



Evaluation of foreign
qualifications

One step on the road to the labour market



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Enic-Naric Sweden

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Evaluation of foreign qualifications – one step on the road to the labour market

During recent debates about the integration of individuals with foreign backgrounds into the labour market, demands have sometimes been made for faster and better recognition of qualifications. The discussion often encompasses both the recognition of professional skills and the evaluation of degrees and qualifications based solely on paper documents. The evaluation of qualifications is performed either by the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) or the competent authority for a specific regulated profession.

Evaluation of foreign qualifications is important but does not automatically lead to employment. Many factors influence the chances of an individual reaching his or her potential on the labour market.

UHR has been tasked by the Swedish Government with conducting a study to evaluate the effects and use of UHR's evaluation statements of higher education qualifications. This evaluation has shown that both employers and individuals find the statements useful, but also highlights some of the problems encountered by those looking for work.

The following document provides a short introduction to UHR's work in evaluation and recognition, and to the results of the evaluation. The entire report is available in Swedish at www.uhr.se/bedomning.



Lars Pettersson
Head of Department

Evaluation of foreign qualifications – what does UHR do?

UHR is responsible for evaluating completed foreign qualifications at several levels. The qualifications that are evaluated are those at upper-secondary level, post-secondary vocational education and higher education. What all the evaluations have in common is that they should make it possible for people who were educated in another country to use their education in Sweden. This could mean eligibility for higher education in Sweden or using a foreign qualification in the Swedish labour market.

The Department of Qualifications Recognition is Sweden's ENIC/NARIC office, which means that the department is responsible for duties in accordance with the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifica-

tions concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Convention). For example, this involves cooperating with other national information centres to facilitate the process of recognising higher education. UHR's duties also include providing support to higher education institutions (HEIs) and other authorities and organisations, both in Sweden and in other countries, on issues relating to the evaluation of foreign qualifications. This includes participating in work on an evaluation handbook for HEIs and providing information about foreign qualifications via a web service, a portal about evaluations, that is aimed at both HEIs and all other users who come into contact with people with foreign qualifications through their work.



Our tasks:

- evaluating foreign upper-secondary qualifications
- evaluating foreign post-secondary vocational qualifications
- evaluating foreign higher education qualifications
- providing information to applicants, careers and study guidance counsellors, HEIs and employers about how international qualifications can be recognised in Sweden.
- to be the Swedish ENIC/NARIC office and otherwise fulfil the obligations of the Lisbon Convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications.
- providing statements on foreign teacher training on request from the Swedish National Agency for Education as part of its certification process and answering questions on the need for supplementary studies for people with higher education, according to an agreement with the Agency for Education
- on request, providing the student financial aid board (CSN) with information for decisions on financial aid by investigating the status of foreign education providers and then taking decisions on acceptable standards
- being a point of contact for Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications
- being the competent authority for the architecture profession
- being responsible for regulations and information about the diploma supplement

More information is available at www.uhr.se.

How are higher education qualifications evaluated?

In the impact study described below, UHR investigates the effect of the statement on **higher education** and how the statement is used.

In order for an evaluation to be performed, individuals must submit an application. The evaluation is voluntary and free of charge. For some professions where authorisation is required, the evaluation is performed by others and the applicant is referred to the relevant authority. One example is the healthcare professions, for which the National Board of Health and

Welfare is the competent and responsible authority.

Employers can contact UHR for a preliminary decision during the recruitment process – no one should miss out on a job opportunity because they are waiting for their evaluation. It is not necessary for the applicant to apply for and receive a statement before applying for courses/programmes at a Swedish HEI as eligibility for higher education is determined during the admission process.

A schematic image of the steps in the evaluation process for higher education is shown below.

The evaluation process for higher education



Is the application complete or must the applicant submit additional information?



Has the qualification been issued by a recognised HEI?



Are the educational documents authentic?



Comparison with Swedish education. Which Swedish degree is equivalent to the qualification?



A statement is sent to the applicant. If an evaluation cannot be performed, a letter is sent with information about what the applicant can do next along with an explanation of why a statement was not issued.



Why are only recognised qualifications evaluated?

A programme must have been conducted by a recognised HEI, or recognised in some other way, for it to be evaluated as equivalent to a Swedish degree. Recognition means the programme has at least a minimum level of quality and that it can

be used in the country in which the degree was issued. Different countries have different systems for recognising HEIs and/or qualifications. This could include national legislation that establishes a framework for how HEIs are founded and may operate, or accreditations for educational programmes that are awarded by a particular organisation.

Which Swedish degree is equivalent to the qualification?

UHR uses a number of criteria in its evaluation. The most important criteria are:

- the purpose of the qualification (e.g. whether it is vocational or academic)
- its level or place in the foreign education system (e.g. whether the qualification provides admission to education at second or third-cycle levels – Master’s or doctorate)
- the scope of the studies
- whether the degree is substantially different from a Swedish degree in terms of content, quality or other aspects.

The basic principle for evaluation, according to the Lisbon Convention, is that qualifications shall be fully recognised unless there are significant differences. Substantial differences mean those which are so great that they present a barrier to studying or working in the receiving country.

The statement does not mean that a Swedish degree has been awarded, nor are any higher education credits stated. The comparison is made with one of the general qualifications or the qualifications in the fine, applied and performing arts (diplomas or Bachelor’s degrees on the first cycle, Master’s degrees on the second cycle and Licentiate and doctoral degrees on the third cycle) or with a vocational qualification.

Numerous tools and resources are used to establish the qualification’s purpose and place it in an educational system. In addition to various databases and handbooks, qualification frameworks and diploma supplements are used. UHR also benefits greatly from participating in various international networks with colleagues in other countries, with whom experiences can be exchanged. Over the more than 25 years in which foreign qualifications have been evaluated in Sweden, knowledge of various educational systems has been built up, along with a reference library of foreign educational documentation.

What happens if the qualification has not been completed or if there are no documents?

UHR only evaluates complete qualifications. HEIs can evaluate incomplete qualifications in association with credit transfers for previous studies as part of a Swedish degree.

If the qualification has been completed but the documentation is missing (and no new documentation can be issued, such as in cases of ongoing conflict in the country of education), UHR may write a background paper with a description of a qualification that is based on information and other available documentation. The applicant can, on the whole, use this document in the same way as a statement.



Interview with a credential evaluator

Andreas Arsalan has worked as a senior officer for more than 15 years, first at the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education and now at the Swedish Council for Higher Education. A great deal of knowledge and experience of a country's educational system is needed to be able to evaluate a qualification. It also requires knowledge of the Swedish educational system.

“My field is evaluating overseas higher education qualifications for people from the Middle East, including Turkey. Naturally, at the moment there are many applications from Syria because many people are fleeing from the war.

“For a variety of reasons, it can be difficult to evaluate qualifications from countries where there is unrest. Regardless of whether there's a war or other crises in the country, the chance to contact the authorities or university to verify documents is affected. Unfortunately, it also means that work on the evaluation process can take longer, and this obviously causes distress for those who have to wait.

“I keep in contact with colleagues in various countries via networks, conferences and study visits. In the same way, colleagues contact me for information on a number of issues. This is so that we can build up knowledge about a particular country's educational system. It feels rewarding to work with something that can help individuals and society as a whole,” he says.

How do things work out for people after their evaluation?

About the impact study

In their annual governmental appropriation directions, UHR was tasked with analysing and evaluating the use and effects of statements on completed foreign higher education issued by the authority. The survey was carried out from both the individual's perspective and the employer perspective and according to the length of residence in Sweden. The survey covered the evaluations completed over the last five years.

The impact study was carried out using three sub-studies. The first sub-study was a register study that compared the labour market results for graduates educated overseas who have statements with those who do not. The second sub-study was a questionnaire that was sent to 17,000 people who applied to have their foreign degree evaluated. The questionnaire had 5,000 respondents. The third sub-study was a questionnaire that targeted public and private employers. Of the 5,000 who received the questionnaire, 2,100 responded.

What the impact study says about the applicants ...

For applicants with statements, compared to those without, the study shows that the statement provides easier access to the labour market because:

- They leave unemployment faster.
- They find employment within jobs which require higher levels of education.
- They are more likely to be employed, both in the short and long term. 1 and 3 years after receiving the statement.

Most people who have a statement have used it and believe that it has helped them. It is most commonly used when applying for jobs, but also for planning the future or continuing to study. At the same time, some people feel it has been difficult to find work that corresponds to their level of education, despite the statement.

Many state that a lack of contacts on the Swedish labour market is the greatest difficulty when looking for work. Easily accessible information in one place covering pro-

fessions and continuing studies in Sweden is something requested by many people.

“In my industry, it is almost impossible to be 50+, have a foreign background and speak Swedish with an accent and get called to an interview. No attention is paid to my senior level in my profession or the experience I have; my experience seems to be completely uninteresting to employers. If you don’t have any contacts in the Swedish labour market it doesn’t seem possible to get a job on the basis of a foreign education. What remains is non-qualified jobs and even these are difficult to get, as I’m considered to be overqualified.”

... and about the employers

One in four employers has seen a statement and many employers know that there is an authority that evaluates foreign higher education qualifications.

The majority of employers believe that the statement has been of significance during the recruitment process.

The statement’s most important function is providing confidence with regard to the qualification’s level and content, and that the qualification is recognised by a Swedish authority. According to the employers, the biggest barrier in finding work for applicants with foreign higher education qualification is their lack of knowledge in Swed-

ish. To some extent, uncertainty about the foreign qualification’s content is a barrier to employment, so there is a demand for more detailed information about which Swedish qualification the foreign one is equivalent to.

“Because we are more familiar with the Swedish higher education qualifications and their levels, there is a need for an ‘equivalence evaluation’ of the foreign qualifications compared to the Swedish ones, to be able to relate to the relevance of the foreign qualification in the recruitment process.”

Information about evaluation can be improved, both for applicants and employers

The statement on foreign qualifications is valuable for both job seekers and for employers who are considering employing someone. It is also, from a social perspective, important to have as smooth an entrance to the labour market as possible for graduates with a foreign education. It is therefore important that those who can apply for an evaluation receive information about the opportunity to have their qualification evaluated as soon as possible. It is also important that employers know of the evaluations and that the statement provides as much help as possible during a recruitment process.

2014 saw a record number of applications for evaluation

During 2014, UHR's evaluation work was characterised by a significant increase in the number of applications with a total of 18,000 cases, an increase of 31% from 2013. The majority of these applications were for foreign upper-secondary education (8,400), followed by higher education qualifications (7,700) and vocational qualifications (1,900). In addition to these cases, more than 2,000 applications of various other types were processed, including certificates of eligibility for people who will study abroad, and responses to documents

circulated for comment from the Swedish National Agency for Education and CSN.

It is primarily the flow of refugees from Syria that is currently affecting the number of applications. More than one in three applications for the evaluation of post-secondary vocational education is related to Syrian education. For upper-secondary and higher education qualifications, one in five applications is from Syria. However, not all those applying for evaluation are refugees as many people come to Sweden for other reasons.

The top countries for each level of education are:

Upper-secondary education	Post-secondary vocational education	Higher education
Syria	Syria	Syria
Iran	Iraq	Iran
Iraq	Iran	Iraq
Poland	Poland	Russia
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Germany	Poland
Romania	Eritrea	Ukraine

The forecast is for a continued increase in 2015

With previous significant flows of refugees into Sweden, there has been a delay between people arriving in the country and them applying for evaluation. This pattern no longer applies; instead there is a direct correlation between the Swedish Migration Agency's statistics for asylum seekers and the number of cases sent to UHR – applications for evaluation are being sent more quickly than before. There is nothing to indicate that the number of applications will reduce in the near future; instead UHR predicts continuing increases in the coming years. Among those who apply for evaluation, some will – for various reasons – have lost their education documents, which means that more people will receive a background paper rather than a statement.

Which qualifications are evaluated?

40% of the **higher education qualifications** have been evaluated as equivalent to a Swedish first cycle (Bachelor's) degree. The qualifications may be specialised in different subjects, the most common being economics and teacher education. The most common professional degrees that are evaluated are a BSc in Engineering and MSc in Engineering. For **post-second-**

ary vocational qualifications, the most common professional areas are education and teaching, finance, administration and sales, followed by healthcare and social work. Evaluation of **upper-secondary education** is done for another purpose and the statistics there are different.

UHR is working to make evaluations better suited to the needs of the individual and the labour market

Work is continually being carried out to make processes more efficient so that no one should need to wait long to get their qualification evaluated. Despite this, the increase in the number of cases has led to long administration periods. One substantial step taken in 2014/2015 was the development of a web application form that makes it easier for applicants to send in their applications for evaluation and to upload educational documents via the internet. A preliminary study is underway to determine the future feasibility of sending the results of the evaluation – the statement – electronically.

UHR also works with authorities and stakeholders, including Arbetsförmedlingen (the Swedish employment agency) within the framework of their task to aid establishment.

Do you want to learn more?

You can read more about the evaluation of foreign qualifications at www.uhr.se/bedomning, where you can also find the impact study.

Applications for evaluation are made at:
utbildningsbedomning-en.uhr.se

We would be glad to answer your specific questions via:
enic-naric.sverige@uhr.se



The Swedish Council for Higher Education is a government agency whose responsibilities span across the education sector. Our work broadly spans the education sector and is characterised by its international dimensions. We evaluate foreign qualifications at the upper-secondary, post-secondary and academic level.



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