

Recognition of qualification holders without documentation.

European guidelines for credential evaluators and admissions officers

This brochure is designed to guide staff in higher education institutions dealing with refugee applicants who are unable to provide complete supporting documentation. In the current circumstances, such applicants are most likely to be from the war-torn countries in the Middle East.

Latest reports indicate that around one million refugees reached Europe in the course of 2015. Some are professional people; some are students; and some have life and work experience which could be recognised as constituting all or part of a qualification. None of them has long-term security or an assured future.

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Academic recognition in Europe

This brochure is an offprint from the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions, published in 2014. The Manual gives practical guidance on the recognition of academic qualifications and on the obligations on institutions in countries which have signed and ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

The Convention covers over 50 countries in the wider European, Central Asian and Australasian regions, from Iceland to Tajikistan, from Norway to New Zealand. It is the legal basis on which the European Higher Education Area is founded. As an international treaty, it has force of law.

It is binding on higher education institutions in a number of ways including that they:

- cannot discriminate between applicants on grounds of age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or nationality;
- can withhold recognition of a qualification, but then must prove that there is a substantial difference between the qualification held by the applicant and the qualification required;

- must give due consideration to the purpose for which recognition is sought – for example, whether it is for further study or for work;
- must, in all their procedures, be able to demonstrate that their assessment procedure is fair.

The Convention also covers the academic recognition of qualifications from people who, for reasons beyond their control, are unable to provide full documentary evidence of academic attainment and of their relevant life and work experience. This can cover a range of designations: refugees, stateless persons, asylum-seekers, displaced persons, migrants. While precise definitions may vary from country to country and have different implications for visa entitlement, residency, and eligibility for financial support, the situation regarding access to higher education is clear.

According to Article VII of the Convention, 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 the qualifications they claim, have a right to assessment of their qualifications when applying for admission to a study programme.

Problems arise when certificates and transcripts have been lost in transit. Further, it may be difficult to verify documentation or inquire about the education system, because of the political situation in the country of origin.

What must you do if you should receive an application from a refugee or person in a refugee-like situation without usual required documentation of the qualification(s) obtained?

Recommendations



Step 1. 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 modules, subjects/courses, assessment and workload (if transcript is not available);
 - attestation from applicant that information was provided truthfully.
- 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.

Tip: Use the model of the Diploma Supplement to design your background paper. Eliminate the sections that are not applicable. If you have the applicant complete the background paper, provide clear instructions.

http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/diploma-supplement_nl.htm

- 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.

Tip: Use previous applications from the same institution or programme to gather information and cross-check consistency of the information provided. Further, keep a database of previous recognition decisions. This may help you in future cases.

Step 2. Assess the qualification(s) on the basis of the information provided in the 'background paper' against the five elements of the qualification: quality, level, workload, profile and learning outcomes.

Adopt a flexible approach, accepting that not all required documentation and information is included in the application file. Focus on determining whether the applicant has the ability to succeed for the purpose recognition is sought for.

Accept if you are not able to assess against 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.

Tip: always contact your ENIC-NARIC in case of questions. For example on the authenticity of documentation provided or to complement information

Example 1 - Adopt a flexible approach towards an incomplete file

A refugee applicant has only all her transcripts of records from her studies. 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 in Engineering at the institution. Furthermore, the transcript of records provides a good overview of the workload and profile. The admissions officer decides to grant recognition.

Example 2 - Using a background paper prepared by an ENIC-NARIC

A refugee applicant seeks admission to a Master's programme in computer Science. He has a diploma or certificate confirming the completion of his Bachelor's qualification in the same field. 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.

Step 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.

Choose an assessment method that is fit for purpose and feasible. Examples of methods are:

- using existing instruments such as 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.

When undertaking an assessment, it is important to focus on the overall learning outcomes of the applicant needs to enter the fields of study;

Ensure that the assessment methodology is consistent throughout your institution and that the quality is assured.

Example 3 - The interview as 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.

Example 4 - Focus on learning outcomes

An admissions officer in 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.

Example 5 – 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 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.

The humanitarian mission of higher education

Academic institutions have every moral, intellectual, legal and economic reason to welcome refugees and to facilitate access through the fair recognition of their qualifications.

We need no reminding that Steve Jobs was the son of a Syrian refugee fleeing Lebanon. But we should also remember the Professor of Oceanography at the University of Oslo, subsequently League of Nations High Representative for Refugees and Rector of the University of St Andrews, Fridtjof Nansen, who introduced a system of certification for stateless persons in the 1920s. It became known as the Nansen Passport.

The Nansen Passport and the Lisbon Recognition Convention's background document share essential features. They aim to build a supra-national framework of good practice with a clear humanitarian purpose.

This brochure aims to help each institution make a contribution.

Further reading

At European level, measures are being introduced which more broadly support the role of higher education institutions:

- ENIC-NARIC.net collects the various national initiatives for the recognition of qualification holders without documentation. Link: <http://www.enic-naric.net/recognise-qualifications-held-by-refugees.aspx>
- The European University Association has built an interactive refugee welcome map, on which all higher education institutions are invited to publicise their initiatives. Link: <http://www.eua.be//activities-services/eua-campaigns/refugees-welcome-map>
- The 2016 Erasmus+ Programme Guide draws the needs of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants into sharp focus. It gives them higher priority in the criteria applied to grant awards to institutions. It opens the way to top-up mobility grants to disadvantaged individuals. It indicates that, for Strategic Partnerships, in view of 'the critical context, particular attention will also be given to support projects involving refugees, asylum seekers and migrants and/or focusing on the topic of the refugees' crisis in Europe.'
- The European Commission has 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
- The Commission has also set up a Regional Trust Fund to support Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan in their efforts to address the needs of refugees arriving from Syria. EUR 140 million will bring 172,000 refugee children into schools. These children may go on to access higher education in other countries.

For more information on the recommendations in this brochure, see the European Recognition Manual for Higher Education Institutions. Link: <http://www.enic-naric.net/ear-manual-standards-and-guidelines-on-recognition.aspx>

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