

Guidelines for the recognition of qualifications of refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation

Background

Today's pressing international refugee situation represents a challenge to the international community on a multitude of levels. According to the UNHCR, the world is now witnessing record levels of displacement with 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide¹. Moreover, refugees often face significant barriers to take active part in the society of the host country, and their lack of access to education and social services has an impact on their ability to contribute to their local communities. As such, there is a need for the international community to work towards developing comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the refugee crisis. This requires the mobilization of resources on both a national and international level, and it requires collaborative efforts between stakeholders working towards a multinational response. This is especially important when it comes to the need to increase refugees' access to education, as their ability to make use of their qualifications and utilize that competence across borders play a significant role in their opportunity to take part in mainstream society.

Importance of recognition

The recognition of qualifications is of utmost importance in the process of allowing refugees to continue their studies and find relevant work. On a regional level, signatory countries of the Lisbon Recognition Convention have made a commitment to develop procedures for the recognition of refugees' qualifications (Article VII)². As emphasized in a recent policy paper by the 2019 UNESCO Global Monitoring Report, the advantages of having an education cannot be duly realized if the qualification achieved before moving cannot be recognized across borders³. As refugees have often been through a dangerous journey fleeing from their home countries, they face several challenges in documenting their educational qualifications. This represents a challenge for educational institutions, as refugees often struggle to comply with normal requirements to documentation and thus cannot have their qualifications assessed through general procedures. When we speak of refugees in this context, we refer to refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation. What this group have in common, is that they often have inadequately documented qualifications. This means that the qualification obtained cannot be proven through relevant and necessary documentary evidence. We therefore need to ensure that refugee's inability to document their qualifications does not hinder their access to education and employment, by having systems in place for the recognition of inadequately documented qualifications.

Roles and implications for stakeholders

This situation has implications for the whole educational sector, as there are several stakeholders that play important roles in the recognition of refugees' qualifications.

National recognition agencies are increasingly faced with inadequately documented qualifications, and has a responsibility to provide fair and non-discriminatory treatment for all applicants. In order to address these current challenges, effective and up-to-date recognition procedures must be put in place. For *higher education institutions*, the situation is urgent and there is a need of practical tools to identify possible admissible students, including those with inadequately documented qualifications. By having appropriate procedures in place for this group of applicants, higher education institutions can ensure that talent is

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

² <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/165>

³ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000366312>

identified based on equal treatment of all. This will provide all applicants with a real opportunity to build on their competence by gaining access to further studies. *Ministries* are also important stakeholders in this process, as they play a vital role in providing educational institutions with the necessary resources and support, while working towards the development of sustainable multinational solutions to the refugee crisis.

Guidelines and principles

The current situation has made visible the need for practical guidelines on the recognition of refugees' qualifications. Guidelines are important as they provide institutions with practical steps to solve real challenges, and the implementation of comprehensive procedures at an institutional level can contribute to long-term capacity building. These guidelines, on the recognition of qualifications of refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation, provide educational institutions with a set of common principles and practical tools to build their procedures on. Eight principles represent our guidelines for the recognition of refugees' qualifications, and ten tools have been identified that can assist in the fulfillment of these principles through the development of systematic recognition procedures.

Principles

1. **Accessibility** – while setting the up the recognition process, it is important to ensure that no applicant is prevented from getting qualifications assessed, neither due to costs involved, lack of information on how to access the assessment, lack of language proficiency, nor lack of special procedures for applicants with inadequately documented qualifications.
2. **Information provision** – we must ensure the applicants get sufficient information on how to access the service, information on the process, information on the outcome, information on the status of the decision / outcome and advice on the way ahead.
3. **Equal treatment** – to ensure that also applicants with insufficient or lack of documentation will be given the real opportunity to get the qualifications assessed and that no one is prevented from having their qualifications assessed, due to geographical, language, financial, and social barriers.
4. **Competent treatment** - refugees, displaced persons or persons in a refugee-like situation should have a right to have their qualifications assessed by a competent recognition authority.
5. **Effectiveness** - applications should be processed as promptly as possible.
6. **Transparency** - procedures and criteria for the assessment of inadequately documented qualifications should be clear, coherent and reliable.
7. **Relevance** –to ensure that the final statement / result of the evaluation process / background document can be accepted both in the labor market, in relation to further studies and other types of recognition / authorization throughout the European Community. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that the methodology used in the assessment is suitable for the population of newly arrived refugees, including those without sufficient proficiency in English or local languages.
8. **Portability** - It is crucial to secure that the final statement is a standardized document accepted by the end users in all States party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention, so that public authorities are not required to repeat the assessment already undertaken by competent authorities of other States Party. The document should be issued in a widely spoken language (in addition to a local language).

Tools

1. **Collection of country databases** with the information on educational systems and status of the educational institutions
2. **Refugee country briefings** for the countries where refugees are coming from contain brief and relevant information necessary while doing assessments.
3. **Verification databases** with the lists of the graduates from the educational institutions
4. **Verification** is the process aiming to confirm that the qualification is correctly issued. The fact that the qualification is correctly issued can be confirmed by the issuing authority. In cases where verification is not possible due to destroyed archives, lack of records or insecure information sources, the documentation is classified as non-verifiable. In cases with non-verifiable documentation, interview-based tools can be applied in order to substitute the fact that the qualification is correctly issued to the applicant.
5. **Questionnaire / self-evaluation template** - This tool allows to get relevant information about applicants' background, including descriptions of qualifications, language proficiency and work experience provided by an applicant him/herself in a systematized way. The information provided in the questionnaire might be especially useful in cases with insufficient or lack of documentation.
6. **Checklist for the credential evaluators** provides structured overview over the main points one has to address while doing the assessment of the qualification.
7. **Level placement** template provides the structured overview over the main characteristics of the qualification being assessed.
8. **Interview / Interview template** contains the questions to be asked during the face-to-face (online) interview.
9. **Report template** provides the overview over the information to be included in the overheads of the final statement. The report is based on the information provided through self-evaluation, documentation analysis and interview.
10. **Template for the final statement (Background Document)** – Qualifications Passport for Refugees

By setting-up our procedures based on this set of principles and tools, we can ensure that all stakeholders are provided with a solution that delivers professional treatment and addresses institutional needs. Although stakeholders in different countries adhere to a diverse set of legislations and assessment practices, building our procedures on a set of common principles will ensure that the assessment outcome provides the necessary and relevant information to make a qualified final decision. Moreover, it will ensure that we maintain our high standards of professionalism when we design a solution that can be beneficial for all stakeholders. In this way we can ensure that the skills and competencies of refugees' are identified as early as possible. To be able to achieve this common goal, more flexible and standardized procedures must be made available for those who cannot fully document their qualifications.

It is therefore essential that we develop systematic procedures based on the principles we follow and that the assessment outcome provides relevant information that has value across borders.

The Qualifications Passport for Refugees represents a comprehensive and systematic approach to these principles, where the outcome is a qualified advisory statement concerning the refugee's qualification(s). Moreover, the standardized document presents available information on the applicant's educational level, work experience and language proficiency – in addition to qualified advice on the road ahead. The document thereby provides necessary and relevant information about the refugee's educational and training background, which can be useful for applications of employment and admission to studies. The methodology is a combination of an assessment of available documentation and a structured interview, and the standardized final document enables national authorities to better organize for the refugees' future in terms of work and further education.

The methodology was first tested in Norway in 2016, and is now implemented as a permanent procedure administered by NOKUT, the Norwegian ENIC-NARIC⁴. The Qualifications Passport for Refugees has since then been tested in a number of countries, as part of several international projects. Within the current MERIC-NET project, testing has taken place in Lebanon as part of the work-package on the recognition of refugees' qualifications. Training in the use of the methodology was provided by NOKUT in January 2018, and interviews were conducted in Beirut in October 2018. Experiences from the testing of the methodology in the MERIC-NET project, and in a number of other international projects, show that the methodology represents a valuable tool for staff working with the recognition of refugees' qualifications.

⁴ <https://www.nokut.no/en/foreign-education/nokuts-qualifications-assessment/>