentioning the manual in the Bucharest Communiqué formed a strong support for the mission of the EAR activities: to streamline recognition practices across Europe. This support has been continued by mentioning this manual in the latest Bologna Process Implementation Report 2015 as an instrument to foster a fair recognition culture and support quality enhancement in recognition procedures according to the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Moreover, the following report, published in 2018, stressed even more than before the importance of streamlining recognition practices in higher education institutions in the EHEA.

The project team also had strong ties to the initial EHEA Structural Working Group and Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition. I thank them for providing us with the bigger picture of recognition in connection with accreditation, learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks.

I would also like to acknowledge the input of many experts from different fields that we met on various occasions, such as at several EAIE meetings, the Nexus conferences promoting the LRC in Germany, and seminars and events led by EQAR, ECA and EUA.

I am grateful to all experts and organizations that -outside the framework of the project- brought the manual to the attention of the practitioners within higher education institutions. Some ENIC-NARICs and university associations even chose to translate the manual into their national language to achieve this and I thank them for their trust in the approach. Further, the EAR manual has been mentioned in the updated LRC subsidiary text on information provision (2019) and refugees (2017), and has inspired key definitions in the Global Convention on Recognition (2019).

Finally, I would like to thank the experts of the EAR HEI, STREAM and AR-Net project teams and Advisory Groups, all of whom worked together very enthusiastically and efficiently over the last eight years to produce the first, second and now third edition of this manual. I also thank the organizations that made these contributions possible, the ENIC NARICs of: Denmark, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Czech Republic, Portugal, Norway and ENIC USA, as well as the European University Association (EUA), the European Students Union (ESU), the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), Tuning Educational Structures and the Hochschulrektorenkonferenz.

Lastly, I wish to give special thanks to two persons from my team who have led the coordination of the manual since its first edition: Bas Wegewijs and Jenneke Lokhoff.

Describing best practice based on first-hand experience of recognition experts, higher education experts, admissions officers and students has led to a manual that sets the standard for fair, transparent and efficient institutional recognition procedures.

Lucie de Bruin -

Member of the Board, responsible for International recognition of Nuffic (the Dutch ENIC-NARIC), coordinator of the EAR HEI, STREAM and AR-Net projects

# Note from the editors

The Third edition of the manual has been produced as part of the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 NARIC “AR-NET” project. The changes in the third edition are minor and follow developments that have occurred since the publication of the previous editions. They include:

- Reference to automatic recognition;
- Update of references, sources and further reading;
- Update of URL’s

As part of the AR-Net project consortium, the following ENIC-NARICs produced this third edition of the EAR HEI manual: Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Luthiania, Norway, Portugal, The Netherlands and UK NARIC, as well as the European University Association and the European Consortium for Accreditation.

# Foreword to the third edition

The recognition of foreign educational qualifications has been at the very centre of European and global policy discussions in the field of higher education for over two decades, and continues to go forward. In the Communiqué issued at the end of their Bucharest conference in 2012, the Bologna Process ministers explicitly mentioned fair and smooth recognition as a pre-condition of mobility and as the basis of further cooperation in the European Higher Education Area. In 2015, in Yerevan, and once again in Paris in 2018, they committed to reviewing national legislations with a view to fully complying with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. An important step that has taken place since the publication of the second edition of this manual is the adoption of the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention (in November, 2019), which addresses the needs of fair recognition in an era with increasing global mobility.

For professionals in higher education who have worked hard to further the cause of fair recognition, it is gratifying to note that some of the trends observed in previous editions (globalisation of HE, stronger focus on internationalisation strategies in the HEIs, development of formal recognition frameworks and procedures in Europe and beyond) have accelerated since 2016. Fair recognition is now acknowledged to be the cornerstone of the internationalisation of higher education and of student mobility.

This third edition of the European Area of Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions (EAR HEI) offers a direct and practical response to the challenges and expectations raised by politicians, policy makers, students, parents and employers all over the world. It comes as a follow-up to the EAR manual, which focused on the recognition practice of the ENIC-NARIC offices, and which was endorsed by the Bologna ministers in their Bucharest Communiqué as a set of valuable guidelines and as a compendium of good recognition practice. Furthermore, the updated Manual continues to respond to the migration crisis within Europe by outlining good practice for the recognition of qualification holders without documentation and expanding on the recommendations included in previous editions.

The internationalisation of higher education and the strong institutional commitment to student and staff mobility underlines the need for a recognition manual specifically addressing recognition issues in higher education institutions. The EAR HEI Manual has been designed for admissions officers and credential evaluators dealing with credit transfer decisions, recognition of study periods abroad, and admissions and selection procedures for applicants seeking entry to full-length courses on the basis of qualifications obtained in other countries.

The Manual provides examples of best practice covering the full range of recognition procedures - from the small but necessary tasks, such as confirming the receipt of applications, to the recognition of foreign qualifications based on recognition of prior learning and to recommendations concerning credit and grade conversions. It takes admissions officers and credential evaluators by the hand and guides them through all the processes of recognition at institutional level, illustrating every single step of the process with examples and backing them up with recommendations. It gives practical advice to institutions wishing to welcome refugee students who may lack fully documented academic records.

The EAR HEI Manual is also targeted at institutional policy makers. It responds specifically to the Bologna Ministers' encouragement to higher education institutions to bring recognition procedures into the scope of their internal and external quality assurance processes. The greater prominence

of recognition in internal QA (following ESG 2015), means that academic staff and students, whether directly involved in recognition and admissions or not, need to be drawn in to the culture of recognition.

The aim is to ensure that coherent institutional policies on recognition are based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which is UNESCO's and the Council of Europe's legally binding text concerning the recognition of foreign qualifications. The principles and procedures outlined in the Convention directly concern institutional recognition. Since the examples of best practice highlighted in the manual are all aligned with these principles and procedures, the Manual provides institutions with the perfect instrument with which to ensure that they are systematically meeting their legal obligations.

As representatives, respectively, of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee Bureau and the European University Association, we renew our full endorsement of the EAR HEI Manual and advocate its use as an important reference tool in all aspects of institutional recognition procedures and as the basis of formulating a coherent institutional recognition policy based on the principles and procedures of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. We strongly encourage HEIs to commend it, not only to their credential evaluators, but also to their wider academic communities.

Allan Bruun Pedersen - Vice President Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee

Howard Davies - European University Association

Sandra Marcos Ortega - European Consortium for Accreditation

# About the manual

## The European Area of Recognition

This manual is the result of the European Area of Recognition – A Manual for the Higher Education Institutions (EAR HEI) project, aimed to assist credential evaluators and admissions officers in higher education institutions in practising fair recognition. The 'EAR HEI' manual is based on the European Area of Recognition (EAR) manual published in 2012, which aimed to streamline recognition practices at the level of the ENIC-NARIC networks (the national information centres on recognition). This EAR manual was based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary texts, and in addition on recommendations from projects, working groups and on publications.

The EAR HEI manual follows the recommendations of the EAR manual which were formulated in close cooperation with and supported by the ENIC-NARICs. As such the recommendations provide a standard to what is considered fair recognition in the European region. Moreover, the use of the EAR manual is recommended by the ministers of Higher Education of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in the Bologna Bucharest communiqué (April 2012). The EAR HEI manual is therefore not just another manual. It is the only European recognition manual for credential evaluators and admissions officers that presents commonly agreed-upon best practice based on the Lisbon

### **Recognition Convention (LRC). Recommendation in the Bologna Bucharest Communiqué 2012 to use the EAR manual:**

'Fair academic and professional recognition, including recognition of non formal and informal learning, is at the core of the EHEA... **We welcome the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual and recommend its use as a set of guidelines for recognition of foreign qualifications and a compendium of good practices, as well as encourage higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to assess institutional recognition procedures in internal and external quality assurance**'.

The idea to develop a guide that is specially geared towards higher education institutions came into existence when the EAR project was finalised. Since a collection of good practices was now available, why not use these and produce a manual specifically geared to the group where most recognition decisions are made, the higher education institutions?

Developing a recognition manual for higher education institutions required substantial expertise and involvement from higher education institutions. Therefore, apart from NARICs from Poland, France, Lithuania, Ireland, Denmark, Latvia and The Netherlands (coordinator) and the President of the LRC Committee (2007 - 2013), the president of the ENIC network (2011-2013) and the special advisor from USNEI, the project team included experts from the European University Association (EUA), the German Hochschulrektorenkonferenz (HRK), European Consortium for Accreditation, Tuning Educational Structures and the European Student Union (ESU).

Furthermore the project strived to collect as much feedback as possible during the development of the manual. Most significant are two consultations (web surveys) for credential evaluators and admissions officers in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The first survey focused on identifying the needs of credential evaluators and admissions officers in the EHEA. This provided the project team with feedback on topics that should be included and which were not specifically covered by the original EAR manual (examples are access qualifications, language tests,

credit mobility). The second survey intended to collect feedback on the first draft of the manual and to identify points for improvement. The outcomes of that survey were used to produce the final version of this manual. In addition to the networks of the project team, both surveys were distributed by individual ENIC-NARICs to the higher education institutions in their countries, and by several European networks such as the Bologna Experts. In both surveys, more than 400 higher education institutions responded and provided a wealth of very useful and positive feedback. The result is the EAR HEI manual that lies in front of you.

## Content

The guide consists of seven parts, each part building further on the other parts and together presenting a complete picture of the evaluation and recognition of foreign qualifications. The first part aims to provide a better understanding of recognition by discussing the legal framework, recognition structures and diversity in recognition procedures and education systems. It also presents the five elements of a qualification that always need to be considered when evaluating a qualification.

After having provided a context in part one, the second part discusses in chronological order the aspects to be taken into account in the evaluation process: the accreditation and quality assurance of the institution that awarded the qualification; checking to make sure the qualification is not 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 right of the applicant to appeal against the decision.

The third part -Institutional Recognition Practices- focuses on what is needed for the recognition process to run smoothly and to be fair. This part describes on one hand the 'recognition infrastructure' that needs to be in place to facilitate the recognition process and 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 (as part of the admissions procedure). It also presents the responsibilities of the institution towards the (potential) applicant regarding Transparency and Information Provision.

The next part 'Information Instruments', provides the sources to be used in the evaluation process. It discusses how and where to find reliable information sources and it specifically presents the Diploma Supplement and Qualifications Frameworks as useful information instruments.

Part five presents specific types of qualifications that may be encountered in the recognition process, such as joint degrees and qualifications that involve 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.

Part six of the manual is reserved for recommendations regarding periods of study abroad. Unlike the previous chapters dealing with diploma mobility, this part considers credit mobility.

The manual finally includes an overview of the main sources and references used per chapter and an index.

# PART I

# Introduction to Recognition

Part I of the manual aims to provide a better understanding of recognition by discussing the legal framework, recognition structures and diversity in recognition procedures and education systems. It also presents the five elements of a qualification that always need to be considered when evaluating a qualification.

# 1. Introduction to recognition

## Summary

This chapter gives an introduction to recognition in the European region by providing an overview of the legal foundation of recognition (the LRC), of the role that the national information centres play in the practical implementation (ENIC-NARIC networks) and of the diversity in recognition procedures and education systems that should be taken into account. The chapter will also briefly describe the concept of automatic recognition.

## The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) forms the basis of and sets standards for recognition procedures in the European region. The LRC is a treaty between states by which the parties and the competent authorities of a party undertake to fulfil the obligations (principles and procedures) specified in the treaty with respect to other parties to the treaty. These competent authorities include higher education institutions, which take decisions on recognition, and which consequently are bound to follow the principles as formulated in the LRC.

The LRC lays down the fundamental principles of the fair recognition of qualifications and periods of study. It stresses that the burden of proof lies with the receiving institution and not with the applicant. This means that the responsibility of demonstrating that a foreign qualification does not fulfil the relevant requirements lies with the competent recognition authority responsible for the assessment. Furthermore, the LRC requires that each country shall recognise foreign qualifications unless it can show that there are substantial differences between the foreign qualification for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification of the host country.

The Convention was adopted and opened for signatures in Lisbon on April 11th 1997, hence the name Lisbon Recognition Convention. Almost all member states of the Council of Europe as well as some countries in the UNESCO European Region have signed and/or ratified the Council of Europe/UNESCO 'Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region'.

In the years following the adoption of the LRC, subsidiary texts were added, in order to give more detailed recommendations and to serve as guidance for institutions and credential evaluators.

The main subsidiary texts are:

- Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications and Explanatory Memorandum (2001, revised 2010);
- Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education and Explanatory Memorandum (2001);
- Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees and Explanatory Memorandum (2004, revised 2016);
- Recommendation on International Access Qualifications (1999);
- Recommendation on the use of qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications (2013).
- Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation (2017).

### **LRC and today's recognition methodology**

The main principles of the LRC are the backbone of today's evaluation methodology called 'acceptance'. Acceptance is based on the idea that there will always be differences in learning outcomes between qualifications of different education systems, and that this should be considered as an enriching aspect of the internationalisation of higher education rather than being an obstacle to recognition and mobility.

This however has not always been the approach towards credential evaluation. Equivalence –or 'nostrification' or 'homologation'– was a common approach in many countries from the 1950s to the mid-1970s (and even exists in some countries today) and entailed 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 to be an outdated practice that is not in line with the LRC and forms an obstacle to fair recognition and student mobility.

Due to the increased student mobility and growth of (the diversity of) higher education programmes, equivalence slowly became an untenable approach and was gradually replaced by 'recognition' in the 1980s. In this new approach, a foreign qualification did not have to be completely equivalent as long as it had a similar purpose and provided the same rights as the comparable qualification in the host country. 'Recognition' would pave the way for the approach which is considered to be best practice today and which gained support from the 1990s onwards: i.e. 'acceptance'.

The LRC has a central position in policy and political initiatives regarding recognition in the European region. The Bologna Process, which began in 1999, has played a major role in placing the issue of recognition on the European agenda, as recognition was considered essential to creating the European Higher Education Area. Within the Bologna Process the LRC is regarded as the main international legal text that aims to further the fair recognition of access qualifications and higher education qualifications. The Bologna Process has led to many initiatives to improve transparency and recognition of qualifications. Examples are the strong support for ECTS, Diploma Supplement and the implementation of qualifications frameworks, which are discussed later in this manual.

Beyond the European area the LRC has been a model for other UNESCO regional conventions, such as the revised Asia Pacific Convention (the 'Tokyo Convention' of 2011) and the revised Convention for the African region (the 'Arusha Convention', 2011). Recently, these regional conventions entered into force. A very important development that has taken place is the adoption of the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention in November, 2019, the goal of which is to achieve fair recognition on a global scale and facilitate academic mobility between regions.

### **The role of the ENIC-NARIC centres**

In the European region there are two networks of national recognition information centres that were established to facilitate recognition: the ENIC and NARIC networks. The ENIC-NARIC centres are the national contact points for anyone with questions regarding the recognition of qualifications.

### **The ENIC network**

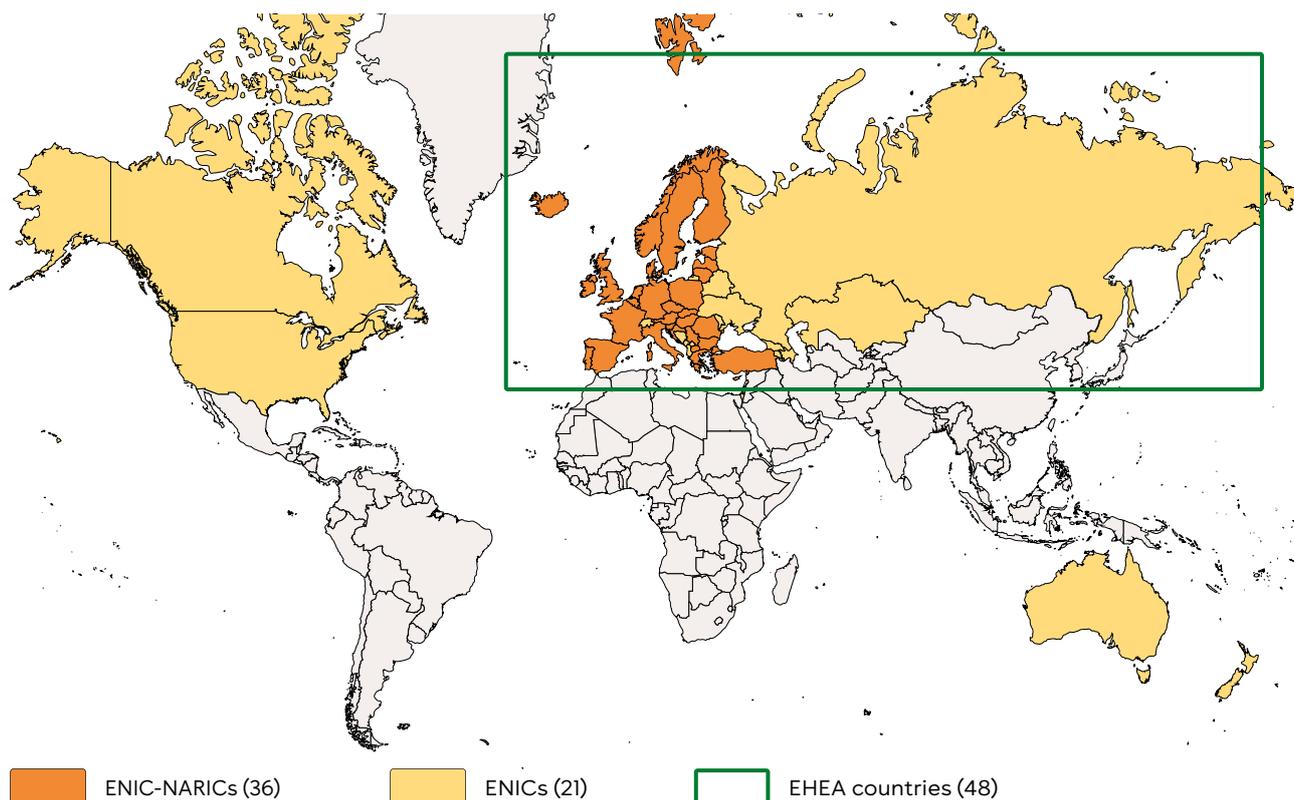
The European Network of Information Centres (ENIC) was established by the Council of Europe and UNESCO in 1994 to implement the LRC and to develop policy and practice for the recognition of qualifications through providing information on foreign qualifications, education systems, mobility schemes and recognition of foreign awards. 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 of 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 Turkey. All member countries have designated national centres, the purpose of which is to assist in promoting the mobility of students, teachers and researchers by providing advice and information concerning the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study. The main users of this service are higher education institutions, competent recognition authorities, students and their advisers, parents, teachers and prospective employers.

The ENIC-NARICs were designated by the Ministries of Education or by other authorities performing similar functions in the respective countries, but the status and the scope of work of individual NARICs may differ (see also chapter 12, 'Institutional recognition practices'). In the majority of member states, institutions of higher education are autonomous, making their own decisions on the admission of foreign students and the exemption of parts of the study programme that students may be granted on the basis of qualifications obtained abroad. As a result, most NARICs do not make binding decisions, but offer on request information and advice on foreign education systems and qualifications. In any case, the higher education institutions and the ENIC-NARIC networks operate within the framework of obligations laid down in the LRC.

## Geographic overview ENIC-NARIC networks



The increasing globalisation of education and training fosters the close cooperation between the two networks and their counterparts in other regions of the world, in terms of further development of adequate criteria and procedures for recognition. The ENIC and NARIC networks –although officially separate networks- in practice work closely together to the extent that in countries (or parts thereof) that belong to both networks, one single centre represents both networks. Both networks organise a joint annual meeting for representatives of all ENIC and NARIC offices. The ENIC and NARIC networks also seek to improve their effectiveness by cooperating with international networks of accreditation and quality assurance agencies.

Contact details for all ENIC-NARIC centres are provided on: [www.enic-naric.net](http://www.enic-naric.net). Here you can also find additional information on recognition, including relevant documents such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

### Diversity of recognition procedures

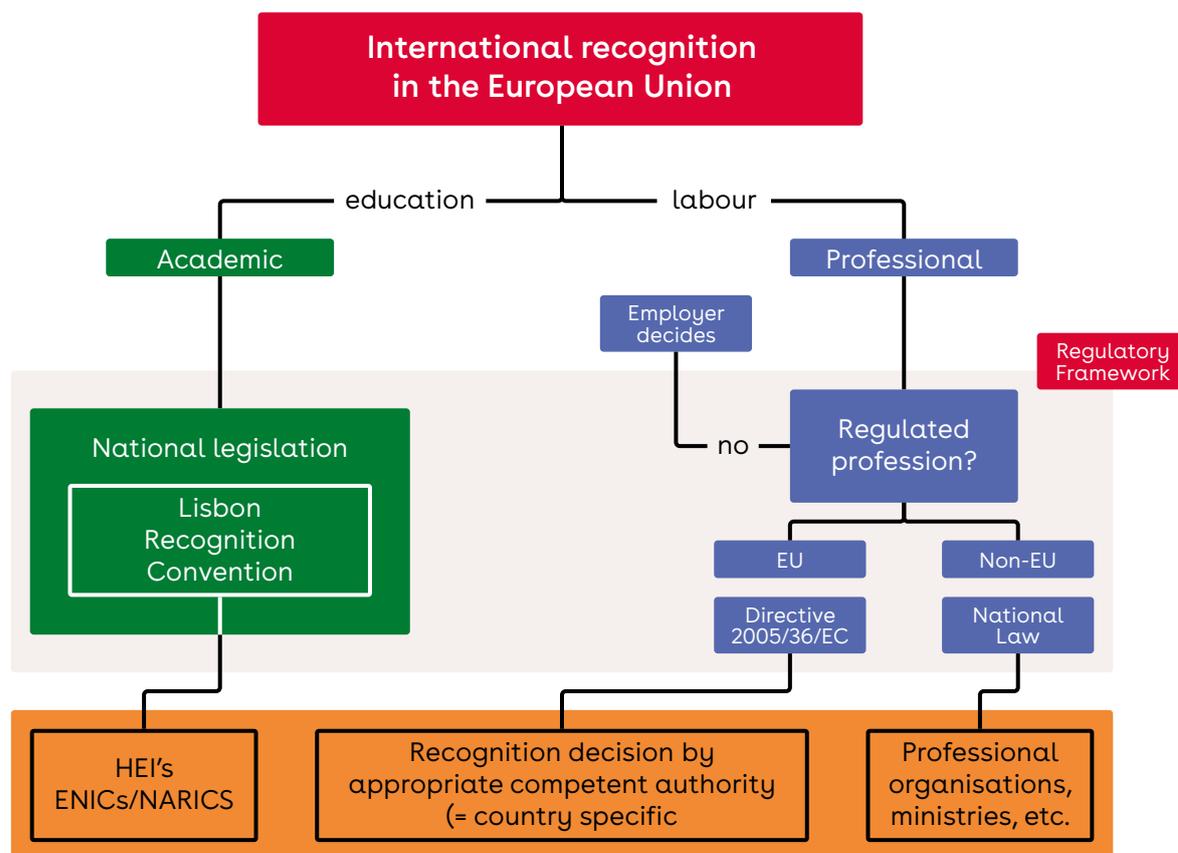
The recognition of foreign qualifications is a formal procedure that may take place in a variety of legal procedures for a variety of purposes. Recognition culture and procedures differ between countries and institutions and may involve a wide range of competent authorities. Sometimes applicants are unaware that some form of assessment of their qualifications has taken place; in other cases they themselves request a written evaluation of their qualifications for their personal use.

Procedures that in some countries may include some form of recognition are for instance obtaining a work permit, obtaining the official status of highly-skilled migrant, applying for a job in the public sector or applying for a job in a specific (higher) rank.

There are basically two types of recognition procedures in the European area: academic and professional recognition. Academic recognition refers to recognition sought for the purpose of further

studies or the right to carry an academic title. Professional recognition concerns recognition sought for the purpose to enter the labour market (especially in the case of regulated professions).

### Framework for international recognition in the European Region:



### Academic recognition procedures in practice

The vast majority of students apply directly to the higher education institution of their choice and thus enter the institutional admissions process, which includes some form of recognition procedure. Although institutional recognition procedures differ widely, this may not be immediately apparent to the applicant.

Academic recognition may take place at various levels within a higher education institution. For instance, periods of study abroad may be recognized at the faculty or at the institutional level, while the recognition of degrees is located in a central office. The recognition of access qualifications may be a separate procedure in itself.

In countries with an active national recognition information centre, it may be possible for admissions officers to ask such a centre for information on a particular foreign qualification, or even for a written evaluation. Such services are also provided by commercial organizations operating on an international basis.

Alternatively, admissions officers may do their own research into the foreign qualification, by using the information tools available on the Internet or in printed form, and by using the expertise already available at their institution.

The preferred structure of academic recognition in many countries is that the higher education institution deals directly with the applicant and makes the final decision, which may be based on advice from a recognition information centre.

## Diversity of education systems

Knowledge of national education systems and the differences between them is important in the field of recognition, because foreign qualifications belonging to other education systems are compared to qualifications within the education system of the host country. A very important factor in comparing and evaluating qualifications therefore is the rich variety of educational systems within Europe and around the world, and the complexity and variety of institutions, programmes and qualifications within them.

National systems reflect educational principles, ideas and methods drawn from national cultures and the heritage of many civilizations, as well as from universal models. While increased international cooperation and globalization have produced both cross-fertilization among systems and some harmonization (particularly within Europe, via the Bologna Process and other developments), they have also led to a proliferation of new institutions as well as new programmes and qualifications. New developments in quality assurance, credit accumulation and transfer, and methods of delivering education have also emerged.

In principle, differences at the system level - or at institutional or programme levels - should not prevent the fair recognition of qualifications. In some cases differences between systems, particularly in learning outcomes or in the systems' structural features, may make direct transfer from one system to another difficult. But in most cases it does not, and should not, make transfer impossible.

## Automatic Recognition

You may have heard about "Automatic Recognition", which is an objective in both the European Union as well as 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 or master degree should automatically be considered for access to the next level was later referred to as "automatic recognition". Automatic recognition was set as a goal for the EHEA in 2020 by the Yerevan Communiqué (2015), following the recommendations of the Pathfinder Group on Automatic Recognition. In 2018, the European Union ministers for education committed to implement automatic recognition in the EU by 2025.

What is meant by automatic recognition? Automatic recognition of a degree leads to the automatic right of an applicant holding a qualification of a certain level to be considered for entry to a programme of further study in the next level in any other EHEA-country (access).

Such a degree would have to meet three criteria. The country in question: 1) should have signed the LRC, 2) implemented the three cycle structure and have an education system referenced to the Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area or European Qualifications Framework, and 3) have a quality assurance system based on the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance.

Qualifications from countries that fulfil these requirements, should automatically be recognised on "system level".

## Automatic recognition: System versus programme level

An easy way to understand automatic recognition is to first distinguish between system level and programme level recognition. Chapter 2 provides information on the 5 elements of a qualification (level, quality, workload, profile and learning outcomes) that need to be taken into account when evaluating a qualification, but we can use them here to explain the difference between system and programme level recognition:

- 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 bachelor's 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 content of a bachelor's degree in physics and in history is very different.

It is important to keep in mind that automatic recognition is always system level recognition and gives the applicant the automatic right to be considered for access to the next level. The actual recognition decision would still take into account whether the profile of the qualification matches the particular purpose of recognition.

Automatic recognition means that you accept that “a Bachelor is a Bachelor is a Bachelor”; the level, quality and workload are accepted without an extra procedure as long as the qualification originated from a country that meets the three criteria mentioned in the text above. In other words, you should treat the information pertaining to the foreign qualification in the same way that you would treat a qualification from your own country. You can still check whether the qualification is accredited and what the level is, but you should not take the additional step of establishing the level of the qualification.

Note that understanding automatic recognition requires some level of understanding of the implementation of the LRC, which this manual intends to provide. Therefore, you may wish to revisit this paragraph after reading this manual, especially chapter 2. The five elements of a qualification, “Part II-The evaluation process” and chapter 12. Institutional recognition practices.

For more information, see also “A short path to automatic recognition-4 models”.

Link: <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/publications/short-path-automatic-recognition-4-models/>

## 2. The five elements of a qualification

### Summary

Five parameters are required to define a qualification: level, workload, quality, profile, and learning outcomes. Although there is overlap between the concepts, all have relevance and need to be considered when assessing a qualification, especially in establishing whether there are substantial differences between the foreign qualification and the required one (see chapter 9, Substantial and non Substantial Differences). Learning outcomes are becoming the most important factor, the evaluation of which 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, in order 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/linked to an overarching qualifications framework, such as the European Higher Education Area Qualifications Framework (EHEA-QF) or the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which will facilitate comparison between different national frameworks.

For higher education, three such levels (bachelor's, master's and doctorate) are now commonly used, which 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 specialized 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 programmes may differ from those based primarily on research, especially in terms of the descriptors associated with the ability to perform independent

research and/or the descriptors 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 (e.g. in Europe 60 ECTS = 1 full-time year's study). Each credit is then associated with a student workload. Credits are 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. 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.

Workload is sometimes a problematic issue in comparing qualifications because, in spite of being a quantitative measure, it is calculated in different ways in different systems. For example, within the Bologna signatory countries the defined student workloads within an academic year vary 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 example, a taught master's may have a defined workload whilst a master's undertaken mainly by research may have a notional workload. A qualification may have been obtained where some of the 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.

## 3 - Quality

The concept of quality is applied to academic programmes in three ways. Firstly, by the internal assessment of the quality of the learning outcomes achieved by the student. This is usually expressed via a grading system, the criteria of which may vary greatly between and within countries; see the 'Grades' section in chapter 8 "

Secondly, the programme and the associated institutional support structures may have been 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.

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 recognized or accredited, which implies that certain minimum educational standards have been met. Sometimes it might be tempting to make use of one of the international ranking lists of higher education institutions that are published by various organizations around the world. However, this is not recommended as good practice by recognition experts for at least 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 learning outcomes obtained by individual students;
- Ranking lists usually only contain a few hundred institutions, which means that at least 97% of the world's higher education institutions are not covered by rankings. This severely limits the use of rankings in 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'.

## 4 - Profile

The concept of qualification profile has been used in various ways, either to describe the general purpose of the programme or the content of the programme. 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 the skills for doing research. 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 are aimed at providing 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.

In the first case, the programme is designed to offer the student an introduction to a wide range of subjects (liberal arts education), while in the second case 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 2.2 – Using the profile of a qualification in recognition**

The entry requirements for admission to a particular programme for applicants with a foreign qualification may be expressed 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 are in line with this profile (and that also fulfil the other criteria such as authenticity and accreditation status) can easily be recognised.

Qualifications that do not fit this profile may be inspected more closely, to find out whether the learning outcomes sufficiently match the requirements. Depending on the requirements of the programme, a very specific profile or a whole range of profiles (e.g. 'a bachelor in engineering, chemistry, physics or biology') may be formulated.

By using the qualification profile in this way, the evaluation process may be speeded up and unnecessary checks may be avoided.

Transparent information on the profile of a programme is very helpful in the recognition process, since it provides a general perspective on the learning outcomes of the programme. It is not always possible to obtain a clear view of the programme profile from the qualifications and transcripts issued by higher education institutions. The format of the Diploma Supplement (see chapter 14, 'Diploma Supplement (and other information tools)') allows institutions to provide more information on the programme profile. In addition, a recent model for a degree programme profile<sup>1</sup> provides an 'academic map' for a particular degree. This programme 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 'a statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning, and may be written 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 the students certify that they have satisfactorily demonstrated the required learning outcomes for the module or programme, details of which are given in the programme profile and/or the Diploma Supplement. More information about learning outcomes can be found in chapter 7, 'Learning Outcomes'.

1 This is the Degree Profile, about which you can find more information on page 86-88 of the following publication: Lokhoff, J. et al, A guide to formulating degree programme profiles. Including competences and programme learning outcomes, 2010.

# PART II

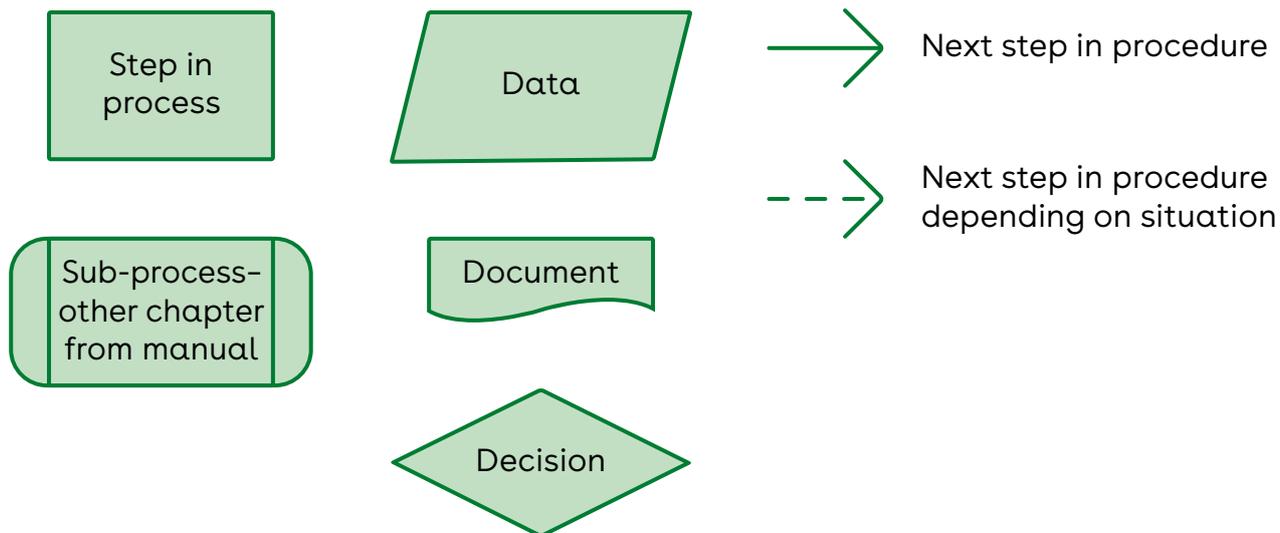
# The Evaluation Process

Part II of the manual discusses 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; checking to make sure the qualification is not 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 right of the applicant to appeal against the decision.

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

In the flowcharts, the grey boxes are numbered according to the recommendation they refer to. The shapes of the various boxes and arrows used in the flowcharts are based on the following logical symbols:

## Legend

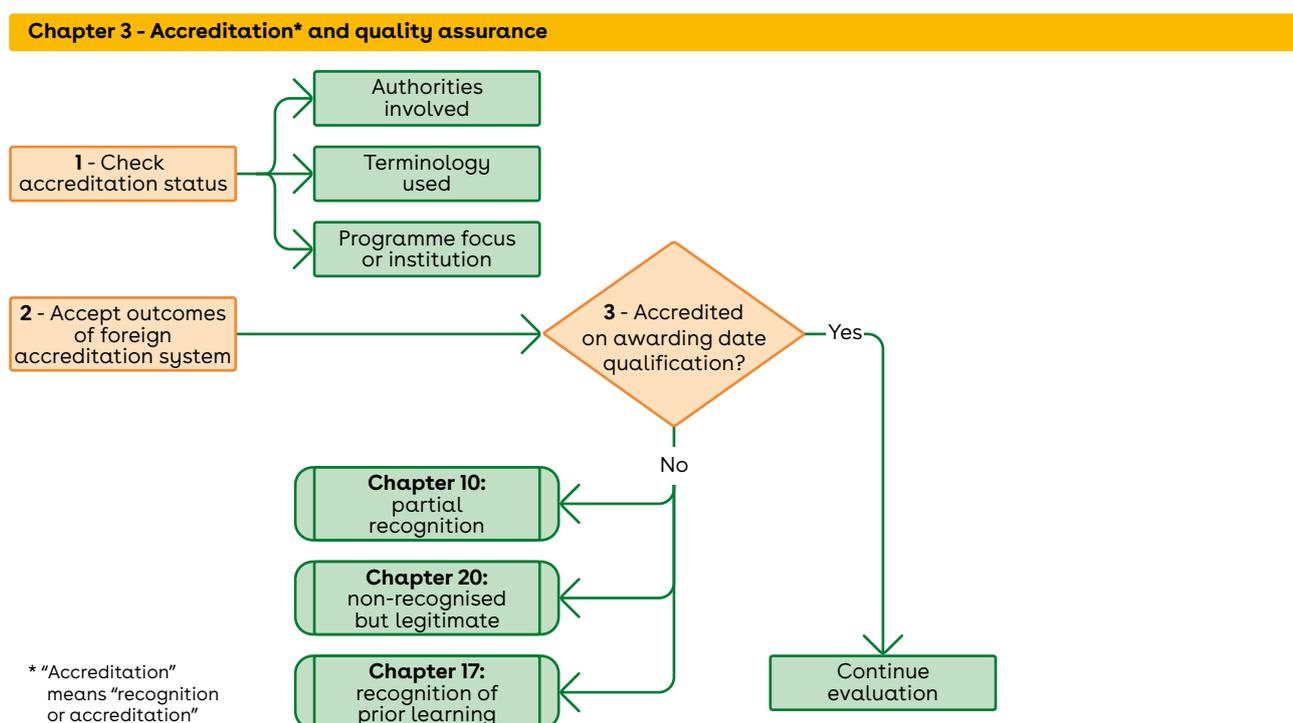


# 3. Accreditation and Quality Assurance

## Summary

This chapter uses the concepts of accreditation and quality assurance as an integral part 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 tools.

## Flowchart



## 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 taken. 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, if 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 dealt with 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 assure 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 recognized 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 rights, and not be a 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 for the quality.

## Accreditation

Accreditation is often mentioned in the same context as quality assurance. They are not synonymous, even though 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. The 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. In order to obtain it, institutions and programmes have to satisfy conditions imposed from the outside.

### Quality Assurance

In recent years, many countries have introduced formal procedures for the assurance of 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 a sufficiently organic and holistic manner as to constitute an internal 'quality culture', while still overseen periodically by an external agency.

Accreditation can be granted to institutions as well as to programmes, or to both. When evaluating a qualification it is important to find out what kind of accreditation is required in the system the qualification is from. National accreditation should be accepted as sufficient evidence for the quality of a qualification, as this 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 additional accrediting bodies for specific types of professional programmes. In countries with this additional type of accreditation, accreditation of programmes where public health and safety are concerned (in medicine, teaching, social work for example) is usually required. In some cases,

institutions may have some type of programmatic accreditation (business is a common example), but no form of national accreditation in an individual country. There are various schools of thought on how to proceed in cases such as this. 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 recognized by the appropriate authorities as an accrediting body. If you are looking for guidance on how to proceed in cases where national accreditation is lacking, a report published after 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 other forms of accreditation at the international level. Accreditation by a foreign body is an attractive strategic option for institutions that depend on the recruitment of foreign students or which set a high premium on their international profile and activities. There are many bodies operating on a cross-border basis in specific fields. They may require institutions to display features over and above those normally present in nationally or regionally accredited institutions, thus investing them with an added value that makes them attractive to particular categories of students. It must be stressed, however, that the absence of such additional forms of accreditation of a foreign qualification in no way implies that recognition must be withheld.

An additional topic that is relevant when considering the recognition of programmes offered across borders is transnational education. With the increase in transnational programmes, you may also encounter a qualification awarded after completion of a programme in country x that is accredited by the accrediting authorities in country y. For more information on how to check the status of these programmes, see chapter 18 of this manual: Qualifications Awarded through Transnational Education.

## Recommendations

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

The recognition by the Ministry of Education guarantees that both the institution and the programme have been established in line with the 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, but that in the education system of country B it is not sufficient that the institution is recognised; the programme has to be accredited as well. Therefore, the admissions officer also checks the database of accredited programmes of the national accreditation organisation of country B to make sure that the programme is accredited.

You should always check the information provided by the institution by comparing it to at least one additional external source (see 'Information Tools and Sources' below).

Note that some cases require more research/investigation on 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 18, 'Qualifications Awarded through Transnational Education', chapter 19, 'Qualifications Awarded by Joint Programmes', and chapter 20, '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 work according to rules that are different from your own national system) and base your evaluations in a consistent way 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 can be accredited. The admissions officer should, however, trust the accreditation system of country Z and recognise the qualification.

2. In case you find that (after applying recommendation 1 of this chapter) the institution and/or the programme was not properly recognized/accredited at the date that the qualification was awarded, 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:
- Try to establish whether parts of the programme may be partially recognised (e.g. 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 20, 'Qualifications Awarded by Institutions not Recognised by National Education Authorities');
  - Refer the applicant to an assessment procedure which might lead to a RPL certificate (recognition of prior learning) that may be (partially) recognized;
  - 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, offering many short courses and one bachelor programme. Country Z has a system of programme accreditation and the admissions officer finds out that this particular bachelor's programme lost its accreditation a few years before the degree was awarded to the applicant. This means that the outcomes of the programme are uncertain, so the admissions officer cannot grant full or even partial recognition.

On the other hand, the study conducted by this particular student at this institution cannot be dismissed completely in view of its previous and current status as an educational institution. The admissions officer refers the applicant to a relevant RPL procedure, where the applicant may be assessed in terms of the learning outcomes achieved in business studies. Depending on the resulting RPL certificate, the student may enter 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 check 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 the accreditation /quality assurance bodies, websites of the ministry of education, websites of the associations of accreditation/quality assurance agencies;
- Official national publications regarding the education system;
- International official sources, such as websites of international organisations and websites of credential evaluator networks;
- Publications containing information about the 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 recognized, see the report on The Recognition of Non-Country Specific Awards, (RENSA).

Link: <https://www.skvc.lt/uploads/documents/files/EN%20versija/Projektai/RENSA%20guidance%20and%20template.pdf>

### Associations and registers of accreditation / quality assurance bodies

- INQAAHE (international network for quality assurance agencies in higher education) provides an overview of QA networks worldwide. The member lists of these networks can be used to find national accreditation/quality assurance agencies.

Link: <https://www.inqaahe.org/members/>

- ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education).

Link: [www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu);

- ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education).

Link: <http://ecahe.eu>;

- EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education).

Link: [www.eqar.eu/register.html](http://www.eqar.eu/register.html);

- DEQAR (Database of External Quality Assurance Reports), a database developed by EQAR of 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: <https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/deqar-project/>

### Professional accreditation bodies

- CEMS, Global Alliance in Management Education.

Link: [www.cems.org/www.cems.org](http://www.cems.org/www.cems.org);

- EAEVE, European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education.

Link: <https://www.eaeve.org/>;

- EQUIS, Accreditation of Management Education.

Link: <https://efmdglobal.org/accreditations/business-schools/equis/>;

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

Link: [www.enae.eu/eur-ace-system](http://www.enae.eu/eur-ace-system);

- UEMS, the European Union of Medical Specialists.

Link: [www.uems.eu](http://www.uems.eu).

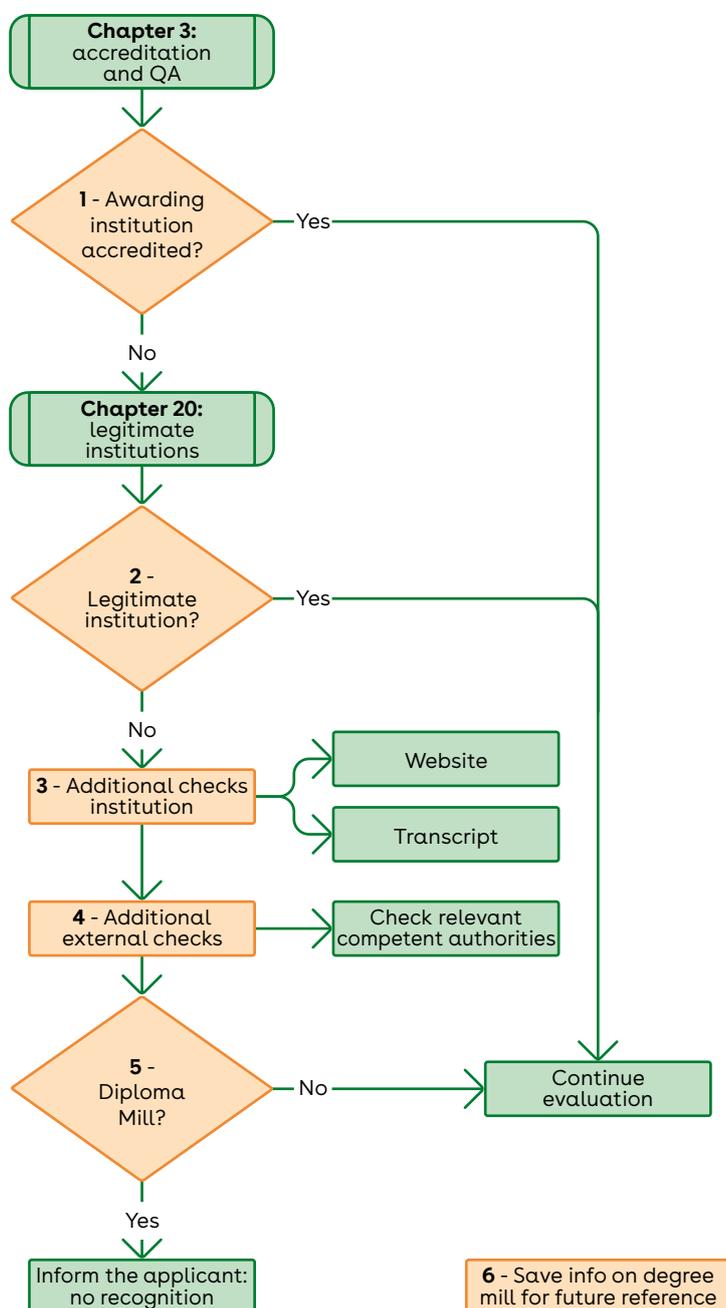
# 4. Diploma and Accreditation Mills

## Summary

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. The chapter provides definitions and tips for identifying diploma and accreditation mills and recommends how to deal with diplomas issued by such providers.

## Flowchart

### Chapter 4 - Diploma and accreditation mills



## Introduction

### Diploma Mill

'Diploma Mill' refers to a business posing as an educational institution, which has the following characteristics:

- Sells bogus qualifications without any requirements for (serious) study, research or examination;
- Does not have recognition by national competent authorities or lawful accreditation, even though it may possess a license to operate as a business;
- Usually has no physical presence and operates online.

Some of the most common features of diploma mills are:

- Credits and qualifications are offered based almost solely on life experience;
- There is a strong emphasis on fees and payment options. You may, for instance, find credit card logos on the website;
- Courses may be very short in duration: in some cases, it may be possible to obtain a bachelor's degree in 5 days;
- A long list of 'national', 'international' or 'worldwide' accreditation agencies and affiliated bodies is mentioned on the website, most of which are not legitimate either;
- No visiting address is provided, only an office suite, or a P.O. Box number. Contact details may 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 the chapter 20, 'Qualifications Awarded by Institutions not Recognised by National Education Authorities'.

### Accreditation Mill

'Accreditation mill' refers to a business posing as an accreditation agency, which has the following characteristics:

- No recognition as an accrediting body by competent national authorities;
- Claims to provide accreditation without having any authorisation to do so;
- Its accreditation decisions may be purchased for a fee without an actual review;
- In many cases accreditation mills are closely associated with diploma mills and even owned by the same people.

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'.

## Recommendations

It is imperative that you do not recognise qualifications or credits from diploma mills.

More specifically, it is essential to take the following steps to prevent the recognition of documents issued by diploma mills when assessing foreign credentials:

1. Check whether the awarding institution is accredited and/or appropriately recognised by the competent authority in the country in question (see chapter 3, 'Accreditation and Quality Assurance');
2. If the awarding institution is not accredited and/or appropriately recognised by the competent authority, determine the legitimacy of the provider (see chapter 10, 'Alternative recognition and the right to appeal');
3. If you cannot confirm the legitimacy and/or status of the awarding institution, check the qualification, transcripts and website of the institution for some of the features mentioned above that are indicative of diploma mills;
4. Check additional, relevant websites of recognized institutions where you would expect to find the institution in question listed;
5. If you have found evidence that the awarding institution is a diploma mill, do not grant any form of recognition to the applicant. Inform the applicant about your findings, but do not offer alternative recognition. Of course, the applicant still has the right to appeal against your decision.
6. Collect and save examples of qualifications from diploma mills for reference. This helps you become familiar with the common formats and contents of diploma mill qualifications.

### Example 4.1 - Identifying a diploma mill

An applicant applying for a master's programme has submitted a number of qualifications attesting to previous education. The usual checks into the accreditation status of the awarding institutions have identified that the applicant's Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) has been issued by an institution that is not accredited by the appropriate authorities in the country of origin. A review of the institution's website reveals that no studies are required to obtain a qualification and there is no physical address given for the institution. You detect additional characteristics of a diploma mill and you reach the conclusion that the qualification was issued by a diploma mill. Details of the institution are then added to an internal list of identified diploma mills to assist other staff.

Consequently the applicant is informed that recognition of the qualification is refused and that the applicant cannot be granted admission on the basis of the BBA.

### Example 4.2 - Identifying an accreditation mill.

When checking the website of an unknown higher education institution, an admissions officer finds information on the accreditation status of its master's programmes in management. It appears that these programmes have been accredited by an organization called 'Quality Assurance European Universities (QAEU)'. "QAEU" has a website which mentions that it is a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The admissions officer is familiar with the aims of ENQA and its review procedure of member agencies, and is therefore prepared to accept the ENQA membership of "QAEU" as sufficient proof for the quality of this accreditation organization.

However, on the website of ENQA the "QAEU" is not listed as a member, although there are some organizations with confusingly similar names on the list. The admissions officer decides to contact both "QAEU" and ENQA. The e-mails and phone calls to "QAEU" are never answered, while ENQA provides the information that "QAEU" is an obscure accreditation mill that only has a website and is mentioned on the websites of three well-known degree mills.

## Information tools

### Links to more information about diploma mills

- 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.  
Link: <http://www2.ed.gov/students/prep/college/diplomamills/diploma-mills.html#fake>
- Useful questions about diploma mills and accreditation mills.  
Link: <https://www.chea.org/important-questions-about-degree-mills;>
- CIMEA against the mills. How to spot and counter Diploma Mills.  
Link: <http://www.cimea.it/it/progetti-in-evidenza/fraudoc/fraudoc-outcomes.aspx>

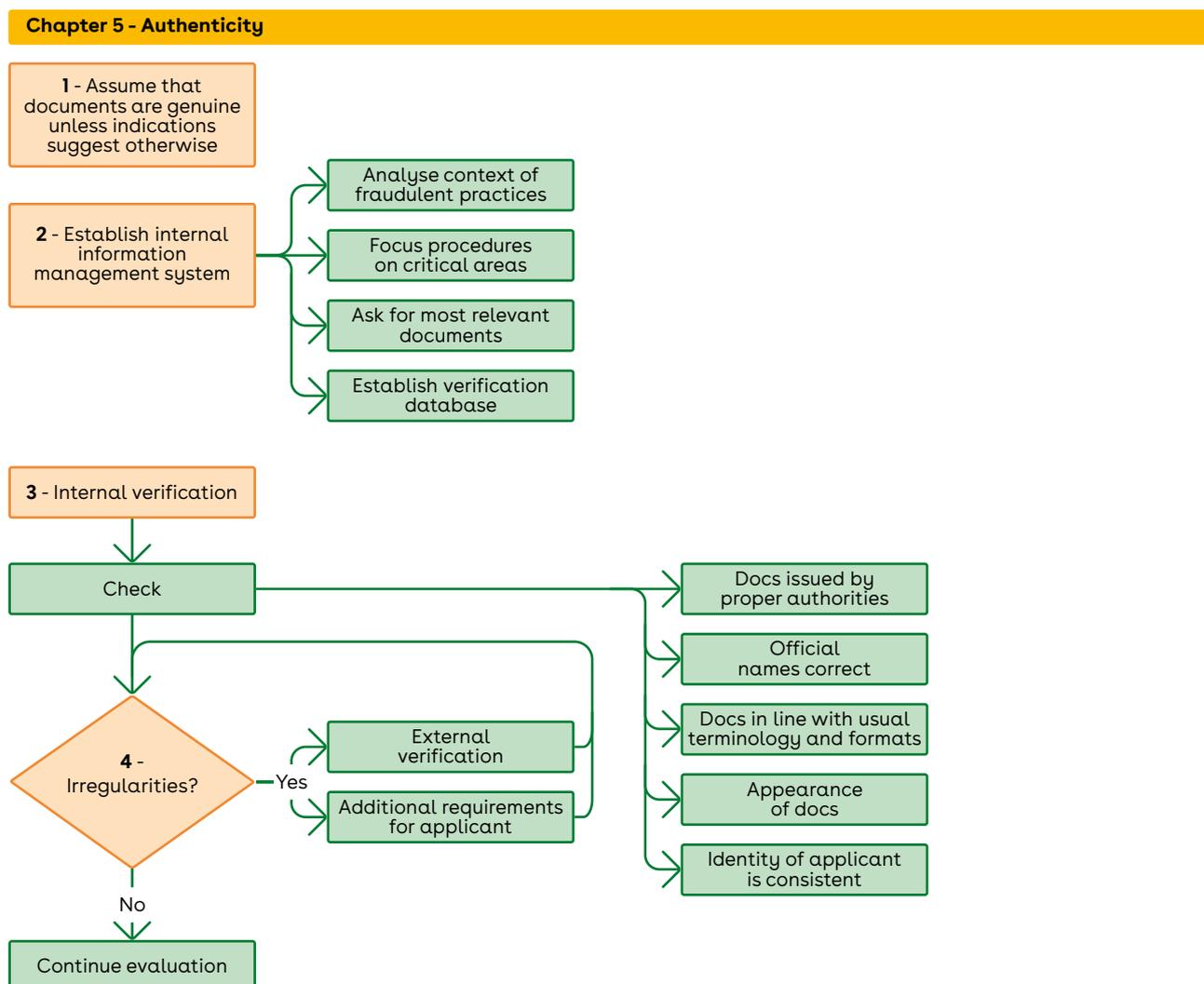
Nota Bene: The initial response of credential evaluators to the occurrence of diploma mills was to produce 'blacklists' of such institutions. However, this appeared to be a moving target, as new and renamed diploma mills kept cropping up. Furthermore, there is the risk of being taken to court by these institutions. For those reasons, many recognition experts nowadays preferred to stick to the 'white lists' of recognised and accredited institutions.

# 5. Authenticity

## Summary

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

## Flowchart



## Introduction

The process of establishing the authenticity of documents presented by the applicant – in other words, to check that they are not fraudulent – is called verification. Verification of credentials is important, since the amount of forged qualifications seems to be on the rise. This comes as no surprise considering the value of certain qualifications, the rights attached in terms of immigration or the opportunities provided in terms of access to employment and further education.

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

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

Please note that in addition to the types of fraudulent documents mentioned here, you should 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. Assume documents are genuine unless there are indications that suggest otherwise. Although verification is an important part of the recognition process, it is equally important to be careful not to place applicants under undue scrutiny. Therefore, your starting point should always be to assume that documents are genuine unless there is evidence that suggests otherwise. It is common practice to work with (usually certified) photocopies of all required documents, with the exception of transcripts (which are sent directly by the awarding institution to the admissions officer).

### Example 5.1 – Balancing verification and efficiency

An admissions officer has recently detected a few fraudulent documents and decides to make the application procedure stricter. Instead of certified copies, all applicants are required to send in the original documents of their qualification, which will be investigated with IR and UV techniques. This new procedure has three main effects:

1. The average time spent on processing an application file increases from 30 minutes to three hours, leading to a pile-up of application files and much longer throughput times;
2. Due to the fact that a small fraction of original documents is being lost or damaged in the admissions office, compensation has to be paid to applicants for their losses;
3. Talented students decide not to risk delay and instead apply to other higher education institutions that offer smoother admissions procedures.

A better balance may be found if the admissions officer tries to detect a pattern in the fraudulent documents received and for a period of time asks for original documents from a specific country or type of qualification (where most cases of fraud seem to occur).

This requirement may be abolished after the trial period has ended and no further fraudulent documents have been detected.

2. Establish an internal information management system for verification. In order to be able to set up an efficient internal verification process, you should:
  - a. Analyse the contexts where fraudulent practices may be encountered more frequently. This could be limited to specific qualifications or institutions;
  - b. Adapt your admissions and recognition procedures accordingly, in order to focus your verification efforts on these critical areas;
  - c. Make sure that you are asking for the most relevant set of documents for each particular country, which allows for efficient verification;

### **Example 5.2 – Ask for the relevant documents**

In some countries, original diplomas are mainly issued with the aim of framing them and hanging them on the wall. They might be oversized documents, beautifully ornamented, and carrying little information. In such countries, the higher education institutions usually prepare official transcripts for individual graduates on request, which may be used in any procedure where the applicant has to provide information on the qualification obtained.

It would not be useful to investigate a copy of such a diploma in search of irregularities, if you could also ask for a transcript to be sent directly by the higher education institution to your admissions office.

- d. Establish a verification database, which may include the following:
  - i. A list of common and reliable verification procedures for specific countries;
  - ii. All incoming qualifications that have been checked and found to be genuine, with their validity dates and security features where appropriate, to use as reference material for future applications. This serves to familiarise yourself with the format and content of educational documentation that can be expected from individual countries and institutions, as well as the educational terminology used;
  - iii. Examples of fraudulent documents as a reference for common fraudulent practices (e.g. the use of scanned signatures);
  - iv. A glossary of common terms in foreign languages. Do not rely solely on translations.

It is very important for the verification process that you keep the database up to date by adding the latest examples and include the most recent information. When credential evaluation is not undertaken at central level, it will be worthwhile establishing an information sharing system with other colleagues within your institution.

### **Example 5.3 – Finding reliable verification procedures for specific countries**

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 to a verified example and you are not confident that this is indeed an authentic document. Since your office lacks experience with qualifications from Moldova, you visit the web pages of various national bodies for information on the Moldavian system of education and possibilities for verification of credentials.

While browsing through the web page of the Ministry of Education of Moldova, you come across a link to a website for verification of documents. Thus, you go to <https://ctice.md/verif/>, click on the column for secondary education, and fill in the requested information to verify the name of the certificate holder. A decision can then be made accordingly.

3. Undertake internal verification:

All credentials should be subjected to some form of internal verification. This means that authenticity should be evaluated on the basis of the documentation submitted and the information sources that are available to you. To undertake the internal verification you should check:

  - a. Whether the submitted documents have been issued by the appropriate authority in that country. You can do this by consulting sources such as the ones listed at the end of this chapter;

#### **Example 5.4 – Qualifications issued by the appropriate authority**

Using Nigeria as an example, make sure upper secondary qualifications have been issued by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) or National Examinations Council (NECO), rather than by a secondary school.

Not only do these councils provide the quality assurance for the examinations taken by the applicant, but they also provide the opportunity to verify the results of the applicant.

- b. Whether all the official names on the documents are correct; whether the format of the qualification is in line with the usual national formats or institutional formats. Please note that while some countries have a (national) standard format, in other countries the format of documents may differ depending on the level of the qualification, the institution, or even the faculty;
- c. Whether the content of the qualification conforms to what you would expect from that country. For example: logos, awarding bodies, dates and duration, the number of subjects studied, the grading system used, the compulsory subjects;
- d. The appearance of the documents for irregularities. For example: a strange variety of fonts; lack 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 be indications of fraud. Check also the chronology of the information presented in the documentation. For example: check that the duration of secondary schooling corresponds with the expected number of years, or check that the age of the person who obtained the qualification is plausible;
- e. Whether the information on the learning path of the applicant contained in the documents is consistent with how the foreign education system works (e.g. have the entry requirements of the foreign programme been met by the applicant, in terms of level and grading?);
- f. Whether the information on the identity of the applicant is consistent throughout the documentation. Here you have to take into account that names may change for many reasons, such as marriage, divorce, national differences in distinguishing between first and last names, bilingual forms of the name and different transcription rules which may lead to differences in spelling.

#### **Example 5.5 – Checking the identity of the applicant**

An applicant (who was born in Russia) submits an application file which contains a British and a German qualification. The British qualification was obtained by someone with the name of Ivanov, while the German qualification mentions the name Iwanow. Since this is a common difference in transcribing Russian 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).

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

The expertise available in the evaluator's office is often sufficient to detect altered and fabricated documents. However, in cases where the internal verification turns up more subtle irregularities, you can consider whether to undertake external verification or to impose additional requirements on the applicant if this would enable you to establish the authenticity of the documents. Which step is best to take depends on the case and the irregularity detected.

- a. External verification – establishing authenticity through external checks can include the following steps:
- i. Contact the issuing institution to verify the applicant's qualifications;
  - ii. Request the applicant to have their transcript sent directly to you by the awarding institution in a sealed envelope;
  - iii. Contact the relevant bodies/authorities in the country of origin or contact your national recognition centre for their professional opinion on the documents presented in relation to authenticity;
  - iv. Submit original documents for forensic examination.

Nota Bene: The development of modern communication technologies has made this step faster and less costly. However, please note that it is important to get the applicant's permission before externally verifying their document for privacy protection reasons. You should consider asking for the applicant's permission in the standard application form used by your educational institution. Please also bear in mind that some countries and some institutions may not respond to such enquiries; this, however, should not be interpreted to the applicant's disadvantage.

A recent initiative to make it easier to verify foreign qualifications is Digital Student Data Depositories Worldwide (<http://www.groningendeclaration.org/>). The intention is to make national student databases available for verification of qualifications.

#### **Example 5.6 – Checking with issuing institution**

An applicant has submitted an application for admission. After comparing his/her educational documents with a verified certificate and transcripts issued by the same institution in the same year available in your internal data bank of verified genuine credentials, you identify considerable differences in appearance: the logo is incorrect and in the wrong position; the text is right rather than centre-aligned and a number of spelling errors and inconsistencies are detected within the text.

After determining these inconsistencies, you send out a request for verification to the issuing institution with the submitted copies of the documents attached.

Further processing of the application for admission is suspended until the answer from the issuing institution is received. Once the answer has been received, the decision is made accordingly

- b. Additional requirements of the applicant include:
- i. Ask to see the original documents; if this option is included in your recognition process, make sure that you have implemented a reliable procedure for handling original documents. This should include clear instructions to the applicant on how to send in the originals safely (e.g. by registered mail), and for your office on how to receive and store them safely, how to treat the documents during examination, and how to return them safely to the applicant. You should also consider the costs of this procedure and who is going to pay for it, as well as the (financial) risks if things go wrong;
  - ii. Ask for legalisation/Apostille of The Hague (1961) in countries where the use of legalisation/Apostille is widely known. Keep in mind that the legalisation seals and the Apostille do not attest to the truthfulness of the contents of the document and that documents are not verified in all countries prior to legalisation. Apostille stamps provide no assurance that an institution or educational programme is legitimate.
  - iii. Be aware that the absence of legalisation is no reason to suspect fraudulent practices, and it should only be asked for in exceptional circumstances when fraud is suspected so as to avoid overly complicated and costly recognition procedures.

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

## Sources and references

### Suggestions for country specific sources for verifying certain documents

The following sources can be used for verifying certain documents. Note that no one complete list exists to provide all information and sources. Please be aware that this list is not complete and is subject to change:

- Bangladesh: secondary school and higher secondary examination results.  
Link: [www.educationboardresults.gov.bd](http://www.educationboardresults.gov.bd);
- China: verification service for Chinese qualifications.  
Link: [www.vetassess.com.au/migrate\\_to\\_australia/verify\\_chinese\\_documents.cfm](http://www.vetassess.com.au/migrate_to_australia/verify_chinese_documents.cfm);
- Gambia: West African Examinations Council (WAEC).  
Link: [www.waecdirect.org](http://www.waecdirect.org);
- Ghana: West African Examinations Council (WAEC).  
Link: <http://ghana.waecdirect.org>;
- India:
  - Central Board of Secondary Education.  
Link: [www.cbse.nic.in](http://www.cbse.nic.in);
  - India Results.  
Link: [www.indiaresults.com](http://www.indiaresults.com);
- Kenya: KNEC.  
Link: [www.knec.ac.ke/main/index.php](http://www.knec.ac.ke/main/index.php);
- Nigeria.
  - WAEC.  
Link: [www.waecdirect.org](http://www.waecdirect.org);
  - NECO.  
Link: [www.mynecoexamns.com](http://www.mynecoexamns.com);

- Pakistan (HEC):
  - Secondary and Intermediate Examination results can often be verified at the issuing institution's website, e.g. BISE Lahore results.  
Link: [www.biselahore.com](http://www.biselahore.com);
  - Degree verification.  
Link: [www.hec.gov.pk/insidehec/divisions/QALI/DegreeAttestationEquivalence/DegreeAttestationServices/Pages/Default.aspx](http://www.hec.gov.pk/insidehec/divisions/QALI/DegreeAttestationEquivalence/DegreeAttestationServices/Pages/Default.aspx);
  - Verification for the University of the Punjab.  
Link: <http://pu.edu.pk/home/results>;
- Romania: ebacalaureat.ro  
Link: [www.ebacalaureat.ro](http://www.ebacalaureat.ro);
- Sierra Leone: WAEC.  
Link: [www.waecsierra-leone.org](http://www.waecsierra-leone.org);
- South Africa:
  - South African Qualifications Authority.  
Link: <http://verisearch.octoplus.co.za/>;
  - Department of basic education.  
Link: [www.education.gov.za](http://www.education.gov.za) (Matric Results section);
- Tanzania: 2009 ACSE results can be viewed on the Tanzania Examinations Council.  
Link: [www.necta.go.tz](http://www.necta.go.tz);
- Moldova: verification service for Moldova qualifications.  
Link: <https://ctice.md/verif/>
- Ukraine: verification service.  
Link: [www.osvita.net](http://www.osvita.net).

#### **Country-specific sources for national format document samples**

- France.  
Link: [http://cache.media.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/file/43/59/0/annexe9139\\_367590.pdf](http://cache.media.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/file/43/59/0/annexe9139_367590.pdf)  
(university degrees only);
- Russia.  
Link: [www.russianenic.ru/rus/diplom.html](http://www.russianenic.ru/rus/diplom.html);
- Ukraine.  
Link: [www.osvita.net/html.php?link=3](http://www.osvita.net/html.php?link=3).

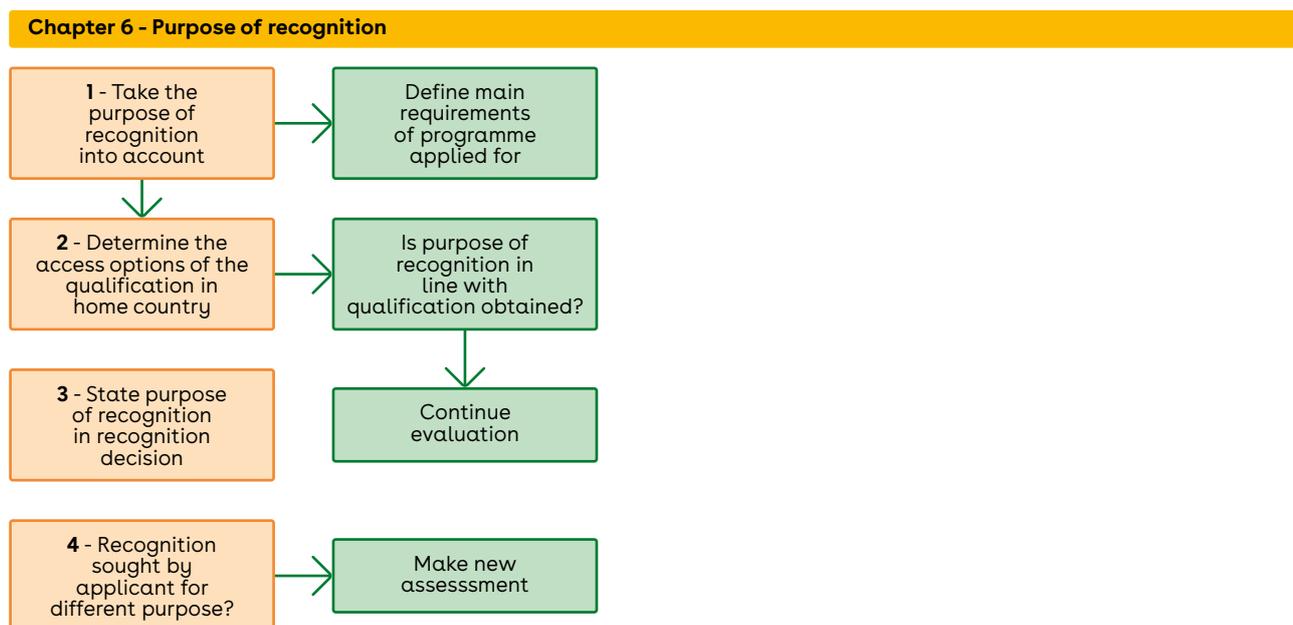
Nota Bene: only a limited number of countries use national formats for their higher education qualifications.

# 6. Purpose of Recognition

## Summary

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 with the academic purpose of recognition. This chapter therefore serves to give a better understanding how purpose should be taken into consideration in academic recognition and provides explanatory examples.

## Flowchart



## Introduction

### Purpose of recognition

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

### Academic recognition

Academic recognition focuses on recognition of periods of study or qualifications issued by an educational institution with regard to a person wishing to continue or to 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 consideration when assessing a foreign qualification in order to ensure the assessment is both accurate and relevant. The assessment and recognition of a qualification for entry into 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 differ depending on the level and specialisation of a specific study programme, for which admission is sought. In other words, the assessment of

the required learning outcomes and competences related to a completed qualification may vary depending on the purpose of recognition.

### **Recommendation**

1. Take the purpose for which recognition is sought into account by defining the main requirements of the study programme to which the applicant is applying.

#### **Example 6.1 - Take the purpose of recognition into consideration**

Usually, the admissions 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 can be applied to certain types of national qualifications.

In order to create efficient and transparent admissions procedures for applicants with foreign qualifications, you should try to transform the national and institutional requirements into a set of comparable requirements that should be fulfilled by applicants with foreign qualifications to have a good chance of successfully completing the programme. Since the requirements for admission to a bachelor's programme in dentistry will be very different from those for admission to a master's programme in business administration, the purpose of recognition determines to a large extent the outcome of the recognition process.

2. Some qualifications may grant restricted access to higher education in the home country. The restriction may be applicable to certain levels of programmes, certain types of higher education institutions, and/or certain fields of study. Depending on what the student in question wants to study, the same restrictions may apply at your institution.

#### **Example 6.2 - 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 working at a higher education institution in another country grants full recognition for the purpose of admission to a bachelor programme in computer science. If on the other hand the applicant would seek admission to a bachelor's programme in medicine, the admissions officer reports a substantial difference in profile and learning outcomes for the purpose of admission.

3. The recognition decision prepared for the applicant should provide transparent information and clearly state the purpose of recognition.

### **Example 6.3 – 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 (admission to which programme of the higher education institution in country A);
- a comparison of the qualification from country B to a specific qualification in country A's education system. If the qualification does not correspond fully 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 qualification of the applicant).

4. If recognition is sought by an applicant for a purpose different from the one previously covered by a recognition statement, a renewed assessment is advised.

### **Example 6.4 - 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 which requires a previous degree with a high level of specialisation in the given field. The applicant applies to another postgraduate programme at the same higher education institution, which requires a general bachelor's degree. The admissions officer uses the earlier information collected in the application file (e.g. the checks on the accreditation status and authenticity of the qualification), changes the purpose of recognition in the recognition statement and writes a new assessment of the qualification, this time resulting in full recognition.

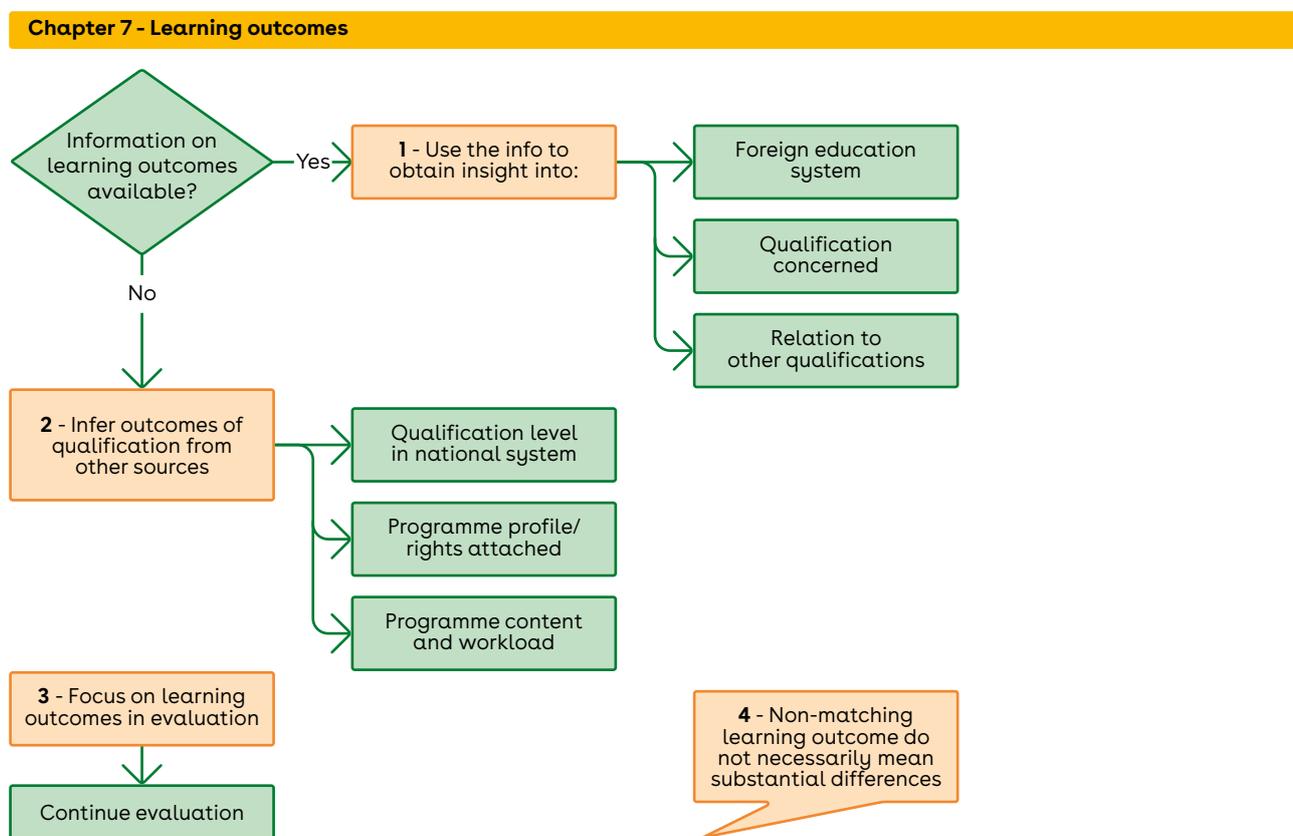
# 7. Learning Outcomes

## Summary

Recognition of foreign qualifications should not focus on a detailed assessment of formal criteria related to the foreign qualification, but should, as much as possible, take into consideration what a person knows, understands, and is able to do. This can be achieved by taking into consideration the learning outcomes of qualifications.

This chapter provides information and guidance on the use of learning outcomes in recognition and gives a brief introduction to the concept of learning outcomes and main information sources as well.

## Flowchart



## Introduction

### What are learning outcomes?

A 'Learning Outcome' could be defined as a statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to demonstrate after completion of any type of learning activity. It may be written for a single module or programme component, an individual programme, a qualification level, or anything in between. In practice, the term 'Learning Outcome' is also used to indicate the overall output of a programme, rather than in the narrow sense of a technical statement as described here.

Learning outcomes are often divided into two types:

- Specific learning outcomes, which are related to the subject discipline;
- Generic learning outcomes, which are transferable from one academic discipline to another.

Various systems for writing learning outcomes are being used or developed. For instance, generic learning outcomes are linked to the cycles or levels of the overarching EHEA-QF and EQF (for more information see Chapter 15, 'Qualifications Frameworks').

National qualifications frameworks make use of several descriptors:

- Qualification descriptors, used as generic descriptions of the various types of qualifications;
- Level descriptors, used as generic descriptions of the various levels;
- National subject benchmark statements, describing the subject-specific characteristics and standards of programmes.

### **Where can information on learning outcomes be found?**

General information on learning outcomes at the national level might be found in the following features of national qualifications frameworks:

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

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

- Diploma supplement;
- Description of the study programme;
- Programme profile or degree profile.

### **How are learning outcomes used in the recognition of foreign qualifications and periods of study?**

Because learning outcomes are being used more and more often to describe qualifications and develop study programmes, learning outcomes are becoming a key element in recognition of foreign qualifications and periods of study. Learning outcomes relate to and reflect all the other elements of qualifications as they are directly linked to the level and profile of a qualification and are subject to the appropriate (or relevant) workload and quality of the institution and programme.

If 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). So, in evaluating foreign qualifications, the principal question asked of the graduate will primarily be 'what can you do, now that you have obtained your qualification?'

It should be noted that the use of learning outcomes in recognition depends strongly on the availability and quality of the description of learning outcomes and to some extent on the expertise of the evaluators, who may be more used to assessing quantitative criteria (such as level and workload) than qualitative ones.

### **Recommendation**

When evaluating a qualification it is recommended that you:

1. Use the available information on learning outcomes of the foreign system of education, of the qualification concerned and on its relation to other qualifications awarded within that system.

**Example 7.1 – 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 7.2 – Use of learning outcomes to understand how qualifications relate to each other**

In some education systems (including Ireland), there is a distinction between honours bachelors' degrees and ordinary bachelors' 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 bachelors' 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.

2. In the absence of information on learning outcomes, try to infer the outcomes of the qualification from its other elements, such as:
  - a. The place of the qualification in the national education system (level);
  - b. The purpose of the programme and the rights attached to the qualification (profile);
  - c. The contents of the programme and its compulsory elements (such as a thesis or dissertation, or work placement);
  - d. The workload of the programme.

**Example 7.3 – absence of information on learning outcomes**

In the traditional way of evaluating qualifications, a set of formal criteria is checked by the admissions officer. This is still an important part of credential evaluation, and the only option available if there is no direct information on learning outcomes. A good way to proceed from there is to take the input criteria into account and see what they can tell you about the learning outcomes of the qualification. For instance, a programme at the master's level which includes writing a substantial thesis and provides access to PhD programmes in the home country is expected to achieve learning outcomes that are sufficient for doing independent research. If you use this approach, you are less likely to concentrate on finding differences in separate elements of the qualification.

3. Focus on the learning outcomes in the evaluation of foreign qualifications.

**Example 7.4 – 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 a 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.

4. Keep in mind that lists of learning outcomes of two programmes that don't match up are not necessarily a sign of substantial differences between the programmes. The various systems of writing learning outcomes currently in existence do not allow for making simple one-by-one comparisons between lists of learning outcomes. Such comparisons require a certain amount of interpretation by the credential evaluator.

**Example 7.5 – Learning outcomes that are unexpectedly missing**

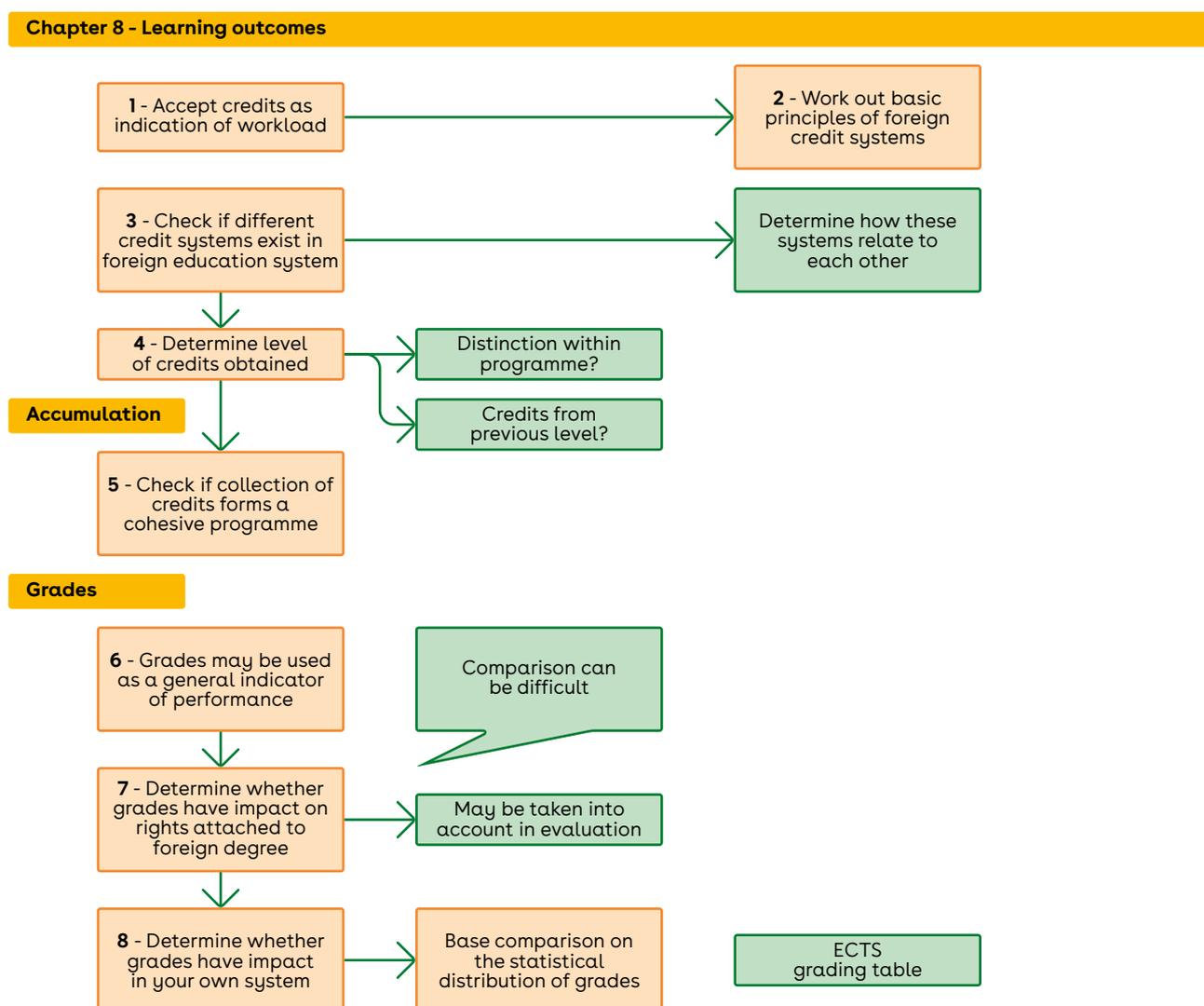
It might be that an important learning outcome of the programme has been overlooked by the compilers of the list, whereas it might be obvious from the rest of the information on the programme that such a learning outcome is being developed within the programme. The learning outcomes assigned to a particular programme should always be looked at within the context of the general learning outcomes assigned to the qualifications at that level (as expressed in national qualification descriptors and level descriptors).

# 8. Credits, grades, credit accumulation and credit transfer

## Summary

Credits quantitatively describe learner achievements. They are awarded after successful completion of the programme or module. In general, credits relate to student workload, although practices vary within and between countries. Grades may be associated with credits. There is no internationally agreed system for the conversions of grades; comparisons of grades should be based on their statistical distribution.

## Flowchart



## Introduction

### Credits

Credits measure the volume of learning based on the achievement of learning outcomes and their associated workloads measured in time. Learning achievements are awarded to the learner upon successful completion of a given unit of a study programme and/or a complete programme. Credits do not normally take the level of performance into consideration unless otherwise specified.

Different credit systems exist across various sectors and levels of education worldwide. A credit system may be limited to a single institution, to a specific national context, or to an aggregate of different national education systems, in the manner of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Internationally, credits are usually based upon the estimated student workload necessary to achieve the learning outcomes. However the system used to convert workload into credits varies. Student workload may be related to hours of academic work completed by the student or to contact hours.

### 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. 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

It is important to realize that credit accumulation and credit transfer are not parallel processes: accumulation operates, in its simple form, when the student is not mobile; transfer comes into play in order to allow mobile students to accumulate credit in an uninterrupted manner. While 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 credit system or institution with the same goal of achieving a given amount of credits in order to obtain a specific qualification. Thus, credit transfer involves a recognition process and is 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. Such qualifications frameworks may be mapped onto other national or international frameworks.

## Grades

Grades represent the intermediate or final evaluation of 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 excellent, pass, merit or fail. 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.

ECTS has tried to solve this problem by suggesting a grading table that provides information about the applicant's performance with regard 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. Credits should be accepted 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, you should work out 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, an admissions officer in country P (which uses ECTS credits) examines the amount of Q-credits spent on key 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 if there are different credit systems in use in one country and if the credit system was changed at a particular point in time, and determine how these systems can be converted to each other and to your own credit system. Make sure that you apply the correct factor to the credits you want to convert.

### 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 1 study point represented 1 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. The admissions officer (who is working in the ECTS system) applies the same factor to the credits listed in the qualification of the applicant.

4. Consider at what level credits have been achieved. Typical cases where the level of the credits could play a role in the evaluation of a foreign qualification are:
- Programmes in which the student is permitted to include a limited number of credits from a level below that of the programme itself;
  - Programmes with clear distinctions between introductory courses in the first year versus advanced courses in later years of the programme.
- Determine whether credits for essential subjects required for admission to the programme in your institution have been obtained at a sufficient level.

### Example 8.3 – Credits at different levels

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 doesn't permit applying credits obtained at the bachelor's level towards a master's degree.

### Credit Accumulation

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 a transcript indicating that 180 ECTS have been completed in a three-year bachelor's programme of 180 ECTS. However, there is no final qualification and it is not clear whether or not the student has successfully completed the programme. The applicant may have acquired some additional credits for non-compulsory subjects, while at the same time, some compulsory subjects are still missing. This would result in a transcript showing that 180 ECTS have been accumulated, but which does not represent a fully completed programme. Accordingly, the recognition decision is suspended until the final qualification 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:

6. Be aware 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 – Grading: no impact on 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 was not very impressive, having consistently obtained the lowest passing grade.

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.

Accepting or rejecting this student will depend to a certain extent on the competitiveness of the admissions process and if you take grades into consideration.

7. 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 8.6 – 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 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 degree in itself forms sufficient preparation for the master programme and admit the applicant to the programme.

8. If grades have a direct impact on the rights of access to further study in your own education system, you may take this into account in your evaluation of the foreign qualification. In this case, 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

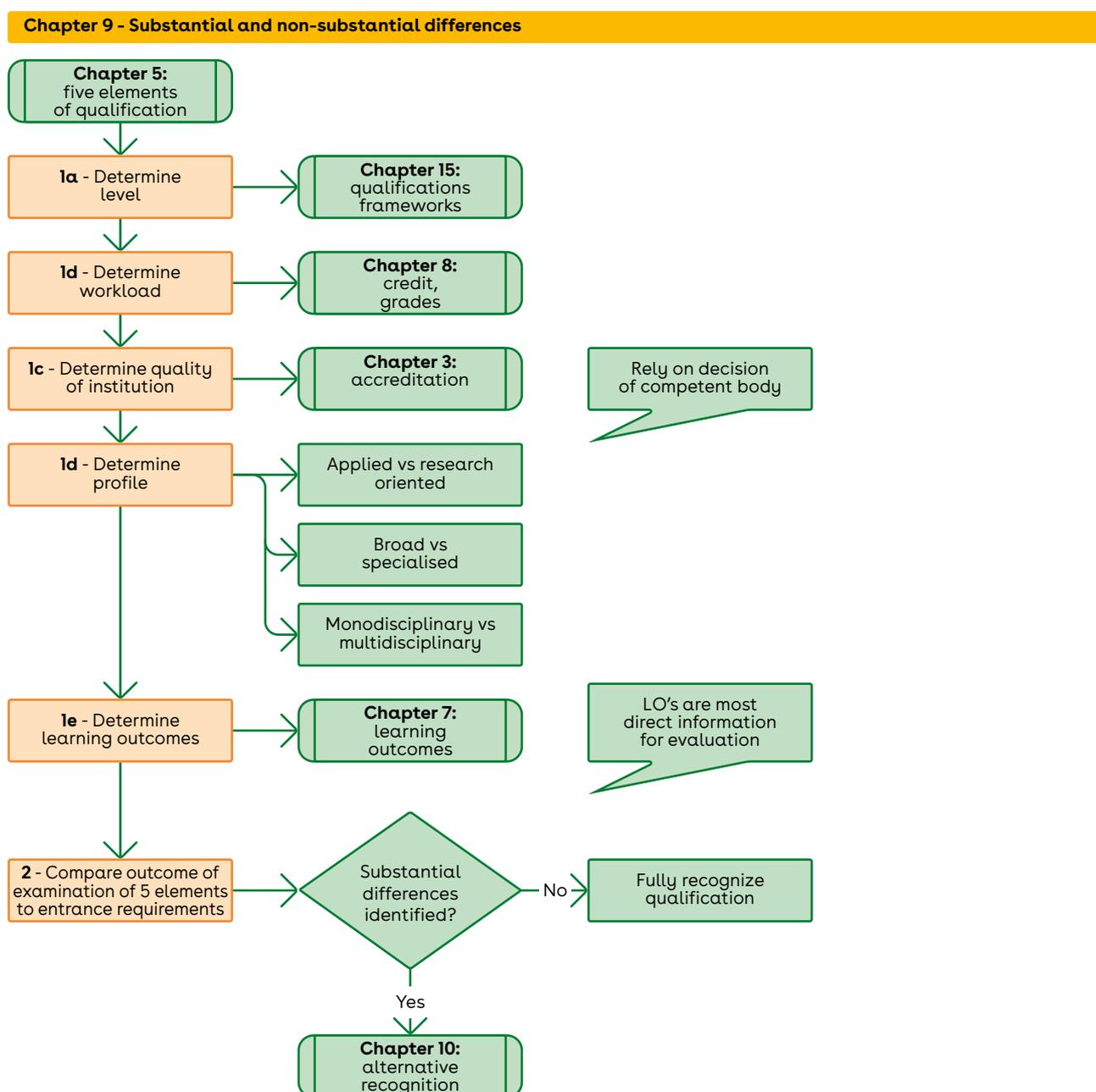
- Website European Commission on European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).  
Link: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/ects\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/ects_en.htm);
- Website European Commission on European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET).  
Link: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/ecvet\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/ecvet_en.htm);
- EGRACONS (European Grade Conversion System)  
Link: <http://egracons.eu> (website) and <https://tool.egracons.eu/> (tool, registration and password needed)

# 9. Substantial and non-substantial differences

## Summary

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, as well as recommendations on how to report substantial differences to the applicant.

## Flowchart



## 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 further study or research activities.

### Burden of proof

The burden of proof of a substantial difference lies with the higher education institution to which the individual submits his/her application. The fact that you might sometimes be uncertain about specific components/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 bound to appear;
- The difference should be substantial in relation to the function of the qualification and the purpose for which recognition is sought (see chapter 6, 'Purpose of Recognition').
- The difference as such may seem substantial, but may be acceptable in 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 you should open the gates for non-qualified applicants. You should ensure that the applicant is offered a fair chance of succeeding (e.g. by providing a student support system which would enable the applicant to quickly catch up and progress with the programme) and that the quality of the programme is not at risk.

### Interpretation of substantial differences

The interpretation of substantial differences is very much linked to the learning outcomes of a qualification, programme and/or programme components, since these determine whether the applicant has been prepared sufficiently for further study. A difference that is only related to input criteria (such as the workload of the programme) is not likely to have a direct effect on the abilities of the applicant, and should therefore not be considered automatically as a substantial difference.

## Recommendations

In judging whether differences between qualifications are substantial or not, 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, you should take into account the five key elements of a qualification: 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 the key elements, you should still determine whether this also leads to a substantial difference in the overall outcome of the qualification, or whether it is compensated by another key element of the qualification. You should focus on learning outcomes when evaluating the qualification.

The following questions may be helpful when assessing the qualification:

- a. What is the level of the qualification and does it give 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'. Usually, qualifications at different levels (such as bachelors' degrees, masters' degrees 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. Thus, judgements on differences in this respect should be based on thorough examination of the context of the credit system used. A substantial difference may arise if a different 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'.) If the national authorities make a clear distinction between institutions and/or qualifications of different quality within their own education system, you may take this information into account in your evaluation. However, the recognition of a qualification should not depend on whether it was awarded by an institution that is highly ranked in one of the many international ranking lists that are being published nowadays.

- d. What is the profile of the programme?

Is the programme meant to prepare the student for work in a particular profession or for doing 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 which is very different from one required of domestic students, since the qualification might be lacking in some essential components. See Example 9.5 below.

- e. What are the learning outcomes of the programme?

The learning outcomes describe what a graduate knows, understands and is able to do after having obtained a particular qualification (see chapter 7, 'Learning Outcomes'). In principle, this should provide the most direct information on which to base the presence or absence of substantial differences, but the information on learning outcomes of qualifications is still scarce and sometimes difficult to interpret.

### **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, but only those that are essential to successfully pursue the study programme.

- a. If non-substantial differences have been identified, accept the qualification

If you have found that there are no substantial differences that could be a major obstacle for succeeding in the given programme, you should fully recognize the qualification.

### **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 probably be no substantial differences between the foreign qualification and the required one.

Obviously, there are bound to be differences in the contents of history programmes offered in two different countries in for example subjects covering national history. However, these differences should not be considered substantial. During their studies, applicants will have developed the competences to easily extend their knowledge of history to any particular period or country.

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

If an applicant wishes to continue at the master's level in a field of study different from the one studied at the bachelor's level, this does not automatically constitute a substantial difference by itself, as long as the overall academic goals of the two programmes are coherent. For instance, a bachelor's degree in physics could constitute adequate preparation for admission to a master's programme in the history of science or philosophy of science. If the applicant is seeking admission to a graduate programme in a more remote field, he or she can in all fairness be required to complete additional requirements such as certain prerequisite courses.

This would also be required of national students who choose to continue in a more remote field at the graduate level.

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

In many countries, the combined workload of consecutive bachelors' and masters' programmes is 300 ECTS (usually 180 ECTS for the bachelor's programme and 120 ECTS for the master's programme). However, there are also countries where a bachelor's programme of 180 ECTS may be followed by a master's programme of 60-90 ECTS. The purposes and learning outcomes of these masters' programmes may be comparable to the 120 ECTS masters' 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 overall outcome of the programme (which would prevent the applicant from succeeding) should be reported.

- b. If substantial differences have been found, report them to the applicant and consider other ways of recognizing the qualification.
  - i. 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;
  - ii. Inform the applicant about the reason for denial of recognition and about the nature of the substantial differences found. This would give 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 with an ordinary bachelor's degree in chemistry from country X is applying 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 reports that there are substantial differences in level, purpose and learning outcomes of the foreign qualification, and decides that admission to the master's programme is not possible.

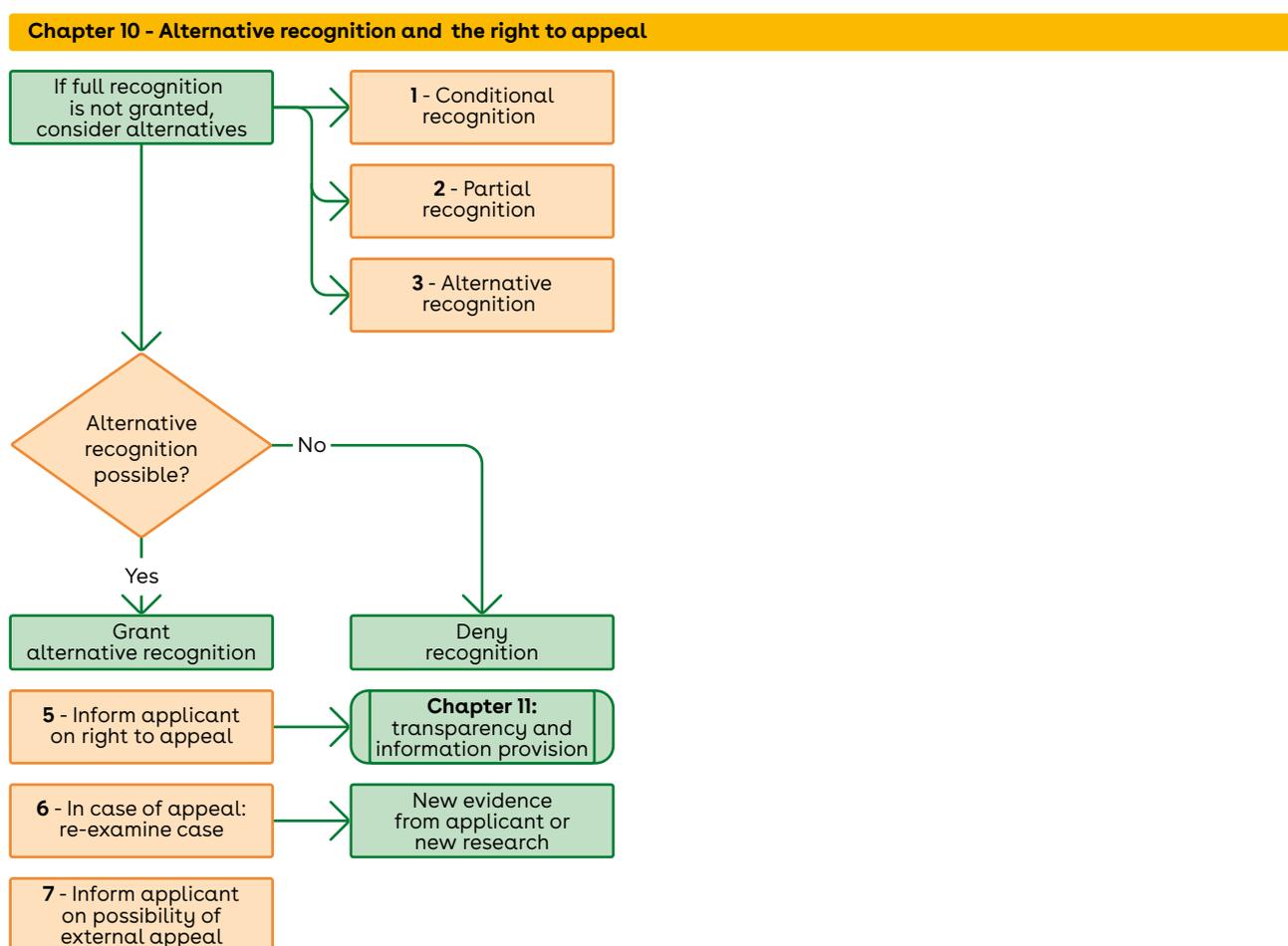
Consider alternative, partial or conditional recognition (see chapter 10, 'Alternative recognition and the right to appeal').

# 10. Alternative recognition and the right to appeal

## Summary

Having analysed the foreign qualification, you may conclude that your institution cannot recognise it according to the applicant's expectations. This chapter will introduce you to alternative types of recognition. It further informs you about the right of applicants to appeal against the recognition decision.

## Flowchart



## 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), 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).

If the applicant agrees with the outcome, the procedure is complete. If however the applicant disagrees with the outcome, he or she has the right to appeal the decision. The appeals procedure is usually regulated by the national legislation.

## Recommendations

### Alternative recognition

If full recognition cannot be granted due to substantial differences, you should consider alternative ways of recognizing 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), e.g. 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.

2. Grant partial recognition, e.g. accept some of the credits earned by the applicant in the course of 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 credits accepted.

#### 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 - Recognize 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, in order to qualify for admission to the bachelor's programme.

4. When you cannot find any alternative form of recognition (alternative, partial or conditional) you may deny recognition to the applicant. Explain why recognition cannot be granted and how the applicant may proceed to obtain a qualification that would satisfy the admissions requirements. Not granting any form of recognition may also be a form of 'fair recognition', especially when the applicant submitted fraudulent documents or a qualification issued by a diploma mill or a degree awarded by a non-recognized 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 the decision made by your institution 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 and the possibility for appeal.

### Example 10.7 - Inform about the possibility of appeal

An applicant with a bachelor's degree in French language and literature is applying to a master's programme in psychology. The admissions officer decides that due to substantial differences in profile and learning outcomes, the student isn't eligible for admission. The decision is explained in a letter to the applicant and information is provided about the possibility of appealing 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 educational 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 applicable, the applicant should be informed about the possibility of external appeal. 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.

### 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. The applicant has previously completed two years of a bachelor's programme in country Y and seeks admission to the third year in order to complete the bachelor's programme in country X in less time. The university grants one year of advanced standing and agrees to admit the student to the second year of the bachelor's programme. The applicant disagrees with the 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 III

# Institutional Recognition Practices

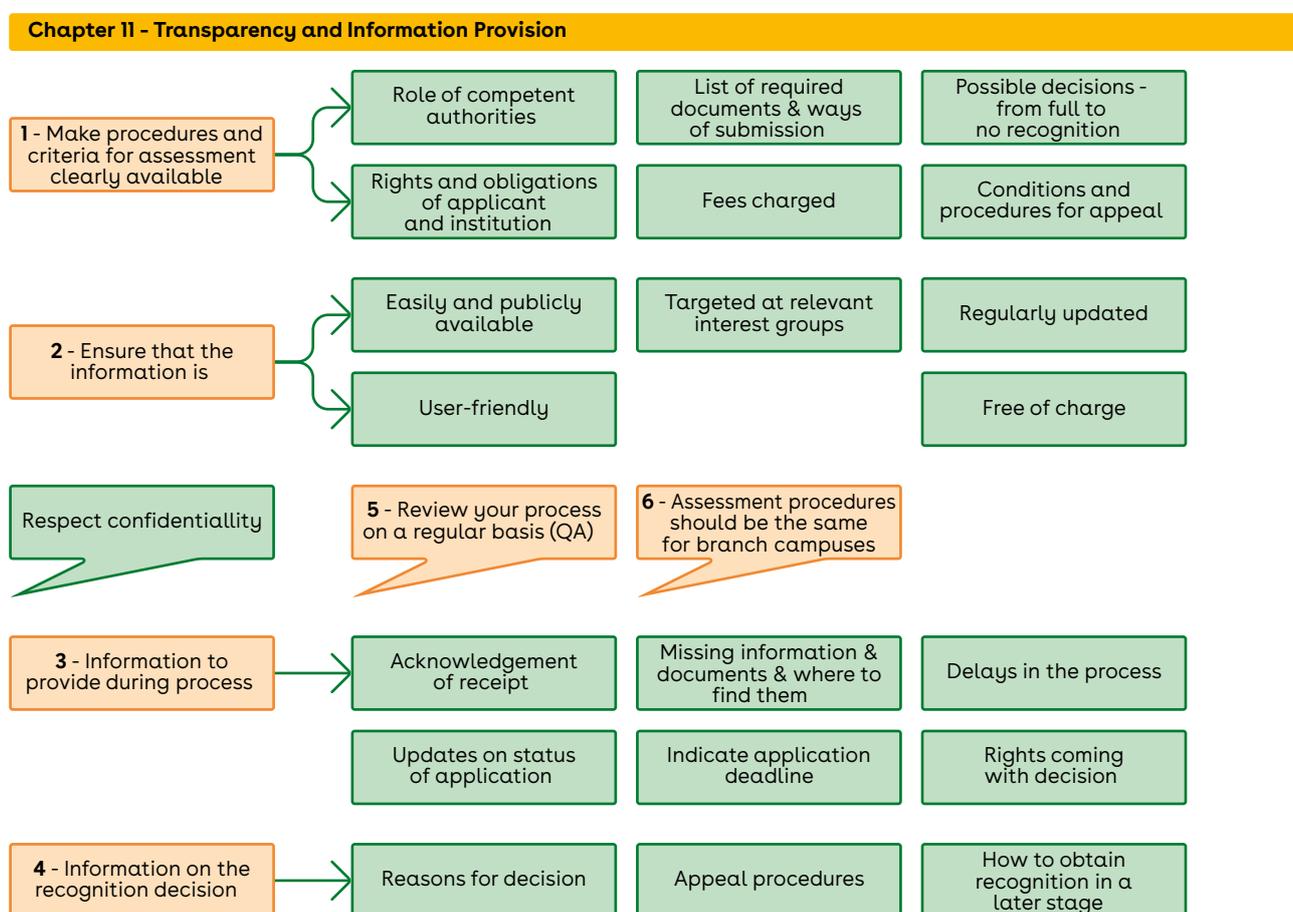
Part III of the manual focuses on what is needed for the recognition process to run smoothly and to be fair. This part describes on one hand the 'recognition infrastructure' that needs to be in place to facilitate the recognition process and the quality assurance of the procedure. In addition it aims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

# 11. Transparency and Information Provision

## Summary

When students apply to your institution, it is in their interest - and yours - that they have all the information they need regarding the application and recognition procedures. If this information is not readily available, time may be wasted, career plans disrupted, and institutional reputation put at risk. Remember that not only students, but also their possible sponsors (employers, funding bodies, parents) may wish to have this information.

## Flowchart



## 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 the precondition of the fair treatment of all applications.

As an admissions officer, transparency should be one of your prime concerns, from the receipt of an application, during the selection process and up to the point the final decision is made. At the same time, you are bound to protect the personal data of applicants. There is no conflict between transparency of procedure and personal data protection.

Apart from transparency, this chapter also gives recommendations on the information provided by your institution, because this is essential for creating and establishing transparency. In general, the emphasis should be placed not on the amount of information, but more on its relevance, clarity, and availability.

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 he or she can accurately identify procedural failings on the part of the higher education institution. It is also for this reason that well-organized transparency and information provision is of importance.

The recommendations provided in this chapter complement those made by your national recognition agency, which you are encouraged to contact if you require specific advice.

## Recommendations

To establish transparency on 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 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 needed to process an application (there should be a commitment that all information requests will be answered within a reasonable amount of time);
  - h. Any fees charged for processing the application
  - i. References to relevant legislation (national and international, etc.);
  - 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 where the qualification was obtained. Required documents may include:

- copy of the qualification in the original language;
- sworn translation of the qualification (if it is not in a widely spoken language);
- copy of the Diploma Supplement or similar information source (e.g. a transcript);
- curriculum vitae;
- 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 should be submitted: by post, electronically, uploaded into a database, etc.

2. Ensure that the information provided on the recognition process and procedure is:
  - a. Easily and publicly accessible;
  - 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 inquiries (telephone numbers and e-mail addresses);
  - d. Targeted at all relevant interest groups (e.g. qualification holders and if applicable others such as refugees, employers, etc);
  - e. Available in a variety of forms (e.g. electronically, by telephone, by post, face-to-face, and/or hard copy, etc).;
  - f. Provided not only in the national language but also in a second widely spoken language, preferably English;
  - g. Regularly updated;
  - h. Free of charge.

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

On its website, a higher education institution publishes a short overview of earlier assessment outcomes made 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 result that can be expected if they submit an application for admission to this higher education institution.

The overview is regularly updated, and only outcomes that are in line 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 during the application procedure to the applicant:
  - a. Acknowledge receipt of the application;
  - b. If applicable, indicate documentation and/or information that are lacking, using the terminology of the applicant's country of origin;
  - c. Provide informal advice to the applicant 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 the application deadline;
  - f. Inform applicants of 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 applicants and provide all the required information within your sphere of competence;
  - i. Respect the confidentiality of the application 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 a confirmation on the status of the institution that awarded the qualification. You contact the relevant authorities in country Z to investigate the status of the institution, but it takes longer than you 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 facilitate the provision of the required information by the competent authorities.

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. Rights granted by the recognition decision in the host country;
  - d. In case of a negative decision, information on the appeals procedure, including the path to follow and the deadline (see chapter 10, 'Alternative recognition and the right to appeal');
  - e. If applicable, provide 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 various standard reasons for not granting full recognition, to be used when substantial differences in the qualification of the applicant have been found. These reasons relate to the assessment criteria of the higher education institution, based on the LRC. The admissions officers may pick the appropriate phrases as a point of departure when sending a negative recognition decision to an applicant. The overview document serves to ensure the consistency and efficiency of case processing.

5. Review the procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications and periods of study on a regular basis in order to adapt them to developments in the field of higher education and to evolving models of good practice in recognition, while ensuring at the same time that they are not discriminatory.

### **Example 11.5 - Review of procedures and criteria (1)**

The most logical option to implement this recommendation would be to include such a review in the quality assurance system of your institution. This could take the form of doing an annual management review, where you analyse the effectiveness and main results of your procedures. The input of the review may consist of 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 followed up in the next year.

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

**Example 11.6 - Review of procedures and criteria (2)**

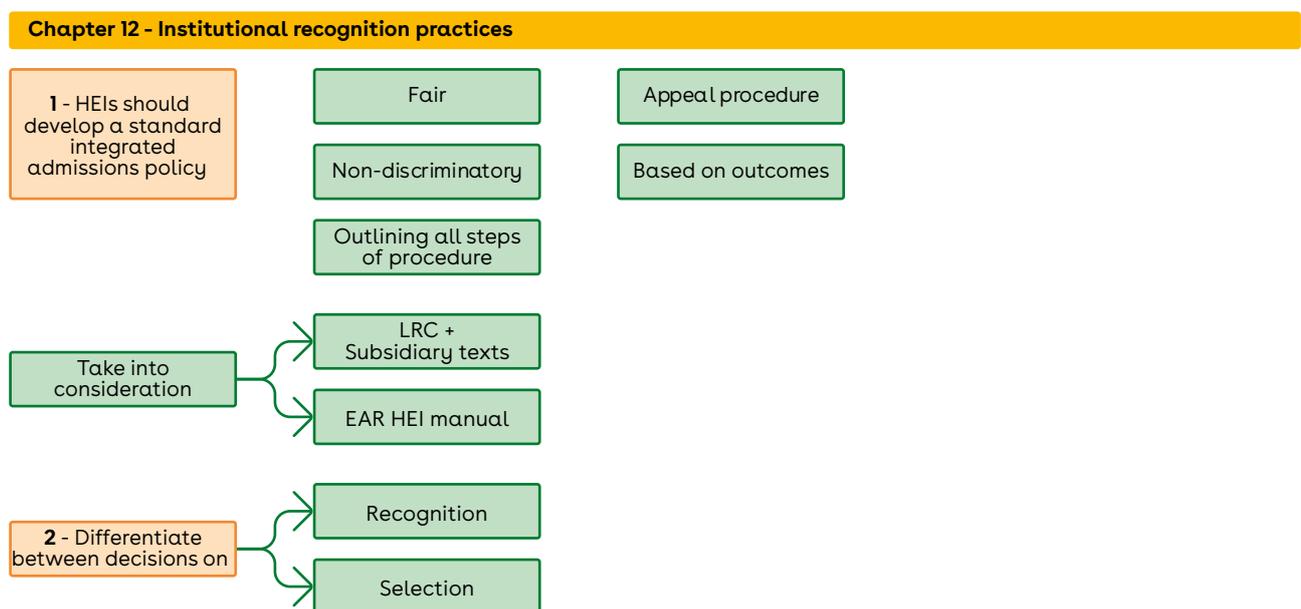
Your institution may be located at two or more places (possibly in various different countries) where separate admissions offices are in operation. Admission to programmes of your institution may also be handled by agencies. In such cases, it is very important to have a central system of information provision for all parties involved and to ensure consistency in applying the recognition criteria (possibly by using a central evaluation database).

# 12. Institutional recognition practices

## Summary

This chapter describes good recognition practice in higher education institutions and provides recommendations on how to improve institutional procedures. Quality assurance of the recognition procedure is an important tool to enhance the quality and consistency of recognition decisions. Models of cooperation between ENIC-NARIC centres and admissions offices are discussed.

## Flowchart



## Institutional recognition practice

According to the Trends 2010 report published by EUA, the more centralized the recognition procedure is within a higher education institution, the more likely it is that students will not encounter problems with recognition. It is therefore recommended in the report that institutions should create a central recognition unit, to support effective and coherent recognition of study abroad periods and foreign degrees, and that this unit should be located within the student service functions.

Such a central recognition unit is able to develop uniform procedures and make available all relevant information on recognition to the academic staff members involved. It is good practice for university websites to contain a page on recognition procedures, with a flowchart, a list of criteria, a link to the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), notes on how to use learning outcomes, templates for acceptance and rejection letters to students and a link to the EAR manual.

## Procedures

To ensure fair recognition practice by your institution it is recommended that procedures and criteria be established for:

- Communication with applicants (as described in chapter 11, 'Transparency and Information Provision');
- The assessment of foreign qualifications (based on the evaluation process as described in parts II and V of this manual);
- The appeals procedure (based on chapter 10, 'Alternative recognition and the right to appeal').

These procedures and criteria should be made publicly available by your institution.

## Information management

Information management – involving the creation of databases and organisation of information sources – is another prerequisite to enable fair recognition decisions.

### Databases

It is recommended that the following databases (which may be combined into one system) be 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 be useful, these databases should not only be created, but 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**

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.).

### **Sources**

A systematic organization of sources and references is recommended because it will benefit the efficiency of the overall recognition process in your institution. Most sources and references to sources can be found in part 4 'Information instruments'.

### **Quality assurance of the recognition procedure**

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.

The basis for this recommendation is that some countries claim that the state cannot ensure that higher education institutions follow the principles of the LRC, since they are autonomous.

The issue can be resolved by incorporating the procedures for recognition into the internal quality assurance mechanisms, duly monitored by the external quality assurance agency. Such a solution avoids the prescription of national recognition procedures, but rather allows higher education institutions themselves to find the most appropriate procedures to ensure compliance with the LRC legal framework while maintaining their academic autonomy.

This solution has been endorsed by the recent revision of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Standard 1.4 of 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 reads as follows:

*'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.'*

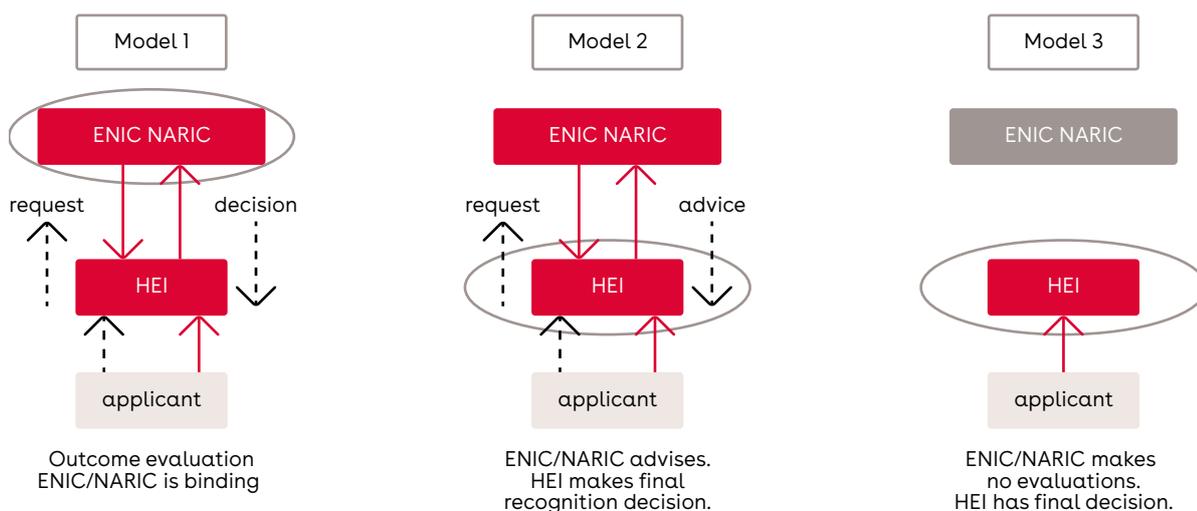
The principles and recommendations described in this EAR HEI manual -because they are based on the LRC and are commonly accepted as good practice- can therefore be used to establish an appropriate internal quality assurance procedure.

### **Institutional recognition in the national framework**

The institutional recognition practice is determined by how recognition is organized in the national context. This is usually laid down in the national education law. One important factor in the national framework is how the higher education institution cooperates with the national ENIC-NARIC centre, and more specifically whether the evaluations of the ENIC-NARIC centre are legally binding or recommendations. In general, three types of situations may be encountered:

1. Authoritative model. The ENIC-NARIC centre issues binding recognition decisions. In this case the higher education institution needs to follow the recognition decision made by the ENIC-NARIC;
2. Consultative model. The ENIC-NARIC centre provides recommendations. In this case the higher education institution makes the recognition decision, based on the recommendation but possibly not in line with it;
3. Methodological guidance model. The ENIC-NARIC centre does not evaluate foreign qualifications, but provides general information on them. In this case the higher education institution does the evaluation and makes the recognition decision. Some higher education institutions may also request evaluations of foreign qualifications 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 may be that in some instances the concerns of higher education institutions differ from those of the ENIC-NARIC centre. The evaluations carried out by an ENIC-NARIC centre will in most cases be standardized comparisons of the foreign qualification with the relevant national qualification. This usually does not fully take into account the requirements of a specific programme or the specific skills or expertise of the applicant.

When a higher education institution makes a recognition decision on the basis of the evaluation received from its national ENIC-NARIC centre, it may take into account its own subject-specific expertise and knowledge of the programme requirements. This may result in a final decision that is not completely in line with the initial evaluation. The decision may be more or less favourable than the generic evaluation by the ENIC-NARIC centre. However, as long as the decision by the higher education institution is in line with the LRC and can be justified, this divergence will not constitute a problem. It is nevertheless important that the higher education institutions and the ENIC-NARIC centre understand and respect each other's roles and have a clear division of tasks and responsibilities. It should also be clear to applicants to which organisation they should address their questions regarding the evaluation and to which body they should address an appeal regarding the recognition decision.

It is good practice that higher education institutions and ENIC-NARIC centres communicate with each other on problematic recognition cases and that feedback is provided on cases where their evaluations differ. This type of 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 12.2 - Academic content versus learning outcomes**

An applicant from country A with a bachelor's degree in sociology is seeking admission to a master's programme in sociology in country B. The admissions office of the higher education institution of country B has contacted the ENIC-NARIC and received an evaluation in which a substantial difference in terms of profile is indicated, because the qualification involves considerable credits outside the major subject. The admissions office has also consulted staff in the sociology faculty, who believe the applicant is qualified to enter the master's programme. This is because they are familiar with the bachelor's degree from country A and because they notice that the credits earned in other subjects are relevant as preparation for advanced study in sociology.

The admissions office decides to accept the evaluation of the sociology faculty, as this is based more directly on the learning outcomes of the qualification. It thus rules out a possible substantial difference in profile. It informs the ENIC-NARIC of its reasons for recognising the bachelor's qualification and for using their academic discretion.

### **Example 12.3 - ENIC - NARIC advice**

An applicant from country X seeks admission to a master's degree programme in country Y in the field of engineering. The applicant from country X graduated from a programme at a university of applied sciences, not a research-oriented university.

The receiving institution in country Y is a research-oriented university. The admissions office has contacted the national ENIC-NARIC, which has advised conditional recognition. Their advice is based on educational reforms that have taken place in country X, that have made it possible for students to transfer from the more applied sector of higher education to the institutions focusing on research. The conditionality of the recognition is based on the profile of the applied bachelor's programme. The applicant is required to take a compulsory module on research methodology before enrolling in the master's programme.

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.

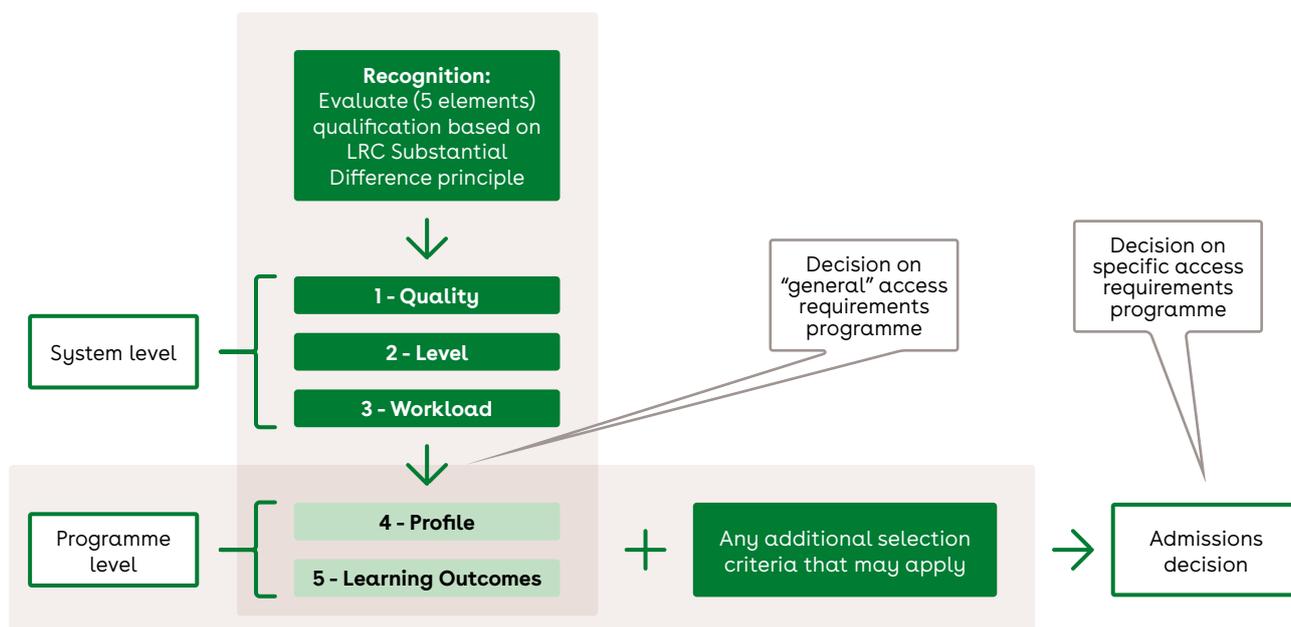
## **Admission: Recognition and Selection**

Recognition and selection are two different but related steps in the admissions procedure when handling applications of candidates with foreign academic backgrounds. While recognition focuses on determining whether the applicant's qualifications are sufficient for entry into the programme, selection focuses on other -additional- requirements posed to prospective students.

There are many types of admissions procedures operating in different countries. They may be open or selective, centralised or managed at the faculty level. Different admissions procedures may be used in the same country or even the same university. The extent to which a higher education institution can set its own entry requirements also depends on the national context. Consequently, entry requirements may be predetermined at national level. For example, all candidates may be required to take a central entrance examination. In other cases, higher education institutions may have the autonomy to select candidates in a more flexible way. Some countries may have elements of both, depending on the programme and/or the source of funding.

Regardless of the procedure in question, there are common steps which are normally present in this process.

### Admission = recognition + selection



### Recognition in the context of admission

During the process of admission, the eligibility of a candidate for access to specific programmes and/or types of programmes based on his or her academic credentials is determined. The admissions procedure usually encompasses the following:

- Determining 'General access', to establish whether the applicant has the necessary academic credentials for access to the programmes at a certain level (for example, a qualification which would allow access to the bachelors' programmes);
- Determining 'Access to specific programmes', to establish whether the applicant meets specific admissions requirements, such as a certain qualification profile, competency in certain subjects or subject clusters, if set by the admitting institution (for example, a combination of subjects, which would allow access to the bachelor's programme in medicine).

### Access versus admission

In information resources (articles, websites, etc.) on recognition practice in the EHEA, the terms 'access' and 'admission' are commonly used to describe the distinction made in this chapter between recognition and selection. Access refers to determining whether the applicant's qualifications are sufficient for entry into the programme on the system level, whereas admission refers to establishing whether the applicant meets specific admissions requirements that may apply. The term 'access' is sometimes a source of confusion because it may suggest giving guaranteed entry to a programme. Therefore, when using 'access', it is important to specify whether one speaks about general access or access (actual admission) to the programme.

In case of a positive recognition decision, the candidate who meets other eligibility requirements, such as language knowledge, is granted:

1. Admission to the programme in an open admission system; or,
2. Permission to participate in a selective admission system

In open admissions systems, access and admission overlap as all eligible candidates are admitted. However, there are admissions systems which are selective. Selection (e.g. by *numerus clausus*) may be a characteristic of the system as a whole or it may operate only when, in specific programmes, there are more applicants than study places.

During the process of selection, all eligible candidates are ranked according to certain criteria, in order to select a limited number of students for participation in a specific programme. Selection criteria may 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.

## Recommendations

### 1. Recognition and selection policy

Higher education institutions should develop a standard integrated admissions policy, that encompasses fair and non-discriminatory recognition and selection procedures and criteria and outlines the different steps in the admissions process, their outcomes, appeal procedures, etc. The approved recognition procedures and criteria should take into consideration the LRC, its subsidiary texts and this manual. The admissions policy should be publicly available and consistently applied (see [chapter 11, 'Transparency and Information Provision.'](#))

Higher education institutions should be aware of the distinction between recognition and selection. This should be reflected in the admissions policy and its application:

- a. While general admissions policy and selection criteria may show considerable variation from institution to institution and within faculties of the same institution, depending on the institutional policy and national context, recognition procedures and criteria, which follow principles of fair recognition, should demonstrate consistency on an institutional and national level;
- b. While, during selection, higher education institutions may take into consideration not only academic credentials, but also other contextual factors, such as character-related traits, linguistic competence and, in certain cases, even citizenship, a recognition decision should not be influenced by circumstances which are not related to the candidate's academic qualification.

### **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.

## 2. Recognition and selection practice

It is recommended that, in terms of recognition and selection within the admission process, higher education institutions should take the following steps:

- a. Determine the general eligibility of a candidate;
- b. Determine whether the candidate meets the specific requirements;
- c. Admit the eligible candidate or select a limited number of candidates from the pool of eligible candidates for admission.

Higher education institutions should be flexible in determining and assessing access requirements and selection criteria for candidates with foreign qualifications and should take into consideration the differences in national systems of education. Higher education institutions should not pose requirements that are difficult or impossible to fulfil.

### **Example 12.5 - Take differing national contexts into consideration**

In country A, which has centralised national school leaving examinations, specific admission requirements for bachelor's degree programmes in medicine require that selection is based on the results of examinations in biology, chemistry, and mathematics. An applicant who has a secondary credential awarded in country B, which does not have a centralised school leaving examinations system, applies for the programme. The candidate has taken the required courses as part of a quality assured secondary school programme and the grades for each of the courses appear on the school leaving credential. The admitting higher education institution should take into consideration the fact that the applicant did not have the opportunity to take school leaving examinations in country B and should consider the grades achieved in the required subjects in lieu of examination results.

Higher education institutions should provide clear and transparent information on access requirements and selection criteria. It is recommended, when possible, to determine and publish eligibility requirements by country of applicants' origins. In this way, each applicant may pre-assess his/her chances of success and will not have unsubstantiated expectations.

### **Example 12.6 - When possible, provide information on access requirements by country**

Examples of provision of information regarding general eligibility requirements by country are:

- [University of Calgary](#) information for international undergraduate applicants
- Entry requirements for foreign applicants provided by the [Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science](#).

While a positive recognition decision does not always imply entry, it is recommended that a negative recognition decision should not always mean refusal of entry, since higher education institutions may also consider granting entry based on other achievements by taking into consideration non-formal and informal learning through recognition of prior learning (see chapter 17, 'Qualifications gained after Flexible Learning Paths'). In the case of a negative admission decision, the applicant must be clearly informed about the outcomes of the different stages of the admission process and the reasons as to why and at what stage admission was denied. This will give an applicant a fair chance to make an informed decision regarding an appeal.

**Example 12.7 - Take into consideration non-formal or informal learning**

[Admission requirements for bachelors' programmes at Malmö University](#), which provision recognition of prior learning for those who do not fulfil formal admission requirements.

# PART IV

# Information Instruments

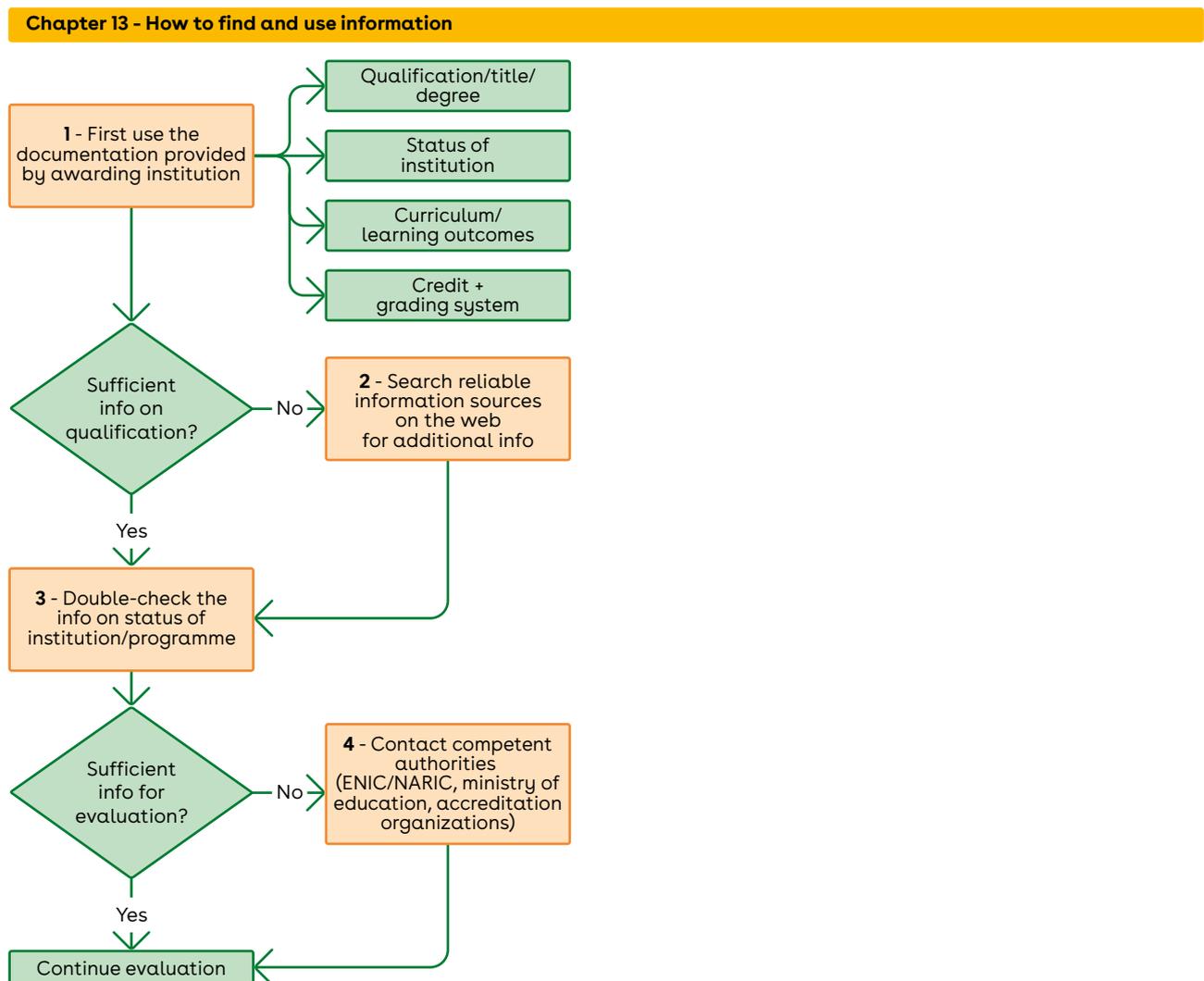
Part IV of the manual provides the sources to be used in the evaluation process. It discusses how and where to find reliable information sources and it specifically presents the Diploma Supplement and Qualifications Frameworks as useful information instruments.

# 13. How to find and use information

## Summary

This chapter provides useful information sources for assessing foreign qualifications and guidelines on how to use them.

## Flowchart



## 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 your applicant and assess the qualification itself, i.e. check the level of education, workload, access to further studies, the profile of the programme and the learning outcomes.

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

### Documentation provided by the awarding higher education institution

- Qualification;
- Statement/certificate issued as a temporary proof of completion (when the actual qualification is issued later);
- Transcript;
- Diploma Supplement (see chapter 14, 'Diploma Supplement (and other information tools)');
- 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](http://www.enic-naric.net);
- Websites of international organizations, such as UNESCO.  
Link: [www.uis.unesco.org/DataCentre/Pages/regions.aspx](http://www.uis.unesco.org/DataCentre/Pages/regions.aspx);
- Publications containing information about the national education system/accreditation and recognition.

### Recommendations

1. First use the documentation issued by the awarding higher education institution.
  - The documentation submitted by the applicant may provide you with information about:
    - 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 having checked 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 this missing information. However, if the application file is technically complete, but you need more information on some 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 the internet is that you may also perform some checks on the information provided by the applicant and the HEI.

### **Example 13.2 – Searching for additional information**

After having analysed the documentation submitted by the applicant the admissions officer cannot determine the learning outcomes achieved, and additional information is needed in order to decide whether the applicant could be admitted to the master's programme. The website of the awarding higher education institution contains detailed information about the programme, helping the admissions officer to decide whether the achieved learning outcomes are sufficient to admit the applicant to the programme.

#### 3. Double-check the information regarding the status of the institution/programme or education system provided by the higher education institution with other official sources.

For example, diploma mills or other illegitimate institutions provide information in the documentation they issue that may suggest that the institution is a legitimate one (for more information see chapter 4, 'Diploma and Accreditation Mills').

Therefore, it is recommended that you:

##### a. Check the national official sources.

The Ministry of Education and accreditation/quality assurance bodies are very reliable sources where you can confirm the status of an institution and in most cases find general information about the education system, including a list 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 a thorough analysis of the submitted documentation it is not clear how the qualification is placed in the national education system and how to interpret the student's average grade. An answer to these questions is found on the website of the Ministry of Education where both a detailed description of the education system and an explanation of the grading scale is published.

b. Check the international official information sources.

These are useful sources where you can confirm the status of an institution and find general information about the education system. In the international databases or publications you may find information about educational systems and/or lists of recognised institutions from many 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 not familiar with the education system of the country of origin. The only national information on the website of the Ministry of Education is in the original, not widely spoken language.

The admissions officer consults official international information sources (see below) and finds useful information that helps to make the right decision.

c. Always make sure that the source of information is official and accurately describes the period of time (which may be recent or any time in the past) at which the qualification was awarded because systems of education and the status of institutions may change.

Also try to check whether the author or the organisation responsible for the publication has adequate expertise in the field.

You should remember that the information provided on the internet on education systems and recognised institutions and programmes can only be considered accurate for current studies or those recently completed. If you are assessing an older qualification, you may need to consult other sources. If you use publications (paper or electronic), check whether they cover the date when the qualification was issued.

4. If the information you need cannot be found in the available resources, contact the competent authority in a given country, such as the ENIC-NARIC centre, Ministry of Education, the accreditation agency or/and 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 collect the contact information of all relevant and reliable contacts and their organisations, sorted by country and type of information provided, in an easily searchable document which is available for all of your colleagues in the admissions office. This document should be updated each time a change in contact information occurs and new contacts should be added as soon as the connection has been established.

## Sources and References

### Websites of regional recognition networks

- The ENIC and NARIC Networks. Link: [www.enic-naric.net](http://www.enic-naric.net);
- The Asia Pacific Academic Recognition Network. Link: <http://www.aniccw.net>.

### Publications containing information about national education systems

#### Global focus

- UNESCO hosts two portals:
  - Portal to Recognized Higher Education Institutions. Link: [www.unesco.org/new/en/education/resources/unesco-portal-to-recognized-higher-education-institutions](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/resources/unesco-portal-to-recognized-higher-education-institutions);
  - Country dossiers. Link: <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/worldwide.html>
- International Association of Universities (IAU) hosts two portals:
  - Database on higher education systems worldwide. Link: [www.iau-aiu.net/content/he-systems](http://www.iau-aiu.net/content/he-systems);
  - List of Universities of the World. Link: <http://www.whed.net/home.php>;
- World Education Profiles are published by World Education Services (WES) in Canada. The country profiles include information about all educational levels and grading systems for selected countries. Link: [www.wes.org/ca/wedb/ecountrylist.htm](http://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. All information is in German. Link: [www.anabin.kmk.org/](http://www.anabin.kmk.org/);
- NUFFIC country modules. Information about educational systems in more than 90 countries. The country modules provide assessment guidelines in comparison to Dutch qualifications. Link: <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/foreign-education-systems/>;
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI): International Qualifications Database. Advice regarding the comparability of a number of foreign qualifications to qualifications in Ireland. Link: [www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/qualification-recognition-service-database.html](http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie/qualification-recognition-service-database.html);
- UK NARIC 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. More information at: [www.naric.org.uk](http://www.naric.org.uk) (fee based);
- NOOSR Country Education Profiles. Provides thorough information about educational systems in more than 100 countries and assessment guidelines in comparison 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> (fee based).

#### European Focus

- Eurydice's Eurypedia, the European Encyclopedia on National Education Systems presents educational systems and reforms in Europe. The site covers 38 European education systems. Link: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfs/mwikis/eurydice/index.php?title=Countries>.

#### Latin American Focus

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

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

- International network for quality assurance agencies in higher education (INQAAHE) provides overview of quality assurance networks worldwide. The member lists of these networks can be used to find national accreditation/quality assurance agencies.  
Link: <https://www.inqaahe.org/members/>;
- ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education)  
Link: [www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu);
- European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education provides a database of quality assurance agencies in Europe. Link: [www.eqar.eu](http://www.eqar.eu);
- DEQAR (Database of External Quality Assurance Reports), a database developed by EQAR of 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: <https://www.eqar.eu/qa-results/deqar-project/>

### **Other resources**

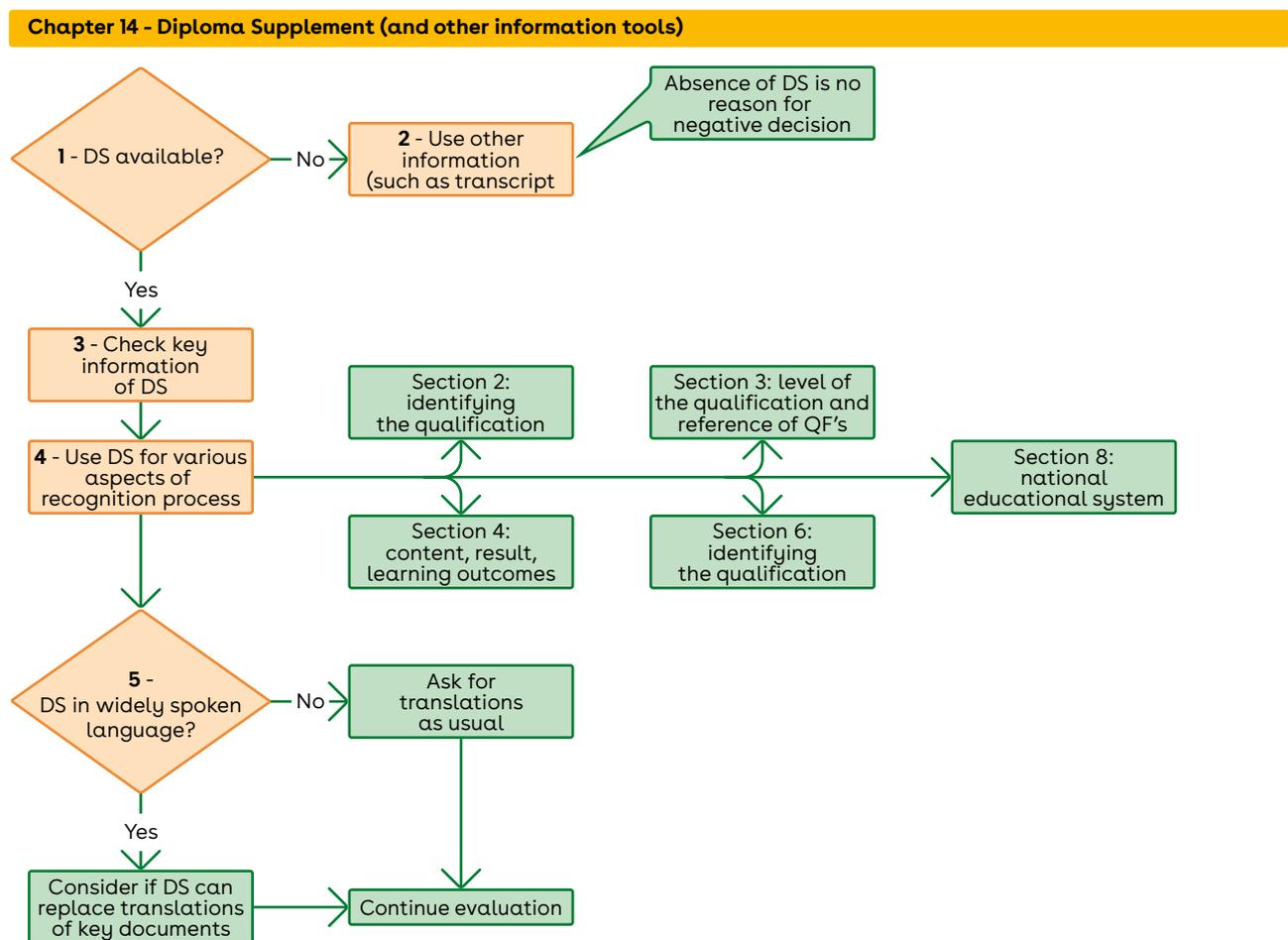
- Internet Archives/Wayback Machine: Enables you to access archived websites when you need information on older qualifications, programmes of study, etc. Accessibility depends on whether or not the website has been archived, but can be a very valuable tool.  
Link: <http://archive.org/web/>.

# 14. Diploma Supplement (and other information tools)

## Summary

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

## Flowchart



## Introduction

The DS is a document describing a higher education qualification and the education system to which the qualification belongs. It is a transparency tool meant to facilitate the understanding and recognition of qualifications. The DS is considered to be 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 the degree or afterwards upon request, by higher education institutions in countries in the European Higher Education Area<sup>1</sup>. Not all of the Bologna signatory countries issue the DS however.

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 purpose similar 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 not belonging to the EHEA, higher education institutions may also issue extra documentation together with the awarded qualification, in order to clarify characteristics of the qualification.

## Recommendations

1. Request the DS from applicants whose qualifications are awarded by higher education institutions in the EHEA.

The DS should not be requested from applicants whose qualification was awarded outside the EHEA or before the DS was implemented in their country, because they will not have one. Also note that the absence of a DS should not be a reason for a negative recognition decision.

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

An admissions officer receives applications from two applicants with qualifications awarded by the same higher education institution in the same year. The application file of applicant A contains a copy of the DS, while that of applicant B does not. The admissions officer sends an e-mail to applicant B requesting a copy of the DS. Applicant B answers that the DS has been lost and that the higher education institution will not supply another one. The admissions officer contacts the higher education institution and receives the information that applicant B did indeed obtain the qualification and that the higher education institution does not provide extra copies of the DS. The admissions officer continues to evaluate the qualifications of both applicant A and B.

2. If no DS is available, use all of the other information accompanying the qualification. Many higher education institutions issue supplementary documentation containing information which is at least partly similar to that of the DS, such as degree profiles, transcripts of records, or records of examinations for each subject studied (e.g. credit book, index of exams, etc.). In the assessment of the foreign qualification, the information contained in these documents should be treated in the same way as the information of the same kind included in the DS.

<sup>1</sup> To check which countries are part of the EHEA, see: [www.ehea.org](http://www.ehea.org)

### **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 with the following information:

- mission of the higher education institution;
- objectives of the programme;
- possibilities for further study;
- employability of graduates.

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

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

You should 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 check, via other sources, the status of the institution and whether or not the qualification is recognised in the awarding country (see chapter 3, 'Accreditation and Quality Assurance');
- b. Check whether the name of the person who obtained the qualification is the same as on the DS. In some educational systems, qualifications carry a number that is also mentioned in the DS. You should verify whether these numbers correspond. If you find any inconsistencies, you should continue the evaluation by applying the procedures of 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 recognized by the Ministry of Education (MoE) of country E and the programme recently received accreditation for a period of 6 years by the National Accreditation Organisation (NAO) of country E.

This information is checked by the admissions officer on the websites of the Ministers of E 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 the MoE and NAO and decides to contact the national recognition information centre of country E. These sources inform the admissions officer that the qualification was issued by a degree mill specialising in selling bogus qualifications accompanied by authentic-looking bogus DS's. 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 provides in one document a structured overview of information relevant to the evaluation and recognition process. The following sections and sub-sections of the DS are especially 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';
    - 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 19, '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 in its national educational context and then compare it to a qualification in the host country. For more information on this, please turn 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 these into consideration and recognition should be based on a comparison of learning outcomes and competences. For more information on this, please turn 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 gives information on the higher educational system: its 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 difficult application file from X, a country with which the admissions office has little experience. It involves a joint programme provided by two different types of institutions in country X, accredited by a small private agency. The degree awarded is not called a 'bachelor' or 'master' degree (or an easily understandable variation thereof). The admissions officer does not understand the credit system or the grading scales used. Instead of sending a long and complicated e-mail with many questions to the national recognition information centre of country X, the admissions officer goes step by step through the relevant entries of the DS (which is included in the application file). The DS provides clear information on the organisation of the joint programme, on the accreditation system and agencies involved, on the NQF and EQF level and learning outcomes of the qualification, and on the education system (including credits and grades). It also gives the sources where this information may be checked. Within a few minutes, the admissions officer has obtained all the required information to fill in the blanks and is now in a position to make the necessary checks, after which an evaluation may be made.

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 you would normally require a sworn translation of key documents you may consider using the translated information in the DS. This saves the applicant having to pay for a translation and would speed up 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 contains a DS in English, which includes a list of subjects. Since there are no doubts regarding the authenticity of the qualification, the admissions officer decides to use this translated list of subjects from the Diploma Supplement, without requiring the applicant to submit a sworn translation of the official list of subjects.

#### **Sources and references**

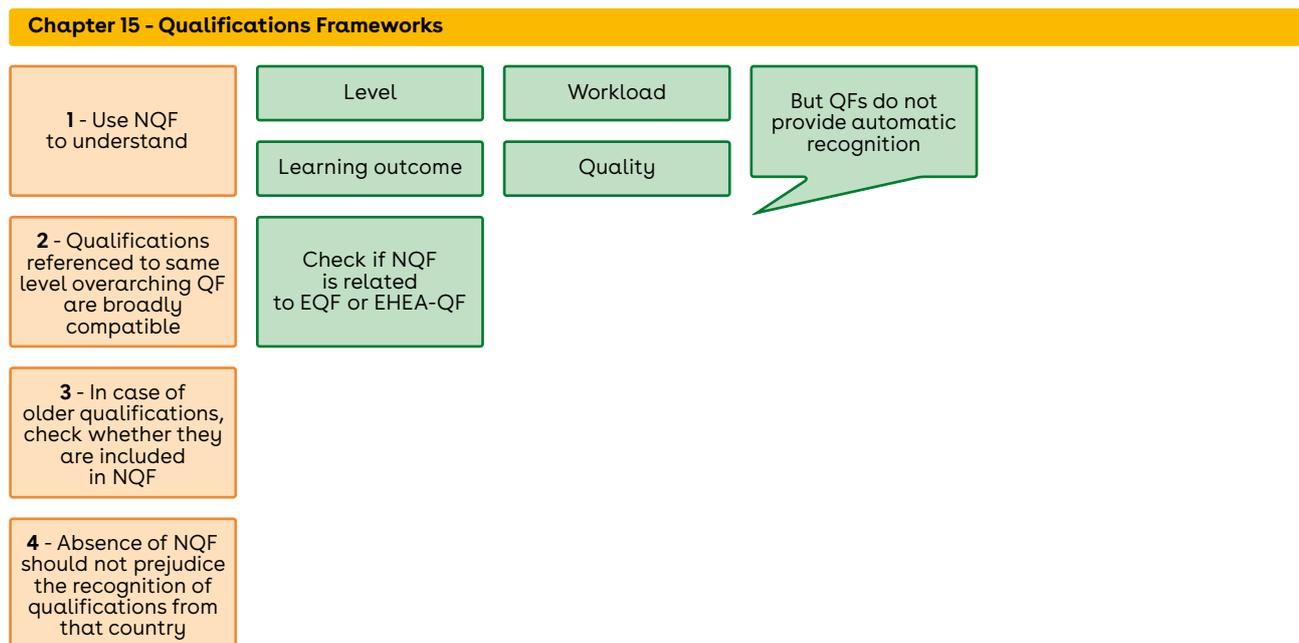
- Template DS on website European Commission.  
Link: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/diploma-supplement\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/diploma-supplement_en.htm);
- Website National Europass Centres.  
Link: <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/about/national-europass-centres>.

# 15. Qualifications Frameworks

## Summary

Qualifications Frameworks are a useful tool to consider qualifications in relation to the different levels of a national system, workload, quality and learning outcomes. This chapter contains guidelines on the application of qualifications frameworks in recognition practice.

## Flowchart



## Introduction

### Purpose of National Qualifications Frameworks

A National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is an instrument for the classification of qualifications of a national education system. The NQF describes the relation between the different levels of a national educational system and its main types of qualifications and provides generic learning outcomes for all NQF levels. A comprehensive qualifications framework is one that covers all levels and types of education, both academic and vocational. Other types of NQF may cover only a limited set of levels, such as higher education. NQFs may also be developed at sub-national level.

### Using National Qualifications Frameworks in recognition

NQFs provide a way to compare qualifications with respect to their level, workload, quality and learning outcomes. NQFs also help us to see similarities between qualifications. In this sense, they can also be used in cross-border recognition of qualifications. Thus, they are a useful tool to understand foreign qualifications, in particular with regard 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 the EHEA-QF). The EQF and the EHEA-QF are overarching frameworks whose goal is to facilitate the mutual understanding of qualifications within the European Economic Area and the EHEA countries respectively, enabling an easier comparison of systems and levels of education.

NQFs may be referenced to such international overarching frameworks, thus describing which levels in the national and overarching frameworks correspond to each other (see Example 15.4).

There are also more general international classification systems, which should not be confused with qualification frameworks. An example is ISCED, the International Standard Classification of Education, which may be used as a transparency tool to indicate the levels and fields of education in a given country. Such classifications can be helpful on 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 one 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 you determine the level, learning outcomes, quality and workload of foreign qualifications in general terms.  
In the case that qualifications have been referenced/self-certified towards the same level in overarching frameworks, you should consider them to be broadly compatible.

#### Example 15.1 - Using NQF as transparency tool

An admissions officer receives for the first time a qualification from Wales. The admissions officer searches the Internet for the NQF of the United Kingdom, and finds out that Wales has developed a separate CQFW (Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales). An attractively styled 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 of all levels.

It is also important to keep in mind that a qualifications framework should not be considered as an instrument providing automatic recognition of foreign qualifications.

### Example 15.2 - Interpretation of NQF levels

There are several reasons why assessing foreign qualifications only by taking into account their NQF level (which might sound like an attractively simple form of 'automatic recognition') is not a recommended approach to fair recognition:

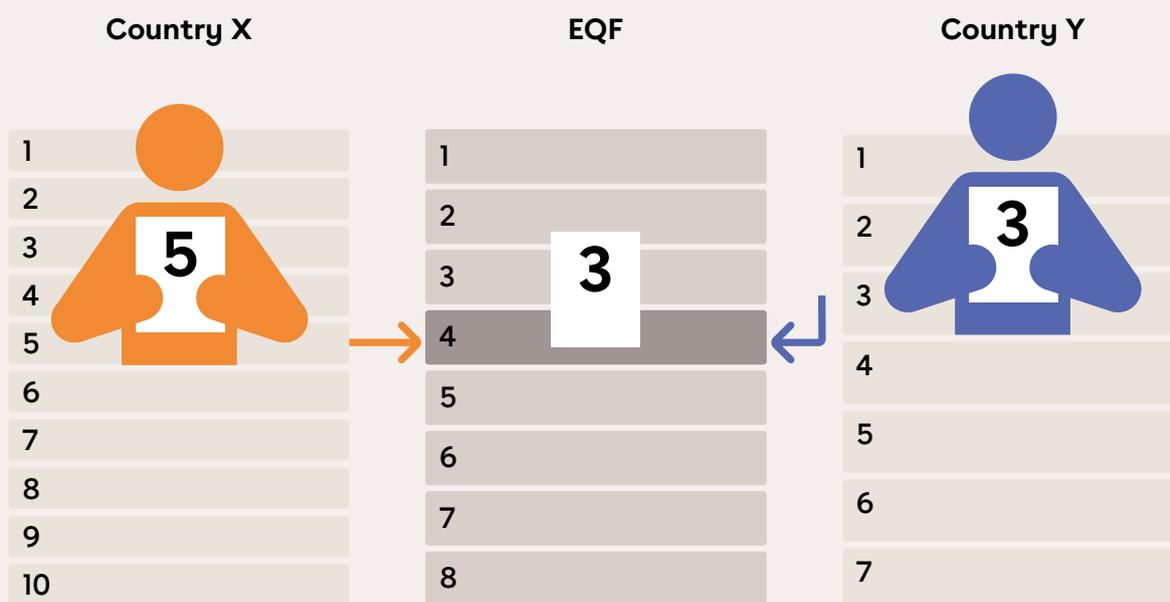
- In each NQF, several types of qualifications with different purposes and outcomes may be grouped together at a particular level, including qualifications awarded on completion of short in-company training courses that may have been linked to a higher education level in the NQF;
- Even if a foreign qualification at a specific NQF level forms a good match with a national qualification at a similar level, the admissions officer should still assess whether the profile of the foreign qualification fulfils the requirements for the particular recognition purpose (e.g. admission to a research master 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 NQFs 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 that you monitor these developments as the situation develops 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 level 4 of the EQF. 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, the use of the EQF can be useful in understanding their respective levels.

#### **Evaluation of qualifications issued under previous structures**

3. Where qualifications were issued under previous structures and thus are not a 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**

How to place old qualifications (legacy awards) within a qualifications framework? 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 take the level of the qualification as one of the important parameters in the final assessment. If the qualifications are not included, it should be established if other official documentation of the level of these qualifications exists and the assessment should be based on this documentation.

#### **Absence of qualifications framework**

- In case there is no sub-national or national qualifications framework available, this should not in any way prejudice the recognition of qualifications from the country in question.

#### **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 educational 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) as 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 hasn't been assigned.

#### **Sources and references**

You are advised to follow developments on qualifications frameworks as these are relatively new. Useful information on the NQFs of individual countries and the EQF referencing reports can be found via this link: <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/referencing-reports-and-contacts>. Information on qualifications frameworks on a global level can be found at the website of the European Training Foundation ([www.etf.europa.eu](http://www.etf.europa.eu)).

## National qualifications frameworks

- Australian Qualifications Framework.  
Link: [www.aqf.edu.au/](http://www.aqf.edu.au/);
- Bhutan Qualifications Framework.  
Link: <http://www.dahe.gov.bt/images/pdf/Bhutan%20Qualifications%20Framework%20Inside%20Content.pdf>
- Cambodia Cambodia Qualification Framework (CQF).  
Link: <http://119.82.251.165:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/287>;
- Canadian Qualifications Framework.  
Link: <http://cicic.ca/1286/Pan-Canadian-qualifications-frameworks/index.canada>;
- European region:
  - NQF's referenced to the QF-EHEA: <http://www.ehea.info/page-qualification-frameworks>
  - NQF's referenced to the EQF.  
Link: <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/referencing-reports-and-contacts>;
- Hong Kong Qualifications Framework.  
Link: <https://www.hkqf.gov.hk/en/home/index.html>;
- Malaysian Qualifications Framework.  
Link: <https://www.mqa.gov.my/pv4/mqf.cfm>;
- Mauritius Qualifications Framework.  
Link: <http://www.mqa.mu/English/Pages/NQF.aspx>;
- New Zealand Qualifications Framework.  
Link: [www.nzqa.govt.nz/studying-in-new-zealand/nzqf/](http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/studying-in-new-zealand/nzqf/);
- Philippine Qualifications Framework.  
Link: <https://pqf.gov.ph/>;
- Rwandan National Qualifications Framework.  
Link: [https://www.utab.ac.rw/documents/RWANDAN\\_NATIONAL\\_QUALIFICATIONS\\_FRAMEWORK\\_FOR\\_HIGHER\\_EDUCATION\\_2.pdf](https://www.utab.ac.rw/documents/RWANDAN_NATIONAL_QUALIFICATIONS_FRAMEWORK_FOR_HIGHER_EDUCATION_2.pdf);
- Seychelles Qualification Framework.  
Link: <http://www.sqa.sc/pages/NQF/Nqf.aspx>
- South Africa NQF.  
Link: [www.sqa.org.za/list.php?e=NQF](http://www.sqa.org.za/list.php?e=NQF);
- Sri Lanka The National Qualifications Framework for Skills Training Reform  
Link: [www.adb.org/publications/national-qualifications-framework-skills-training-reform-sri-lanka](http://www.adb.org/publications/national-qualifications-framework-skills-training-reform-sri-lanka);
- Tanzania National Qualifications Framework.  
Link: [https://www.idea-phd.net/images/doc-pdf/TCU\\_NQF\\_Final\\_Report\\_March\\_2010.pdf](https://www.idea-phd.net/images/doc-pdf/TCU_NQF_Final_Report_March_2010.pdf);
- Thailand National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education  
Link: [www.mua.go.th/users/tqf-hed/news/FilesNews/FilesNews8/NQF-HEd.pdf](http://www.mua.go.th/users/tqf-hed/news/FilesNews/FilesNews8/NQF-HEd.pdf);
- National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Turkey.  
Link: <http://tyyc.yok.gov.tr/?pid=31&dil=eng>;

## Examples of regional qualifications frameworks

- Website European Commission:  
Compare qualifications frameworks: <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/compare>.  
Link: [http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home_en.htm);
- The Pacific Qualifications Framework.  
Link: <http://www.eqap.org.fj/getattachment/Our-Work/Projects/Pacific-Register-for-Qualifications-Standards/2--PQF-booklet-FINAL.pdf.aspx>;
- Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Qualifications Framework.  
Link: <https://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/CARICOM-Qualifications-Framework.pdf>.

# PART V

## Specific types of 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 that involve 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.

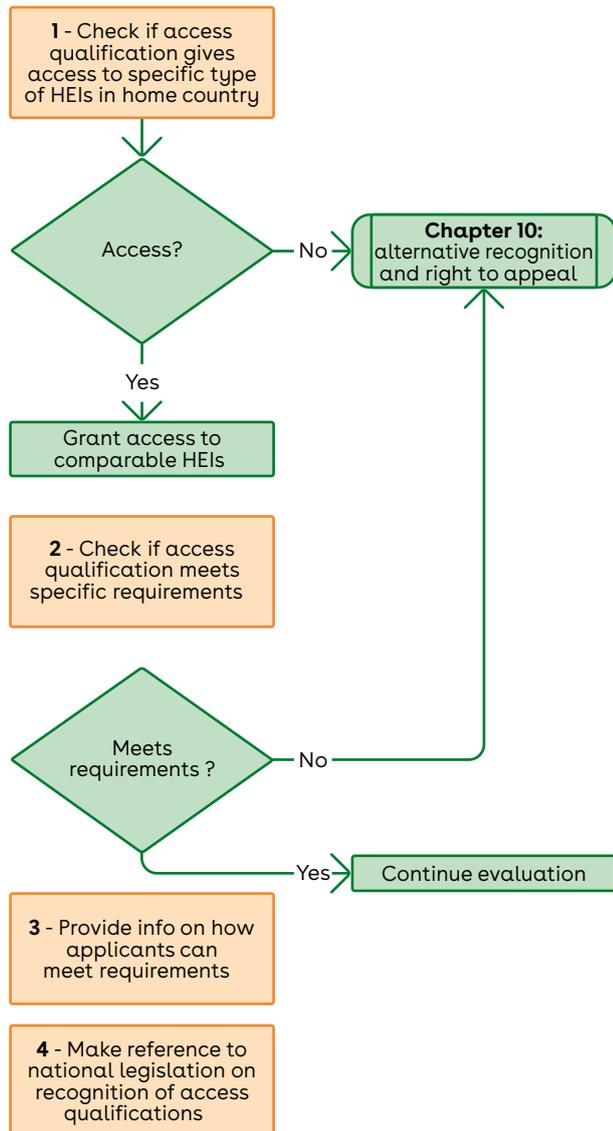
# 16. Access qualifications

## Summary

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

## Flowchart

### Chapter 16 - Access qualifications



## Introduction

An access qualification is a qualification that gives access to higher education in the country of origin.

There are three types of access qualifications:

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

The diversity in 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 mainly have general secondary qualifications, whereas others have a wide range of vocational secondary qualifications and/or secondary qualifications that include vocational as well as general subjects. In a number of countries a national entrance examination is required. In others, educational institutions may arrange their own entrance examinations, or no entrance examinations exist.

When assessing whether a foreign access qualification can give access to a given study programme at your institution, a good starting point is to look at the types of programmes and higher education institutions that the access qualification would give access to in the country of origin.

Moreover, it is important to familiarize yourself with your country's legislation on admission to higher education, and whether a national authority provides information and guidelines on admission of students with access qualifications from other countries. In some countries national recognition authorities have made general assessments of foreign and international upper secondary qualifications for the use of the higher educational institutions, or it is required for the applicants to have their secondary qualification assessed by the national recognition authorities.

## Recommendations

1. Check if the access qualification gives access 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 16.1 - Access to specific institutions and programmes**

Countries X and Y have differentiated secondary school systems with leaving certificates and examinations at different year levels. Some of these leaving points give access to general tertiary education, some to post-secondary technical education, and some only to vocational apprenticeships. These countries also have differentiated types of higher education institutions and other post-secondary schools that continue the secondary differentiation. When graduates of such systems apply to enter programmes in countries that have undifferentiated systems, a question can arise as to where to place such students. The reverse is also true when graduates of an undifferentiated school system seek to enter tertiary education in a country with a differentiated tertiary system.

Higher education institutions should be aware of such differences among educational systems and develop policies or practices to help them give fair recognition to graduates from differently structured systems. Remember, an important responsibility of an admissions officer is to determine if applicants have a realistic chance of succeeding in the programme they are applying for. If an applicant cannot be granted general admission, they should at least be eligible for conditional admission or admission to a programme in your system that corresponds to what would be possible in the home system.

#### 2. Check if the access qualification meets specific requirements.

If a study programme at your institution has specific access requirements, you should check whether the applicant meets them. Depending on the organization of the admission process at your institution, this may require assistance from academic staff. If the applicant does not fulfil some essential specific requirements, you may report that substantial differences have been found (see chapter 9, 'Substantial and non-substantial differences').

### **Example 16.2 - 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.

#### 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 16.3 - 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 16.4 - National legislation on foreign access qualifications**

Many countries have bilateral agreements with other countries on the recognition of qualifications. Such agreements may include regulations on how to recognise specific qualifications of the other country, including access qualifications. This type of information is very relevant for applicants and for your admissions officers, and should be published clearly on the website of your institution.

## **Sources and references**

### ■ Nuffic Country Modules.

Link: <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/foreign-education-systems/>;

### ■ Eurypedia, European Encyclopedia on National Education Systems.

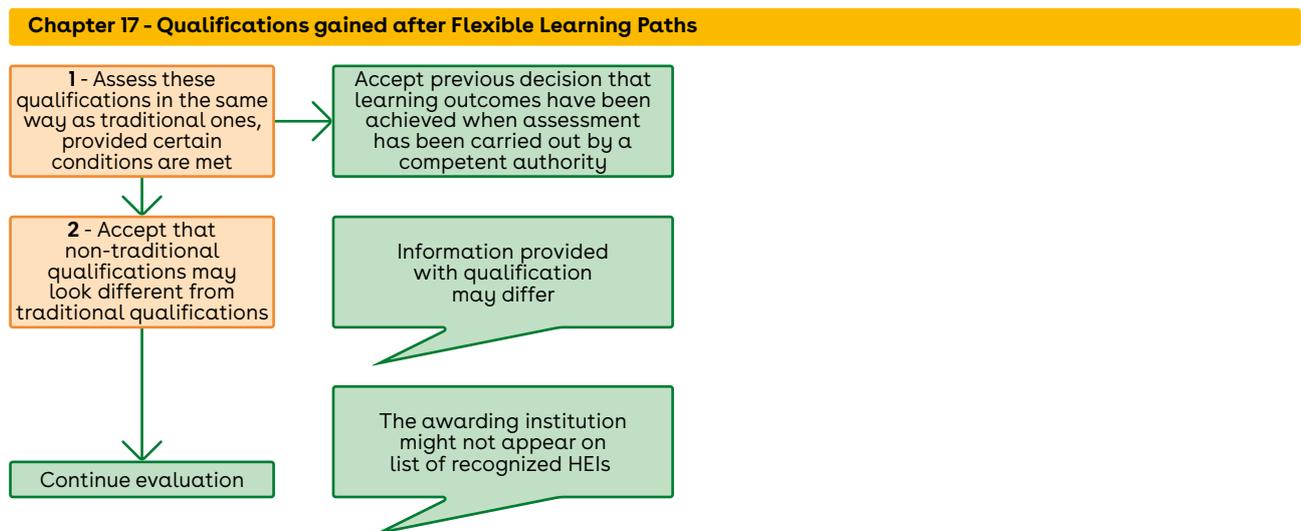
Link: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfs/mwikis/eurydice/index.php?title=Home>.

# 17. Qualifications gained after Flexible Learning Paths

## Summary

This chapter provides information on flexible learning paths and recommendations on how to assess qualifications obtained outside of the traditional classroom.

## Flowchart



## Introduction

As the concept of lifelong learning is becoming more important (e.g. in the EQF), it will become more common to obtain qualifications in a flexible way. A flexible learning path refers to any situation in which the graduate has obtained a qualification in a way that is not the standard learning path followed by the mainstream student.

Examples of a flexible learning path are:

- When access and admission to the programme are not based on the standard requirements in terms of entrance qualifications (e.g. a secondary school leaving certificate);
- When exemptions of part of the programme are based on a previously obtained qualification or period of study,
- When exemptions of part of the programme, or the whole programme, are based on non-formal or informal learning;
- When the programme or part of the programme has been completed through distance learning and e-learning (MOOCs, micro-credentials).

## Useful terminology

In the ECTS Users' Guide 2015 the following concepts are defined:

### *Formal learning*

Learning typically provided by an education or training institution, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.

### *Informal learning*

Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure which is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner's perspective.

### *Non-formal learning*

Learning which takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives, learning time) where some form of learning support is present (e.g. learner-teacher relationships). Very common cases of non-formal learning include in-company training, structured on-line learning and courses organised by civil society organisations.

### *Recognition of non-formal and informal learning*

The process through which an institution certifies that the learning outcomes achieved and assessed in another context (non-formal or informal learning) satisfy (some or all) requirements of a particular programme, its component or qualification.

## Recognition of prior learning

Procedures that have been developed for the recognition of prior learning are often used to evaluate flexible learning paths. 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 which refers to the process of identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievements (examples are 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 RPL to cover all these different terminologies.

Prior learning may have resulted in learning outcomes that are comparable to those acquired through traditional learning. Recognition of such learning is important in order to facilitate admission to further studies or credit transfer, since non-traditional learners should benefit from the same principles of transparency, mobility and fair recognition as those with formal qualifications.

## Alternative procedure for the recognition of flexible learning pathways

As an admissions officer, you may be asked to evaluate the learning outcomes achieved in non-traditional pathways, or the applicant may include an official assessment of his/her non-traditional learning in the application file, conducted by a competent authority. It would be unrealistic to expect most admissions offices to have the capacity to carry out a time-consuming RPL procedure including assessment and portfolio development. If a competent authority has previously conducted

an assessment of the learning outcomes achieved by that student however, you should take that assessment into consideration.

In addition to RPL, a procedure for the recognition of “stand-alone e-learning” was recently developed as part of the NARIC project e-Valuate. Stand-alone e-learning is defined as all types of e-learning that are offered outside of an accredited degree programme. The evaluation methodology involves scoring the ‘level of robustness’ of seven criteria when evaluating the qualification, to determine if there are sufficient grounds for granting some kind of recognition. 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

*The Practitioner’s guide for recognition of e-learning*

(<https://www.nuffic.nl/publicaties/practitioners-guide-recognition-e-learning/>) explains the methodology in detail.

## Recommendations

When evaluating qualifications partially or fully obtained through flexible learning paths either at recognized institutions or that have already been assessed by competent authorities, you should:

1. Assess these qualifications in the same way as a comparable qualification which was obtained in the traditional way.

Accept that the institution awarding a qualification which is based on a flexible learning pathway has determined that the learning outcomes of the qualification have been achieved by the graduate.

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.

### Example 17.1 - Assessing a qualification awarded on the basis of RPL

An applicant applies in country X for recognition of a French qualification: Brevet de Technicien Supérieur (BTS). The qualification has been awarded primarily on the basis of RPL by the competent French authorities. The qualification should be recognised by the competent authority in country X according to exactly the same standards as if the qualification was obtained strictly through the French formal education system.

2. Accept that qualifications obtained through recognition of prior learning (RPL) may appear different from qualifications acquired in a traditional way, especially in the type of information provided with the qualification (such as workload, credits, contents of the programme). Be aware that competent RPL authorities might not appear on the usual lists of recognised higher education institutions. If you cannot find this information, please contact the ENIC-NARIC or national recognition information centre in the country where the institution is located.

### **Example 17.2 - Recognising an RPL qualification with a different appearance**

An applicant has submitted a recognised qualification, which was awarded solely on the basis of RPL. The qualification is not accompanied by a transcript and is not described in traditional terms of workload and contents of the programme, which you take into consideration in your decisions. Nonetheless, you should trust that the qualification has been awarded after its holder has attained the competences required for this qualification. You should base your assessment on the available information about the generic and specific learning outcomes for this level and/or type of qualification.

## **Sources and references**

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

- DS which should provide information regarding flexible learning paths in higher education, if applicable. (See chapter 14, 'Diploma Supplement (and other information tools)');
- 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://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/referencing-reports-and-contacts>
- 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 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 Practitioner's guide for recognition of e-learning: <https://www.nuffic.nl/publicaties/practicioners-guide-recognition-e-learning/>

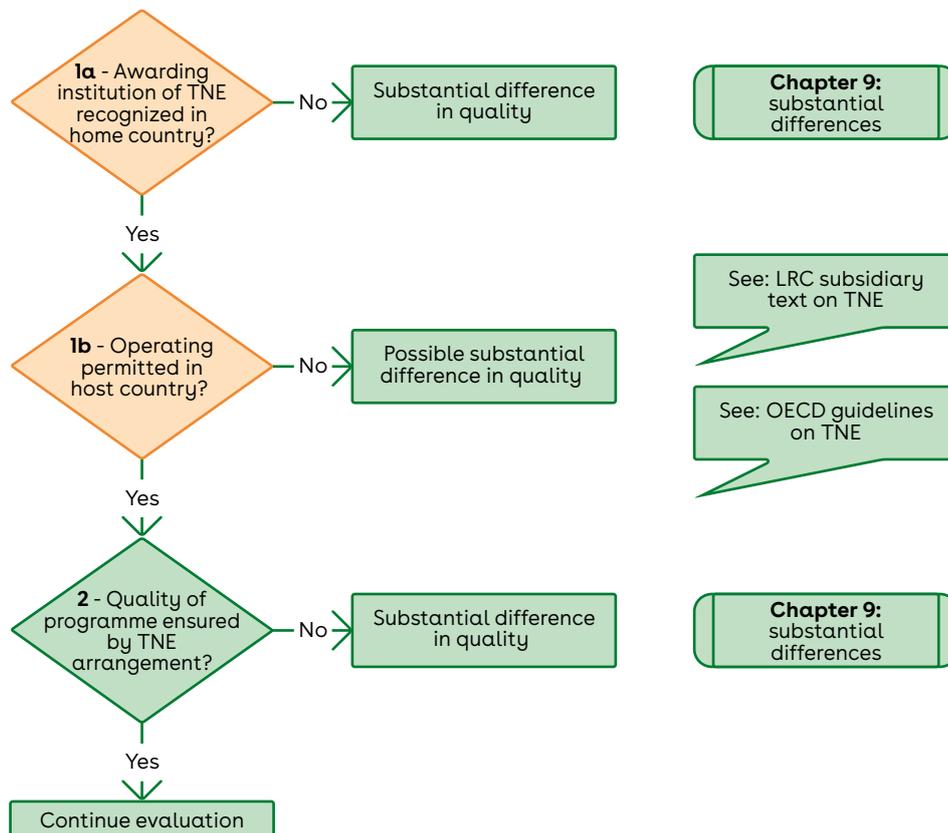
# 18. Qualifications Awarded through Transnational Education

## Summary

Growth in transnational education (TNE), or cross-border provision, has been spectacular in recent years, thanks to technological advances and to the greater mobility of educational providers in the globalised economy. The principal problem 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

### Chapter 18 - Qualifications Awarded through Transnational Education



## Introduction

Transnational education (also known as 'cross-border education') is a relatively new development in higher education. It 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 19, 'Qualifications Awarded by Joint Programmes') where the degree is awarded jointly by, and study takes place in, institutions in more than one country.

In many cases it is difficult to determine the 'home country' of the awarding institution and the authority that is responsible for recognising and/or accrediting it and/or its programmes.

Transnational education programmes are established through transnational arrangements, of which there are two types:

1. **Collaborative arrangements**, where study programmes of the awarding institution are delivered by another partner institution (e.g. 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);
2. **Non-collaborative arrangements**, where study programmes are delivered directly by an awarding institution on a cross-border basis (e.g. a university from country X has a branch in country Y, where it provides the programme while awarding the qualification from country X).

## Recommendations

As explained in chapter 3 ('Accreditation and Quality Assurance'), some specific types of qualifications may require more investigation in order 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. Verify that the awarding institution and (where applicable) the programme is/are recognized/accredited in the home country;
  - b. Verify that the awarding institution (which in the case of non-collaborative agreements is also the provider) has legal permission (by home and host authorities) to operate in the host country.
2. Check whether the quality of the programme is ensured by the transnational arrangement of 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.

More information on the principles that providers of transnational education should adhere to can be found in:

- [The Code of Good Practice for the Provision of Transnational Education](#) (a subsidiary text of the LRC);
- [OECD's Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education](#).

**Example 18.1 - Rogue providers**

Transnational education is usually considered to be a useful addition to the national education system, especially in countries where the higher education institutions have insufficient capacity for the national student population. However, a lack of transparency and clear legislation for such arrangements may lead to situations where rogue providers try to by-pass regulations on the quality of higher education.

For this reason, an extra check on the legitimacy of the transnational arrangement may be necessary, especially when there is no information available on the accreditation status of the transnational education programme. In such cases, the fact that the awarding institution is a recognised higher education institution in the home country does not always guarantee the quality of the programme provided in another country.

**Example 18.2 - Checking a transnational education qualification**

An admissions officer investigates a qualification that was awarded by a recognised institution in country A through a branch campus in country B. The branch campus has no official status in country B as a recognised higher education institution. The admissions officer finds out that the programmes of the branch campus have been accredited in country A (which has an accreditation system at programme level).

As a result, the admissions officer concludes that there is sufficient evidence for the quality of the programme, and continues the evaluation of the qualification.

If the provider and/or the programme do not fulfil the requirements of the two recommendations above, you do not have sufficient evidence for the quality of the transnational education programme. See recommendation 3 of chapter 3 ('Accreditation and Quality Assurance') for the options you have to continue the recognition process.

# 19. Qualifications Awarded by Joint Programmes

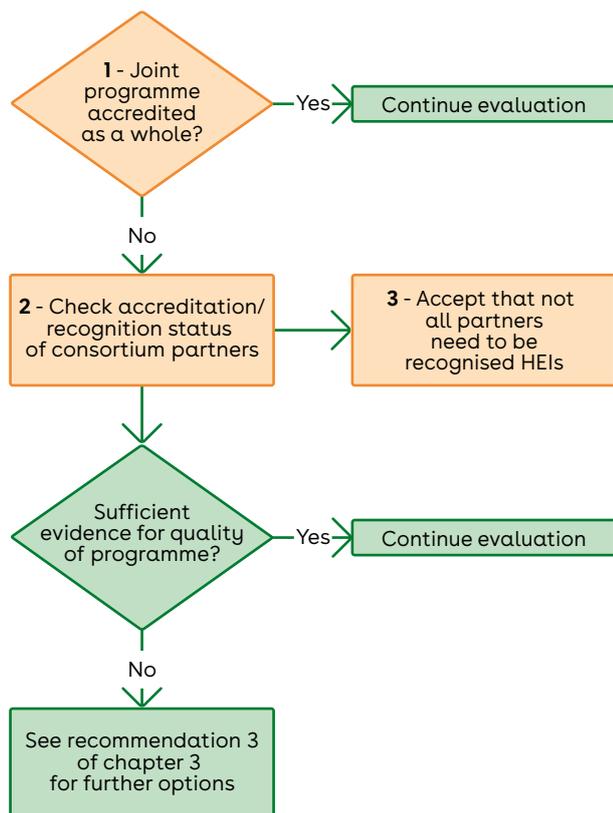
## Summary

The recently adapted European Approach, which provisions mechanisms for joint quality assurance of joint programmes, increases transparency and facilitates recognition of qualifications awarded after completion of such programmes. Nonetheless, recognition of qualifications awarded by joint programmes still often involves qualifications awarded outside this structure and may require closer examination of the programme and status of the institutions involved. In such cases, some flexibility in the assessment is recommended, as national legislation for properly awarding joint qualifications may be lagging behind in many countries.

In this chapter some advice is given on how to proceed with the assessment of such qualifications.

## Flowchart

### Chapter 19 - 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 of the possible awards. After the 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.

Qualification(s) from a joint programme differ(s) from foreign national qualifications because they are considered as either belonging to more than one national system or not fully belonging to any single national system. Hence some additional evaluation elements have to be taken into account in the assessment of these qualifications.

A complicating factor is that the provision of (international) joint programmes and the awarding of joint qualifications may be hampered by the national legislation of the consortium partners. Relevant legislation may be either missing, or may prevent their proper provision. Another possibility is that national legislations of different countries conflict with some aspects of the joint programme. In order to solve this problem, quality assurance agencies are advocating that accreditation of a joint programme by one reliable organization should be sufficient evidence for their quality.

In May 2015 European ministers responsible for higher education adopted the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in order to ease the external quality assurance of these programmes. The European Approach sets a framework for joint quality assurance of joint programmes by providing an application mechanism and standards that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA without applying additional national criteria. It determines that cooperating higher education institutions should jointly select a suitable quality assurance agency from the list of EQAR-registered agencies. The agency should use the standards and procedures mentioned within 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 programmes.

### Recommendations

As explained in chapter 3 ('Accreditation and Quality Assurance'), some specific types of qualifications may require more 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 if the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has been applied to the accreditation of the programme.  
It means that an integrated quality assurance of the programme has been applied, the programme is accredited in each of the relevant consortium partners, and no further checks are necessary.
2. In the absence of such accreditation, check whether the joint programme as a whole has been accredited by a reliable (national) accreditation organization, usually in a country where one of the consortium partners is located.  
In that case, you have sufficient evidence for the overall quality of the programme, and further checks into the status of the consortium partners should not be necessary.

### **Example 19.1 - Accredited joint programme**

An applicant submits a master's degree in European Studies awarded by a consortium of seven higher education institutions. The degree was awarded prior to the adoption of the European Approach, but in the Diploma Supplement (see chapter 14, 'Diploma Supplement (and other information tools)') it is explained 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 continues the evaluation of the qualification without having to check the status of all seven consortium members.

3. In the absence of full programme accreditation, check the accreditation/recognition status of the consortium partners or (in countries with an accreditation system at programme level) the accreditation status of parts of the programme, in order to obtain sufficient evidence for its quality.

This may be a rather difficult and time-consuming task if you are assessing a joint programme provided by a consortium consisting of dozens of institutions. The accreditation status of a part of a programme offered by one institution of a consortium can be particularly difficult to verify in most education systems. You are therefore advised to take a flexible approach in this aspect of investigating the joint qualification. You do not have to check every detail about the accreditation of the programme, as long as you have sufficient evidence for the overall quality.

### **Example 19.2 - 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 organization. The admissions officer starts to check the accreditation/recognition status of the consortium and finds out that two partner institutions are recognised higher education institutions in their national systems, while the three other institutions operate in a national system based on programme accreditation. The admissions officer cannot find any information on the accreditation status of the parts of the joint programme that are provided by these three institutions, but they 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, as long as the recognised institutions of the consortium take responsibility for the quality of the joint programme.

The provision of joint programmes is in some respects experimental (especially within the European Higher Education Area) to create new forms of higher education programmes. Therefore, consortia may include partners outside of the formally recognized higher education institutions, such as research institutions or commercial organisations with specific knowledge or skills that are relevant to the joint programme.

### **Example 19.3 - Consortium with a non-recognised partner**

An applicant submits a master's degree in international marketing awarded by a consortium of two higher education institutions and a large international marketing company.

The joint programme is not accredited as a whole by a national accreditation organization.

The admissions officer checks the accreditation/recognition status of the consortium and finds out that the two higher education institutions are recognised in their national systems and offer a range of national master 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 hands-on training in specific business cases and supervises the internships of students.

The admissions officer concludes that there is sufficient evidence for the quality of the programme and continues 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 for 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 (joint degree), should be available in the Diploma Supplement of the joint degree. 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;
- Ecapedia website, including JOQAR project results. Link: [http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/Main_Page)
- European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.  
Link: <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/>

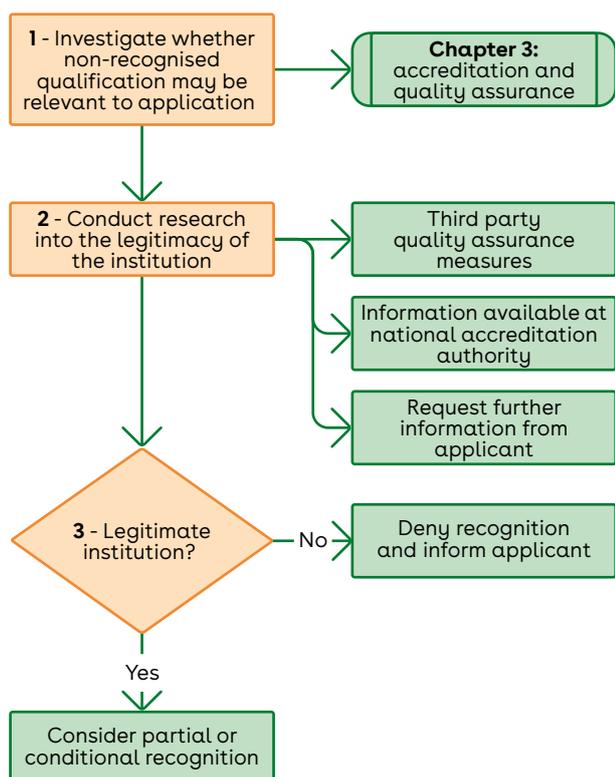
# 20. Qualifications Awarded by Institutions not Recognised by National Education Authorities

## Summary

This chapter describes how to deal with qualifications awarded by institutions that are not formally recognised in their national system of higher education, and which may still be legitimately offering study programmes, which may be taken into account for evaluation.

## Flowchart

### Chapter 20 - 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 in its national system: the qualification can be assessed and recognised according to the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC);
- When an institution is not formally recognized or listed by the educational authorities in its national system: verify if some other authority gives it legitimacy, or if 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 concerns legitimate institutions whose programmes and qualifications may be officially recognized by public authorities, by other higher education institutions and by employers but fall outside the purview of education authorities for reasons of law or jurisdiction, not quality;

2. **Substandard tertiary education providers.**

This category includes institutions falling under the purview of educational authorities, providing 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 recognized 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 regular recognition standards.

It is worth noting that national procedures for quality assurance and recognition may vary from country to country, which may result in particular types of institution or programme not being recognised. Even if there are legitimate differences making full recognition impossible, it may still be possible to provide some form of recognition or useful comments and advice to applicants holding such qualifications and to interested parties.

## Recommendations

1. It is recommended that you make an effort to investigate whether an institution can be considered a legitimate provider even though it is not officially recognized. However, for reasons of efficiency you should limit such investigations to qualifications that seem relevant to the application case at hand and that you might somehow include in your evaluation.

### Example 20.1 - Investigation into a legitimate provider

An admissions officer receives a qualification awarded by a police academy which 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 obtained might be in line with the purpose of the programme, the admissions officer decides to further investigate the institution and qualification, instead of dismissing it on formal grounds.

2. To establish that a non-recognized institution is a legitimate institution, it is recommended that you:
  - a. Conduct research into the legitimacy of the institution and the qualification; which (national) authorities are responsible for it, what is the function of the qualification in the home country?
  - b. Take particular note of any third party quality assurance measures as well as any information which may be available at the national accreditation authority;
  - c. Request that the applicant provide further information about the institution, if necessary.
- 1 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 18 'Qualifications Awarded through Transnational Education').

### **Example 20.2 - Information obtained about a legitimate provider**

The admissions officer of the previous example searches the internet for relevant information on the qualification awarded by the police academy and finds the following information:

- the quality assurance of the police academy does not fall under the responsibility of the ministry of higher education, but of 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 3-year programme seem related to those of professionally oriented bachelor programmes provided 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 programmes in a related field.

3. If the provider is found to be legitimate, consider if partial or conditional recognition of the qualification is possible.

### **Example 20.3 - Partial or conditional recognition**

The admissions officer of the two previous examples decides that sufficient information has been gathered to conclude that the police academy is a legitimate institution and that the quality of the qualification is sufficiently assured. The admissions officer considers that partial recognition is possible, similar to the situation in the home country (admission to the final year of the bachelor programme in forensic science).

4. If no recognition can be granted to the qualification, inform the applicant of the reasons why.

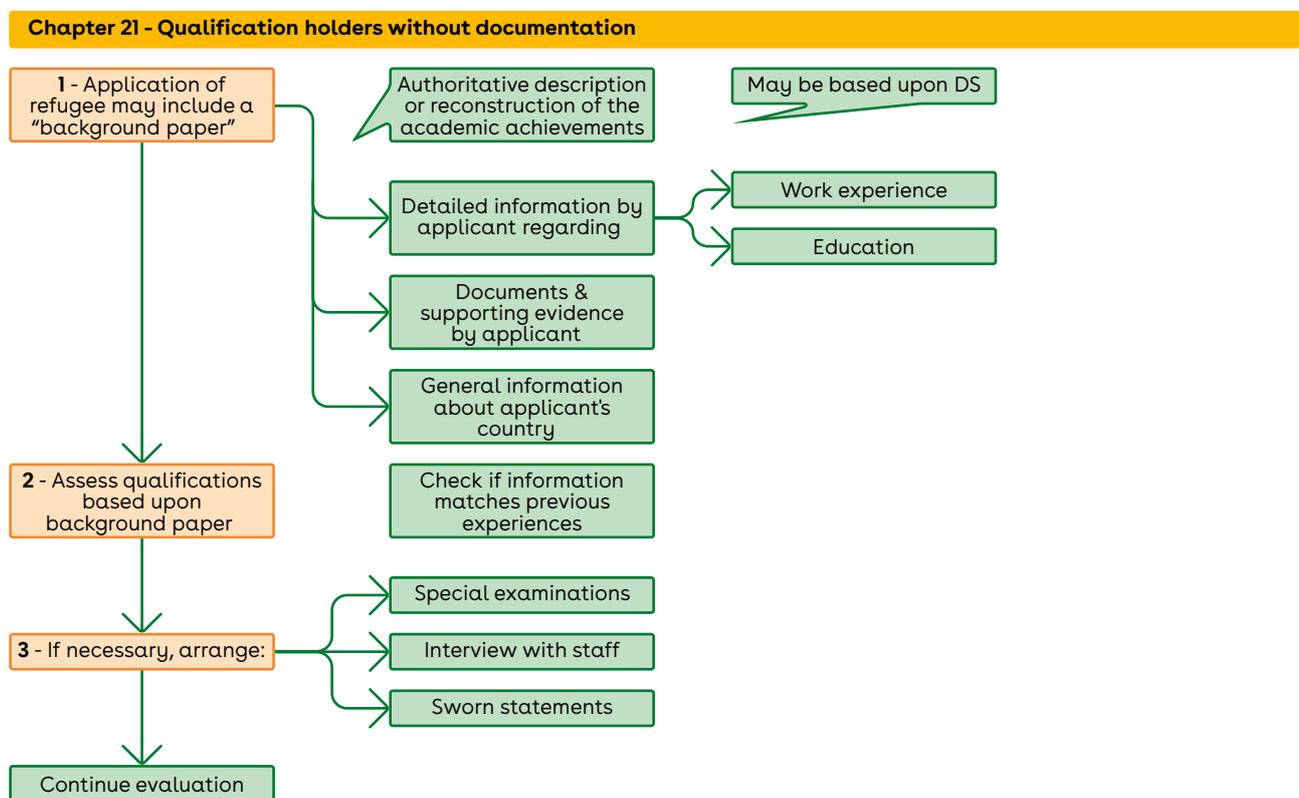
# 21. Qualification holders without documentation

## Summary

Refugees or persons in a refugee-like situation may not have the appropriate qualification documentation for an evaluation. Article VII of the LRC obliges authorities to assess these qualifications.

In absence of the required documentation, the qualifications can be evaluated through a supported reconstruction of the academic achievements in a so called 'background paper', and be followed by an assessment if necessary.

## Flowchart



## Introduction

Refugees, or persons in a refugee-like situation who have formal education from a recognised and/or accredited educational institution and others who for valid reasons cannot document their qualifications, have a right to assessment of their qualifications 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 for these procedures.

The evaluation of refugees' qualification(s) can be a complex process: documentation may be incomplete and it may be difficult to verify or clarify about the education system, because of the political situation in the country of origin.

To ensure fairness, your office is advised to describe the assessment procedure and include this in your departmental or Institutional recognition procedure.

## Recommendations

If you receive an application from a refugee or person in a refugee-like situation without documentation of the qualification(s), you need to determine whether the person meets the main requirements to enter the programme based on these previous qualifications:

1. You accept that the information provided by the applicant is not complete and try to reconstruct the academic achievements based on alternative information provided by the applicant in a 'background paper'. The background paper is a file that may include:
  - a. Detailed information on the content, level and extent of education, provided by the applicant, such as:
    - personal data of the applicant: names, birth date, birth place, etc.
    - name of qualification(s) obtained;
    - name of institution(s) where qualification(s) were obtained;
    - level(s) of qualification(s) obtained;
    - duration of the study programme;
    - year(s) when qualification(s) were obtained;
    - name of programme(s);
    - description of the content of the programme(s), including courses and workload (if transcript is not available);
    - attestation from applicant that information was provided truthfully.Further information regarding professional experience could also be included, especially when related to the applicant's education.
  - b. Documents and supporting evidence provided by the applicant, which may help to confirm the information given under the bullet a above:
    - student identification number(s) or code (if available);
    - educational documents (transcripts, school certificate(s), etc.);
    - declaration(s) of institution(s) that the qualification was awarded;
    - testimonials of work experience (if applicable);
    - any other evidence, such as instructors names, description of courses, etc.NB: encourage the applicant to include as much relevant supporting documentation as possible.
  - c. General knowledge of the educational system(s) the qualification(s) is/are from; your national recognition authority may also be able to provide useful information about the educational qualification(s) in question.

Note - you may:

    - encounter applicants submitting a background paper (e.g. prepared by your national ENIC-NARIC) instead of the usual application documents;
    - be asked to help create a background paper for the applicant.

### Example 21.1 – 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

(<http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/documents/european-skills-passport/diploma-supplement/examples>. (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 21.2 – Template for an educational background paper

#### EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

| Qualification                  | Evidence   |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Secondary education            | Diploma  |
| Higher education-first degree  | Student ID<br>+ transcript of 1st year   |
| Higher education-second degree | No educational documents, but instructor’s statement<br>+ employment contract<br>+ proof of informal and non-formal learning |

2. You 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 is included in the application file. Focus on determining whether the applicant will be able to succeed in the purpose recognition is sought for, based on the five elements of the qualification: quality, level, workload, profile and learning outcomes.

If possible, use previous applications from the same institution or programme (e.g. transcripts) to gather information about the five elements of the qualification and/or contact your ENIC-NARIC to complement information. You may also use this information to cross-check consistency of the information provided.

Accept if you are not able to reconstruct all five elements despite best efforts and keep in mind that this is often also the case when original documents can be provided, especially when it comes to learning outcomes.

NB: it is recommended to keep a database of previous recognition decisions because this can help to provide information to you for future cases.

If you doubt the authenticity of the documents delivered, contact your ENIC-NARIC (see chapter 5, ‘Authenticity’).

### **Example 21.3 – Adopt a flexible approach towards an incomplete file**

A refugee applies for a Master in Engineering at institution X. The only supporting documentation the applicant has, are all his/her transcripts of records from his studies. The admissions officer accepts this situation. On the basis of the transcripts, the admissions officer concludes that the applicant has a qualification at the level of a Bachelor in Engineering from an accredited institution, giving access to a Masters study at the institution. Furthermore, the transcript of records provides a good overview of the workload and profile. The admissions officer decides to grant recognition to the applicant.

### **Example 21.4 – 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 the completion of the programme. The ENIC-NARIC has prepared a 'background paper' describing the educational background of the applicant based on information on 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 (not) able to obtain from the background paper.
  - a. Choose an assessment method that is fit for purpose and feasible. Examples of methods are:
    - existing instruments such as Colloquium Doctum and entrance examinations (specifically for admission to Bachelor programmes), possibly adapted to avoid overly heavy examinations;
    - interviews with admissions officers (to check coherence) and staff of the relevant faculty of your higher education institution;
    - sworn statements before a legally competent authority.
  - b. When undertaking an assessment, it is important to focus on the overall learning outcomes of the applicant needed to enter the fields of study;
  - c. Make sure that the assessment methodology is consistent throughout your institution and that the quality is assured.
4. Formulate a recognition decision based on the outcomes of points 2 and 3 above.

### **Example 21.5 – The interview as a specially arranged examination**

A refugee applicant seeks admission to a Master's programme in institution X. The only documentation available is the translation into English of the Bachelor's degree. The admissions officer interviews the applicant in collaboration with professors at the educational institution. The applicant is asked about the contents and learning outcomes of the study programmes, information about the textbooks used and examinations. The applicant also provides information about the study method of the educational institution and the projects completed during the Bachelor's studies. The admissions officer and the professors gather all the information in a background paper and make a decision on the basis of this.

### **Example 21.6 – Comparison with earlier application files**

A refugee applicant applies for a Master programme in Sociology at institution X, but has no documentation whatsoever. The admissions officer accepts the situation and finds 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 the information the applicant provided is coherent. Further, the contents and study load of the previously acquired transcript, provides the admissions officer with sufficient information to evaluate the credential. Next, the admissions officer organises an assessment alike the one in example 21.5.

### **Example 21.7 – Authoritative description for Recognition of Prior Learning procedure**

A refugee applicant seeks admission to a Master in History but the documentation is so thin it is impossible for the admissions officer to proceed with the regular assessment. Upon request of the institution, the ENIC-NARIC develops an authoritative description of the qualification the applicant claims to have. This description is based on:

- Information from the applicant about his/her educational achievements;
- the ENIC-NARIC's knowledge of the education system in the country of education, and;
- any documents provided as evidence of the qualification(s).

The description includes a general assessment of the qualification or how the ENIC-NARIC in general will assess this type of qualification.

The authoritative description may be used as part of an official RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) procedure, where the competences of the applicant may be examined more thoroughly.

### **Example 21.8 Focus on learning outcomes**

An admissions officer of institution X arranges an interview together with the academic staff to assess the information provided in the background paper of a refugee applicant. The admissions officer decides to deny recognition, because in the programme followed by the applicant different textbooks were used as compared to the programme at institution X. This decision is not in line with the LRC, since the focus should be on the learning outcomes in order to be able to determine whether the applicant is sufficiently prepared for the programme.

## Information tools

### KMK:

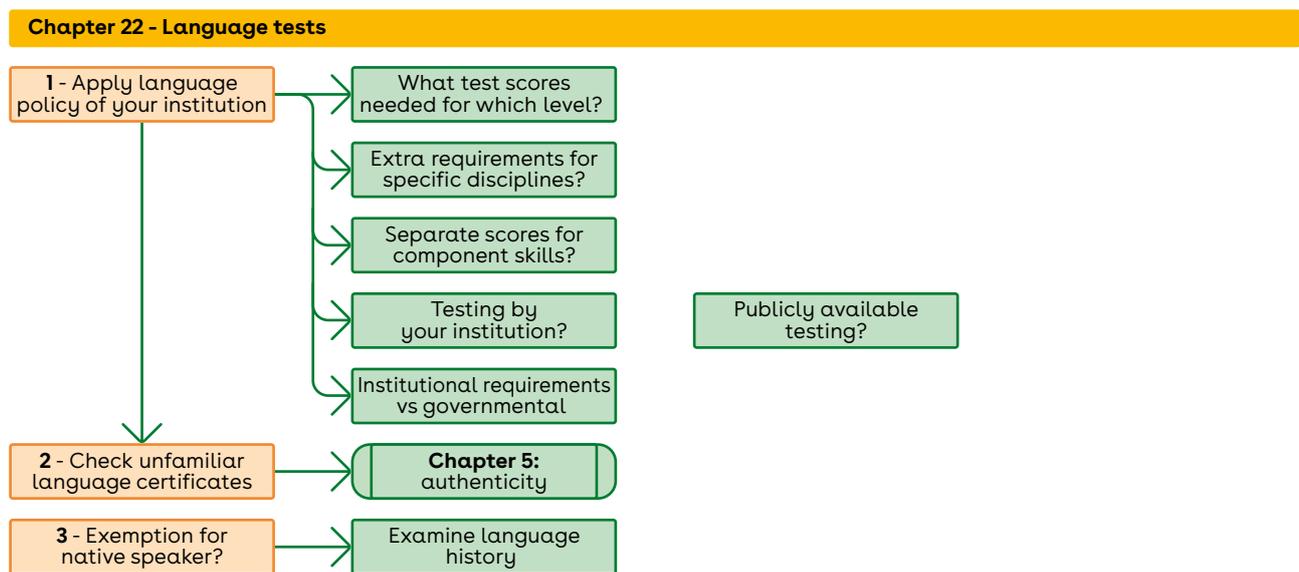
- The European Commission launched an 'Education and Migrants' website, which aims to accelerate the integration of people fleeing inhospitable homelands.  
Link: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/migration/index\\_en.htm?pk\\_campaign=Email-Jan2016&pk\\_kwd=News2](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/migration/index_en.htm?pk_campaign=Email-Jan2016&pk_kwd=News2)
- The European University Association has built an interactive refugee welcome map, on which all higher education institutions are invited to publicise their initiatives:  
Link: <https://eua.eu/101-projects/541-refugees-welcome-map.html>
- ENIC-NARIC.net dedicated a webpage to the recognition of qualifications held by refugees.  
Link: <http://www.enic-naric.net/recognise-qualifications-held-by-refugees.aspx>  
See also the subsidiary text to the LRC on the recognition of refugees' qualifications:  
[https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/1251\\_Recommendation\\_on\\_Recognition\\_of\\_Qualifications\\_Held\\_by\\_Refugees\\_Displaced\\_Persons\\_and\\_Persons\\_in\\_a\\_Refugee\\_Like\\_Situation.pdf](https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/1251_Recommendation_on_Recognition_of_Qualifications_Held_by_Refugees_Displaced_Persons_and_Persons_in_a_Refugee_Like_Situation.pdf)

# 22. Language tests

## Summary

Language testing routinely features in higher education admission procedures. Proficiency requirements can be set by governments, in the context of immigration control, and by institutions, as a precondition of the academic selection process. As cross-border mobility has increased in volume, the role of the tests has become more prominent. The tests used by the main receiving countries in Europe are designed and administered by bodies that in one way or another are 'official' and sufficiently well established to enjoy credibility and trust.

## Flowchart



## Introduction

### Legal basis of language tests

The Lisbon Recognition Convention states that applicants to academic programmes cannot 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 (its consular service or its immigration ministry), as a condition of entry into the country in which the intended host institution is located. They may be set by the institution itself, as the precondition to join a particular programme. When they are set by both government and institution, it does not automatically follow that the requirements are the same.

### Characteristics of language tests

In general, language tests are threshold tests and are non-negotiable. They seek to establish whether the candidate has the minimum skills necessary to enter a course of study and to complete it successfully. Of course, institutions may 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 programme aims. 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 language proficiency levels associated with different levels of national qualifications frameworks, as well as with quota systems and any bilateral agreements which might exist with other countries.

### **Types of language tests**

Some language tests have global currency, for example, in English – Cambridge Proficiency, IELTS and TOEFL. They are used in recruitment not only to programmes in Anglophone countries, but also to courses delivered in English in non-English speaking countries. Other European languages have tests which 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); TISUS (Swedish). Most provide general scores of language proficiency, as well as separate scores for the component skills of reading, writing, understanding spoken language and speaking.

### **Language frameworks**

Governments and institutions may make reference to the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference. This is a three-level attainment grid (with sub-levels) that was designed to support the European Language Portfolio (ELP). ELP, which is based on self-evaluation, 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 to you than the disciplinary requirements of the course which the applicant wishes to join. Complications may nevertheless arise, for example when a candidate claims to be a native speaker, to have a native speaker parent, to have undertaken the whole or part of prior education in the relevant language, or when he/she has a certificate of proficiency which is no longer valid. Authenticity of certificates, on the other hand, may in practice be less of a problem, since the major testing bodies have the capital, technology and motivation to combat identity fraud.

### **Recommendations**

1. Be familiar with and apply the language policy for incoming students of your institution:
  - a. What scores of which test(s) are required for bachelor's, master's and doctoral study? What additional requirements exist for specific disciplines? Do the requirements specify separate scores for the individual skills (such as speaking and writing)? Is the attainment of a sufficient level an absolute precondition of selection or is there scope for discretion and 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 the requirements laid down by government, if any? And what liaison mechanisms exist between your institution and the immigration authorities?

### **Example 22.1 - Scope for discretion**

A higher education institution requires an overall score of 6.0 IELTS for entrance into its bachelor's programmes. It also offers preparatory programmes, in which students are prepared for entrance into bachelor's programmes. For these preparatory programmes, IELTS scores lower than 6.0 are also accepted, since part of the preparation consists of English language training. Thus, for preparatory programmes with a length of 6 - 12 months a minimum requirement of 5.0 IELTS applies.

### **Example 22.2 - Liaison mechanisms with immigration authorities**

In country N, the government has made signing of a Code of Conduct by the higher education institutions a precondition for granting residence permits to non-nationals to study at the level of higher education. Among other things, the required language levels for various types of programmes are clearly mentioned in this Code of Conduct. The admissions officers in country N should be well aware of the contents of this Code of Conduct and respect its minimum language requirements. Otherwise their non-national students will not be granted residence permits even if 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 institutional partners to develop ELP models registered by 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 (mother language, instruction language at educational institutions) and prior qualifications for evidence.

At the institutional level, you may have the options of: waiving the requirement, requesting a European Language Portfolio, administering a diagnostic test where circumstances permit, or insisting on a formal test. In respect of government requirements, there may be exemptions 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](http://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/](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/)

# **PART VI**

# **Credit mobility in context of student exchange**

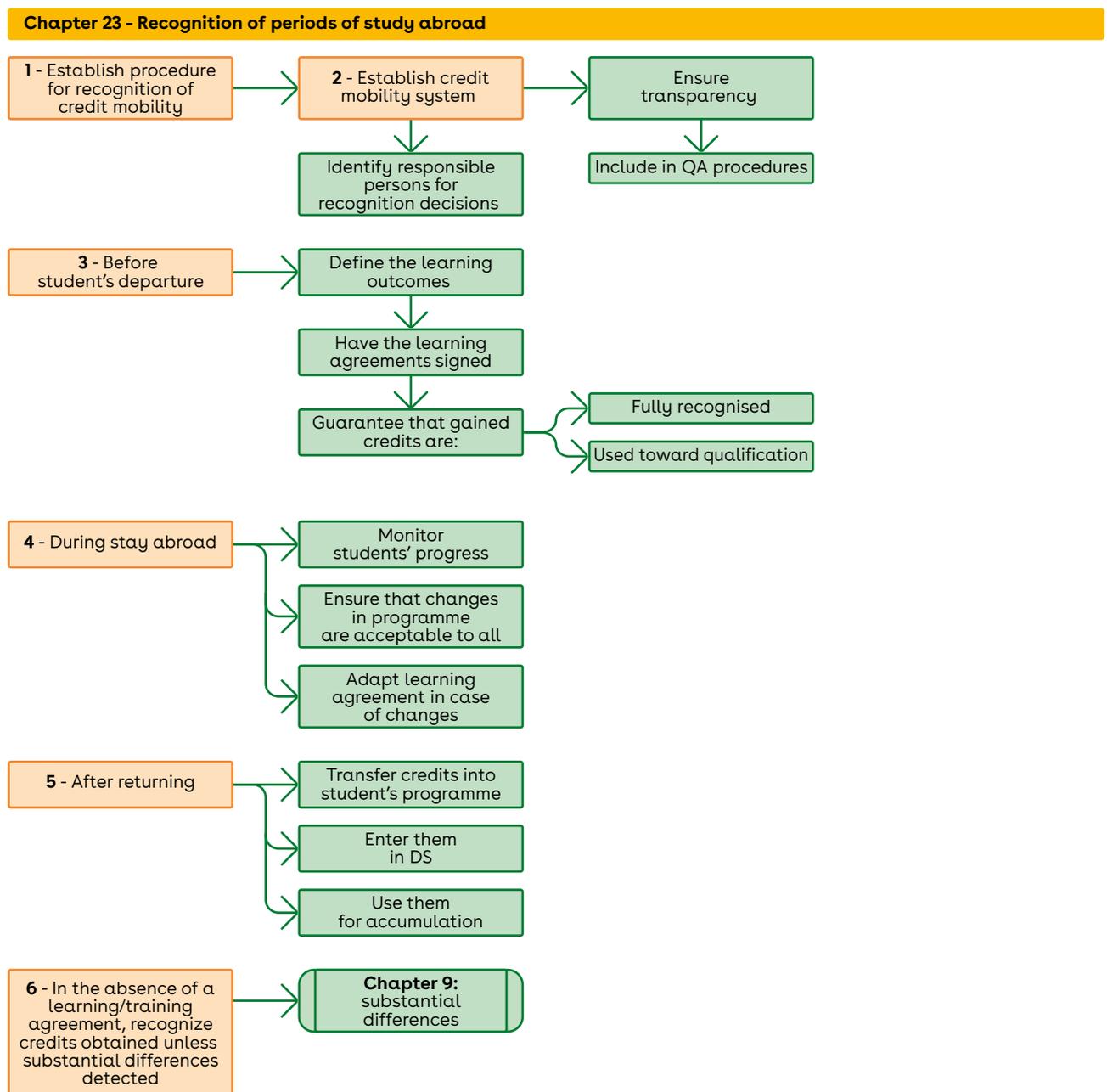
Part VI of the manual is reserved for recommendations regarding periods of study abroad. Unlike the previous chapters dealing mainly with diploma mobility, this part considers credit mobility.

# 23. Recognition of periods of study abroad

## Summary

This chapter focuses on the recognition procedures for credits earned for short-term study at another institution. This is referred to as 'credit mobility'. To support the recognition of credits gained in this way, the recommendations in this chapter address the phases prior to, during, and following the student mobility.

## Flowchart



## Introduction

Credit mobility can be described as the mobility of students temporarily studying at another institution (often abroad) and returning to their home institution to complete their studies. The credits gained at the other institution need to be recognized. 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.

Erasmus student exchanges are familiar examples of credit mobility, but they are by no means the only ones. Transatlantic exchange programmes also involve credit mobility. This is also true of the student exchanges organised by regional groups of countries, such as Nordplus Higher Education in the Baltic and in Scandinavia as well as of the many joint degrees developed by partner institutions in Europe, both inside and outside the Erasmus Programme. These, however, merit separate consideration (see chapter 19 'Qualifications Awarded by Joint Programmes') insofar as they tend to support multilateral, rather than bilateral, mobility. Finally, short-term mobility can involve work placements as well as study placements: the credits awarded for these, too, should be recognised.

### The Lisbon Recognition Convention

Credit mobility falls within the scope of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), where it is included in a separate section on 'recognition of periods of study'.

In other words, formal recognition – either by virtue of an established procedure or on request – is the normal outcome of a short-term period of study at another institution. Just as in the case of diploma mobility, recognition should be granted unless substantial differences can be shown to exist. Chapter 9 'Substantial and non-substantial differences' gives a full explanation of the concept of substantial differences.

### Basic documentation

Credit mobility relies on a number of important pieces of documentation:

1. The Erasmus University Charter. Applicable only to the Erasmus Programme, this Charter is mandatory for participating institutions. It lists the operating principles to which all institutions must commit. These include the requirement that 'full recognition shall be given to students for satisfactorily completed activities specified in the compulsory Learning Agreements';
2. The course catalogue. It is important that students seeking a foreign placement are informed of all the study opportunities in potential host institutions;
3. The application form. It is equally important that outward-bound students provide their potential hosts with full details of their background and their intentions;
4. The learning/training agreement. The learning/training agreement is negotiated between the student, the home institution and the host institution. It sets out the obligations of each of the parties and indicates (prior to the period of mobility) which modules will be studied, whether the learning outcomes are appropriate, whether and how a work placement will be structured, and how many credits will be earned. Once the mobility application is approved, all parties (student, home institution and host institution) sign the learning/training agreement. This process is completed prior to the student's departure from the home institution. The agreement can be modified during the period of mobility, with the consensus of all parties;
5. The transcript of records. When the study placement ends, the host institution gives the student and the home university a transcript showing which of the courses contained in the learning agreement were attended and successfully completed. The home institution is then obligated to recognize these modules;
6. The Diploma Supplement (DS). After the student has completed the full degree programme, the institution awarding the qualification should provide clear information on the periods of study abroad and the credits and grades obtained. See chapter 14 'Diploma Supplement (and other information tools)'.

### **Grade transfer**

Grading systems vary greatly across Europe. It is therefore important that the transfer of grades is transparent and conducted according to a methodology agreed upon in advance.

The local grading scale must be clearly explained, 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. Pre-established conversion tables should only be used within the framework of integrated double/multiple/joint degree courses.

### **Obstacles to recognition**

Despite the fact that recognition procedures are increasingly well-defined and that several tools help ensure full recognition of short-term periods of study abroad, students still face certain problems with recognition of their credits. Two common problems are:

1. When the home institution has failed to assign the authority to recognise courses successfully completed abroad to an appropriate person (either at central, faculty or departmental level);
2. When the person engaged in recognition (whether authorised or not) insists that the courses completed abroad must be identical to those which would have been taken at home, i.e. when equivalence is confused with comparability of learning outcomes.

### **Quality assurance**

Problems such as these may be identified and remedied by internal quality assurance procedures. However, clear guidelines are not yet available at the European level. The Erasmus Mobility Quality Tools Project (EMQT) has assembled a toolbox and a bank of good practice (see below under 'Sources and References').

### **Joint degrees**

In the case of multilateral joint degree programmes with tightly prescribed curricula, there is no need for individualised learning/training agreements. A formal agreement drawn up at the institutional level is sufficient. However, 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; the curriculum may be more or less integrated. Whatever has been agreed upon regarding recognition will, nevertheless, be formalized in official documentation.

## Recommendations

1. Establish an institution-wide procedure for the recognition of credit mobility which includes the steps mentioned below and is incorporated in your quality assurance system;
2. Establish a credit mobility system for the institution:
  - Establish a credit mobility system capable of issuing – and capturing data for – appropriate documentation from the range listed above: the Erasmus University Charter, course catalogue, application form, learning/training agreement, transcript of records and DS;
  - Ensure that this system is transparent to all users and that it exists within the scope of the internal quality assurance procedures;
  - Identify the academic and/or administrative person(s) who will be responsible for making recognition decisions concerning particular students or cohorts.
3. Before the departure of the student, the staff member responsible for the mobility should:
  - Define the learning outcomes of the various components of the placement;
  - Assist the student in choosing the appropriate host organisation, placement duration and content;
  - Give adequate cultural, linguistic and logistic support;
  - Ensure that all relevant parties sign and counter-sign the learning/training agreement;
  - Guarantee that all credits gained in the approved mobility programme will be fully recognised, transferred into the home programme and used to satisfy the qualification requirements.

### Example 23.1 – Selection of subjects

In selecting the subjects to be taken at the host institution and to be included in the learning agreement, the emphasis should not be on maximum overlap with the curriculum of the home institution. After all, an exchange period in another country offers the student the opportunity to study courses that are not provided by the home institution. As long as the main learning outcomes achieved at the host institution fit in with those required for the programme at the home institution, the learning agreement should be acceptable for the home institution.

4. During the placement, the staff members responsible for the mobility of 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 fast procedure for altering the learning agreement exists;
  - Confirm agreement of modifications to the learning/training agreement in writing.

### Example 23.2 – Fast track recognition of alternative courses

A bachelor student from country A applies for a one-semester exchange to a higher education institution in country B. The student plans everything well in advance, and has the learning agreement signed long before the exchange period begins. When the student arrives at the HEI in country B at the start of the new academic year, it appears that some of the agreed courses listed in the learning agreement (which was based on last year's course programme) are not offered.

The student contacts the staff member responsible for mobility of the host institution, and together they make a selection of alternative courses with learning outcomes comparable to those of the courses initially chosen. Then the student contacts the staff member responsible for mobility of the home institution in country A and provides the information on the changes made. This staff member makes sure that the new list of courses is acceptable, and has the revised learning agreement signed in a matter of days. In this way, the student does not have to lose time in waiting on a decision, and can also be reassured that the courses will be recognised when returning to country A.

5. After the return of the student, the staff responsible for the recognition process and the decisions relating to it should:
  - Transfer all credits gained in the approved mobility programme – as inscribed in the transcript of records – into the student's official programme at home, indicating the learning/training activities they refer to, with their original titles;
  - Enter the credits subsequently in the DS, with a note specifying the institution or organisation where they were obtained;
  - Use the credits for accumulation purposes to satisfy specific curricular requirements, as previously agreed in the learning/training agreement. Recognising credits gained abroad as 'additional credits' does not fulfil the commitment to full academic recognition, and is allowable only if the student brings back more credits than are specified in the learning/training agreement.
6. In case there was no proper procedure in place and/or no learning/training agreement was signed, even though the institutions approved the exchange, the home institution should always seek recognition of the credits gained at another institution based on the spirit of the LRC 'to recognize unless there is a substantial difference' (see chapter 9, 'Substantial and non-substantial differences').

To establish whether there is a substantial difference it is recommended that you look at the programme learning outcomes and recognize the credits unless the learning outcomes of the programme have not been obtained.

# Sources and references

The EAR HEI manual is based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and its subsidiary texts, and further projects (including the EAR manual) and publications by recognition experts. Below you find the main sources and suggestions for further reading per chapter.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction to recognition

- Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (almost always referred to as the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)).

Link: <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=165&CM=1&DF=26/01/2010&CL=ENG>;

- ENIC-NARIC Network.

Link: <http://enic-naric.net>;

- ECTS Users' Guide, 2015

Link: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide_en.pdf)

## Chapter 3 – Accreditation and Quality Assurance

- Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions, on the implementation of Council Recommendation 98/561/EC of 24 September 1998 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education.

Link: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52004DC0620:EN:HTML>;

- ENQA (the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education).

Link: [www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu);

- EQAR (the European Quality Assurance Register).

Link: <https://www.eqar.eu/>

## Chapter 4 – Diploma and accreditation mills

- 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.

Link: <http://www2.ed.gov/students/prep/college/diplomamills/diploma-mills.html#fake>

- Useful questions about diploma mills and accreditation mills.

Link: <https://www.chea.org/important-questions-about-degree-mills>;

- CIMEA against the mills. How to spot and counter Diploma Mills.

Link: <http://www.cimea.it/it/progetti-in-evidenza/fraudoc/fraudoc-outcomes.aspx>

## Chapter 5 – Authenticity

- Groningen Declaration.

Link: <http://www.groningendeclaration.org/>.

## Chapter 7 – Learning Outcomes

- Adam S., An introduction to learning outcomes: A consideration of the nature, function and position of learning outcomes in the creation of the European Higher Education Area. In: EUA Bologna Handbook, 2006.  
Link: [http://is.muni.cz/do/1499/metodika/rozvoj/kvalita/Adam\\_IH\\_LP.pdf](http://is.muni.cz/do/1499/metodika/rozvoj/kvalita/Adam_IH_LP.pdf);
- Lokhoff, J. et al., A guide to formulating degree programme profiles. Including programme competences and programme learning outcomes. Bilbao, Groningen, The Hague 2010.  
Link: [www.core-project.eu/documents/Tuning\\_Guide\\_Publicada\\_CoRe.pdf](http://www.core-project.eu/documents/Tuning_Guide_Publicada_CoRe.pdf).

## Chapter 8 – Credits, grades, credit accumulation and credit transfer

- ECTS Users' Guide, 2015.  
Link: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide_en.pdf);
- EGRACONS (European Grade Conversion System).  
Link: <http://egracons.eu/>.

## Chapter 12 – Institutional recognition practices

- EUA, Trends 2015 report, Learning and teaching in European universities.  
Available by searching for this publication through the link:  
<https://eua.eu/resources/publications.html>
- Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area 2015.  
Link: <http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/>;
- EUA, Trends 2010 report, A decade of change in European Higher Education.  
Available by searching for this publication through the link:  
<https://eua.eu/resources/publications.html>

## Chapter 14 – Diploma Supplement

- Aelterman G. et al., Study on the Diploma Supplement as seen by its users, 2008.  
Link: [www.ciep.fr/publi\\_educ/docs/diploma-supplement-as-seen-by-its-users.pdf](http://www.ciep.fr/publi_educ/docs/diploma-supplement-as-seen-by-its-users.pdf);
- Council of Europe and UNESCO, Explanatory Notes to the Joint European Diploma Supplement, 2007.  
Link: [www.aic.lv/ace/ace\\_disk/Dipl\\_Sup/DS\\_expl\\_nt\\_rev2007.pdf](http://www.aic.lv/ace/ace_disk/Dipl_Sup/DS_expl_nt_rev2007.pdf);

## Chapter 15 – Qualifications Frameworks

- Council of Europe and UNESCO, Recommendation on the use of qualifications frameworks in the recognition of foreign qualifications. Explanatory memorandum to the subsidiary text to the LRC, revised text 2013.  
Link: [http://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/DGIIEDUHE\\_2013\\_15\\_Rev\\_01\\_FINAL\\_-\\_Explanatory\\_memorandum\\_on\\_LRC\\_Supplementary\\_Text\\_on\\_the\\_Use\\_of\\_QFs\\_ENGLISH.pdf](http://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/DGIIEDUHE_2013_15_Rev_01_FINAL_-_Explanatory_memorandum_on_LRC_Supplementary_Text_on_the_Use_of_QFs_ENGLISH.pdf);
- European Commission, The European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF).  
Link: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm).

## Chapter 16 – Access qualifications

- Council of Europe and UNESCO, Recommendation on International Access Qualifications, 1999.  
Link: [www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/recognition/International%20Access%20Qualifications\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/recognition/International%20Access%20Qualifications_EN.asp).

## Chapter 17 – Qualifications gained after flexible learning paths

- ECTS Users' Guide, 2015.  
Link: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide_en.pdf);
- Nuffic et al., Formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning. A study exploring the possibilities of formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning, The Hague 2008.  
Link: [http://ecctis.co.uk/NARIC/documents/contributions/StudyonFormalRecognitionof\\_nov2008\\_def.pdf](http://ecctis.co.uk/NARIC/documents/contributions/StudyonFormalRecognitionof_nov2008_def.pdf).

## Chapter 18 – Qualifications awarded through Transnational Education

- OECD, Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education, 2005.  
Link: [www.oecd.org/education/educationeconomyandsociety/35779480.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/education/educationeconomyandsociety/35779480.pdf);
- Council of Europe and UNESCO, Revised code of good practice in the provision of transnational education, 2007.  
Link: [http://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/REVISED\\_CODE\\_OF\\_GOOD\\_PRACTICE\\_TNE.pdf](http://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/REVISED_CODE_OF_GOOD_PRACTICE_TNE.pdf).

## Chapter 19 – Qualifications Awarded by Joint Programmes

- Council of Europe/UNESCO-CEPES, Revised Recommendation on the Recognition of Joint Degrees, 2016.  
Link: <http://www.enic-naric.net/the-lisbon-recognition-convention-97.aspx>
- European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, 2015.  
Link: <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/>;
- Aerden, A. and J. Lokhoff, Framework for Fair Recognition of Joint Degrees. European Consortium for Accreditation. ECA 2013.  
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- Aerden, A. and H. Reczulska, The recognition of qualifications awarded by joint programmes, ECA 2010.  
Link: <http://ecahe.eu/w/images/4/47/Eca-Publication---the-recognition-of-qualifications-awarded-by-joint-programmes---2010.pdf>;

## Chapter 21 – Qualification holders without documentation

- ENIC NARIC webpage on qualifications held by refugees – guide for credential evaluators  
Link: <http://www.enic-naric.net/recognise-qualifications-held-by-refugees.aspx>

# EAR-HEI, STREAM and AR-Net consortia

This publication is a result of the European Area of Recognition – Higher Education Institutions (EAR HEI) project. The update for the second edition has been made by the STREAM consortium. The members of the consortium are listed below.

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The project team consisted of recognition experts from the following National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (NARICs) and European Network of Information Centres in the European Region (ENICs), and associations of higher education institutions:

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- France Education International (ENIC-NARIC France)
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- European University Association - EUA
- Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyzszego, Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Department of Higher Education Organisation and Supervision (ENIC-NARIC Poland)
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- European University Association - EUA
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- Nuffic - The Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education (ENIC-NARIC The Netherlands)
- Studijų kokybės vertinimo centras (SKCV) - Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (ENIC-NARIC Lithuania)
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- Robert Wagenaar, Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, Joint Coordinator.

## **Coordination**

The EAR HEI, STREAM and AR-Net projects are coordinated by Nuffic.

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*“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.”*

# Colofon

## AR-Net consortium:

- Coordinator: Nuffic - The Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education
- Centro Informazioni Mobilità Equivalenze Accademiche (CIMEA)
- Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann - Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
- Direção-Geral do Ensino Superior - Directorate-General for Higher Education Portugal
- European University Association (EUA)
- France Education International
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