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REPORT: SEMINAR ON RECOGNITION OF REFUGEE QUALIFICATIONS

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SEMINAR ON RECOGNITION OF REFUGEE QUALIFICATIONS

SECTION I: SEMINAR

A seminar for credential evaluators and others called upon to evaluate educational qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons, and persons in a refugee-like situation (hereafter referred to as “refugees”) was hosted by the Council of Europe on November 15-16, 1999 in Strasbourg, France. The seminar was developed on the basis of the crisis in South East Europe, with emphasis on educational qualifications from Serbia and Kosovo. However, many of the outcomes and recommendations are relevant to the evaluation of qualifications held by refugees, no matter what their geographical origin. A background document entitled *Recognition of Refugee Qualifications – Outline of a Training Seminar* is attached (**Appendix 1**).

As an international credentials expert and manager of British Columbia’s International Credential Evaluation Service (ICES), I was asked to attend this seminar and prepare this report in order to share the information gathered. I am grateful to the Canadian Information Centre on International Credentials, who initially found out about this opportunity, and to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, for funding the trip and the resulting report. I would also like to thank the Council of Europe for hosting the seminar and inviting a representative from Canada to attend.

The information in this report is current as of January 13, 2000. Further information and outcome documents are expected from the seminar in the future. These will be posted on the ICES Website at <http://www.ola.bc.ca/ices> as they become available.

A full list of the seminar participants appears in **Appendix 2**.

SECTION II: ISSUES

The Difficulty of Dealing with Refugees’ Qualifications

Normally, those who assess educational qualifications do evaluations on the basis of well-documented qualifications from education systems where information is generally available. In the case of refugees, evaluators are often faced with incomplete or entirely missing information about the individual’s educational achievements. Further, information from the country and the educational institution from which the qualification hails may also be unavailable. The evaluation of refugees’ qualifications calls for a different approach than that normally used by evaluators.

Unfortunately, some evaluations come to a stop when faced with these barriers. The result is that many refugees who could be contributing to the country and community in which they now reside are unemployed or underemployed, and obliged to restart education or training already completed in their home country. While refugees often face other barriers such as language and/or emotional trauma, there is also evidence that systems for assessment and recognition of certificates, skills, and knowledge can fail to offer refugees appropriate routes into

employment or further education and training. The Lisbon Recognition Convention and, in particular, Section VII on the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons, and persons in a refugee-like situation were created in an effort to address some of these issues.

Recognition Barriers Faced by Refugees

The main recognition-related barriers faced by refugees were identified by the Danish Refugee Council to be:

- Insufficient information and unclear procedures
- Lack of provisions for various areas of assessment and recognition
- Lack of procedures to deal with insufficient documentation
- Lack of financial support and bridging to mainstream education and training

In a discussion among the participants at the seminar about the qualification recognition practices in each of the countries represented, it became apparent that there was a broad range of practices with regard to assessing the qualifications held by refugees. The number and severity of barriers faced by refugees in one country versus another varied.

Some of the assessment options that are already available in Canada to address these barriers were considered among the best in the group. For example, the credential evaluation reports offered by some of the evaluation services met many of the recommendations, as did the availability of examinations and prior learning assessment from some institutions and professional regulatory bodies. Unfortunately, the practices across Canada, from educational institution to educational institution, and between various regulated occupations and provincial jurisdictions, are as wide-ranging as those seen between the various European countries represented in the seminar. The result is that refugees and others arriving with education from other countries frequently do not know what to expect by way of recognition in our country. In other words, our systems of qualification recognition are less than clear.

SECTION III: INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

The Lisbon Recognition Convention

The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon 1997) was jointly drafted by the Council of Europe and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It is designed to streamline the legal framework at the European level and to replace, in the long run, six conventions adopted in this matter by the Council of Europe or UNESCO. It provides that requests for recognition should be assessed in a fair manner and within a reasonable time and that recognition can only be refused if the qualification is substantially different from that of the host country. The onus is placed on the evaluating party to demonstrate where substantial differences lie.

Two bodies, namely the Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region and the European Network of National

Information Centres on Academic Mobility and Recognition (the ENIC Network), oversee, promote, and facilitate the implementation of the Convention. To this end, the Committee can adopt, by a majority of the Parties, recommendations, declarations, protocols, and models of good practice to guide the evaluating agents. Before making its decisions, the Committee seeks the opinion of the ENIC Network. The ENIC Network (or comparable agent in each country) is expected to uphold and assist the practical implementation of the Convention by the competent national authorities. The comparable body in Canada is the Canadian Information Centre on International Credentials (CICIC). This Convention was signed by Canada in November 1997 and came into effect in February 1999. The full text of the Convention is posted on the CICIC Website: <http://www.cicic.ca/conventions/index.stm> (**Appendix 3**).

In response to the Convention, Canada's Provincial Assessment Committee (PAC) developed a guiding principles document entitled *General Guiding Principles for Good Practice in the Assessment of Foreign Credentials*. The full text of the Guiding Principles is posted on the PAC Website: <http://www.canalliance.org/> (**Appendix 4**). This document referenced both the Lisbon Recognition Convention and a document produced by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, entitled *Draft Recommendations on the General Procedures and Criteria for the Evaluation of Foreign Qualifications*, as starting points. This guiding principles document is an excellent source of information to credential evaluators in Canada who want to ensure the use of good practices in the evaluation field.

Section VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention

Section VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention covers the recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons, and persons in a refugee-like situation. It reads as follows:

Each Party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps within the framework of its education system and in conformity with its constitutional, legal, and regulatory provisions to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation fulfill the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programmes or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence.

The purpose of the seminar in Strasbourg was to develop guidelines in consultation with the ENIC Network to answer the questions that this section of the Convention raises. What feasible and reasonable steps can be taken in the absence of the normal documentation required for qualification assessment? What is "fair" and how may "expeditiously" be defined? These guidelines will likely go on to be adopted by the Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region to guide the evaluating agents in the countries that are parties to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

SECTION IV: GUIDELINES FOR THE RECOGNITION OF REFUGEES' QUALIFICATIONS

Draft guidelines on how to deal with refugees' qualifications were presented at the seminar in Strasbourg for discussion by the participants. The draft was developed by the Working Party

on Refugee Qualifications on the basis of a workshop held at the ENIC meeting earlier in the year, work by the Danish Refugee Council, as well as by Erwin Malfroy, a member of the Working Party. These guidelines begin to provide a process for implementing Section VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. They were discussed in detail and some changes were suggested. A final document is being prepared by the Council and will be available later in 2000.

The participants at the seminar acknowledged that the options for dealing with refugee credentials may not be viable in every situation; however, these guidelines provide helpful alternatives for consideration and application when possible. Different evaluation needs and situations call for different approaches. The intent of this report is to present the guidelines that were discussed in Strasbourg to credential evaluators in Canada so that they can incorporate what is feasible for their situation.

Alternate Evaluation Methodologies and Types of Supporting Evidence

As previously discussed, the evaluation of refugees' qualifications frequently involves additional hurdles for evaluators. Evaluators are often faced with incomplete or entirely missing information about the refugee's educational achievements. Approaches to compensating for missing or incomplete documentation that we discussed in Strasbourg included the following alternate evaluation methodologies and use of alternate supporting evidence.

Alternate Evaluation Methodologies

- *Interviews* - May be conducted by a qualified individual to assess the refugee's level of knowledge.
- *Special competence examinations* - May be established to determine if an individual has the knowledge and/or skills necessary to either enter an educational program or pursue a particular occupation.
- *Sworn statements* - May be used in conjunction with or as a basis for assessment of the qualifications that the individual claims to have been completed.
- *Prior learning assessment* - May be based on a portfolio and other supporting evidence to determine an individual's level of knowledge and/or experience.
- *Provisional recognition or admission* - May be used as an interim measure by an organization or institution until the "normal" evidence becomes available. In some cases, this evidence may never be available and some institutions may waive it if the refugee has successfully achieved the expected outcomes.

Alternate Types of Supporting Evidence

Credential evaluators may also accept types of *supporting evidence* from outside their normal requirements in order to document the education claimed by a refugee. This supporting evidence can take many forms. Several different types of supporting evidence can be used to corroborate a refugee's claim. These include but are not limited to:

- *Certificates of professional status* - Normally awarded upon completion of a particular level of education or training, these may imply completion of a minimum level of education that may therefore be recognized by the evaluator.
- *Teachers' statements about the education completed by the individual* - May be accepted in the absence of normal documentation from a registrarial office or similar authority.
- *Printed lists of admitted, registered, or graduated students* - Sometimes printed in the newspapers of various countries to publicly acknowledge the accomplishments of individuals, these may be used by credential evaluators as supporting evidence of educational achievement.
- *Student identification cards* - Provided by educational institutions upon registration, these may be used to demonstrate that an individual had access to a particular level of education in the home country. A credential evaluator at an educational institution may use this as a basis of admission for further education.
- *Statements from employers* - May be used by evaluators to incorporate work experience, skills, and knowledge with formal education. The work experience may make it possible to bridge undocumented education gaps, compensate for detected shortfalls in practical training hours, and update old degrees.
- *Course calendars and program syllabi* - In cases where completion of a program can be established, but a record of the individual's courses and grades cannot be obtained, an evaluator may be able to use an educational institution's course calendar or program syllabi to determine what courses and even what content was covered by the individual. In many countries and institutions, the program of study toward a particular credential is, in whole or in part, fixed. In these instances, evaluators may be able to make educated assumptions about what courses and material the graduate must have successfully completed in order to be awarded the credential. This information can be particularly helpful in assessing qualifications to meet the requirements of regulated occupations. It may also be used for decisions about transfer credit toward further education.

Canadian Context: Alternate Evaluation Methodologies and Supporting Evidence

The Canadian representative at the Strasbourg seminar was pleased to report that many of the alternate methodologies are already in place in many evaluation jurisdictions in Canada. For example, some credential evaluation services will do assessments on the basis of a sworn statement from a refugee. Prior learning assessment is also on the rise in Canada.

Canadian evaluators, educators and professional/trades recognizing bodies are beginning to acknowledge the benefits of using whatever means viable to give due recognition to the credentials of those who come here from overseas. Participants at the seminar considered many Canadian practices to be on the cutting edge of evaluation.

Where possible, Canadian evaluators should continue to seek ways of demonstrating flexibility through alternate but reliable means to reach the goal of recognizing as much of the refugees' education as possible. Balanced with the need to ensure evaluations done by evaluation

services remain credible, fair, and reliable; evaluators need to be creative, open-minded, and willing to combine a range of assessment methodologies and use alternate types of evidence.

Alternate Sources of Information or “Vehicles of Evidence”

For a number of reasons, the normal routes of information about a qualification frequently fail credential evaluators in the case of assessing refugees’ qualifications. The refugee’s educational institution may be closed or the records temporarily or permanently damaged or destroyed; the country’s communication systems may be unreliable or unavailable; an ethnic, social, religious, or other group may be denied access to “recognized” education or information about the completed programs; and so forth. A number of alternate sources of information or “vehicles of evidence” were suggested in these cases:

- *Non-governmental Organizations* - These include UNICEF, the World University Service (WUS), and others who sometimes have access to information due to their role in providing assistance within the country where the refugees’ qualifications originate.
- *National Information Centres* - Evaluators are encouraged to make use of the National Information Centres (NICs) in their assessment of qualifications held by refugees. These centres are often willing and able to share their gained knowledge and expertise concerning the recognition of refugees’ credentials.
- *Web resources* are increasingly helpful in assessing refugee qualifications from around the world. As helpful sites are identified, the International Credential Evaluation Service will create links on its Website at <http://www.ola.bc.ca/ices>

Canadian Context: When researching the educational credentials of refugees, Canadian evaluators are encouraged to seek out and utilize alternate sources of information.

Expeditious Evaluation

In order to prevent the loss of valuable time, it was proposed in the seminar that refugees should have access to results of their qualification assessment within four months of applying for recognition. Ideally, these results should be in the form of an advisory statement that can be used as a reliable tool in job search, and career and education planning. The goal is to prevent the refugees from losing touch with their field of study, profession, or trade due to extensive delays in integrating them with the systems in the host country. The participants reported that the four-month timeframe was already being achieved in most cases in their respective countries.

Canadian Context: Canadian evaluators should endeavour to complete evaluations for refugees as quickly as possible and within four months of their submission of an application for evaluation.

Financial Considerations

Refugees are often in a financially difficult situation. The recommendation made in the seminar is to reduce or eliminate the fees charged to refugees for the evaluation of their credentials. It was pointed out that recognition of their education and training is a critical factor in getting them back on their feet and allowing them to become productive members of society in the host country.

In addition to the problems associated with evaluation fees, the cost of translating their documents was also identified as a problem. Flexibility on the part of evaluators about the translations that are submitted was recommended.

Canadian Context: Many costs associated with evaluation and translation are unavoidable because these services are not generally funded by the federal and provincial governments in Canada and must therefore recover their operation costs. A possible solution is for government, perhaps in partnership with the banking industry, to provide loans or bursaries to cover the costs of assessment, translations, and compensatory education or training. Alternately, they could fund evaluation services directly for the assessment of refugee qualifications.

Ideally, all government-recognized refugees should be funded for translation and evaluation of their educational credentials by one of the international credential evaluation services in Canada, the assessing body for their profession or trade, or the educational institution that offers training in the refugees' field.

Clear Assessment Procedures

The draft guidelines suggested that information on the procedures and criteria for the assessment of refugees' qualifications should be plain and the written materials, like the application form, should be in a "relevant language". There was some debate among the attendees at the seminar about the issue of a "relevant language". In the end, it was determined that it is preferable to translate instructions and forms if possible. In situations where a large group with a common language is being taken into a country, funding may be provided to facilitate translation of key information or tools to assist them.

Those working with the refugees (for example: social workers, vocational guidance counsellors, and translators) should be kept informed about the procedures and criteria for the assessment of refugees' qualifications. It is important that the procedures be clear to this group because they will likely be working in an advisory and facilitating capacity with refugees.

Canadian Context: Assessment procedures in Canada should be written in plain language that would be easily understood by an individual with English or French as a second language. If Canada took in a large group of refugees from a particular country or region of the world, and it was determined that it would be beneficial to provide assessment instructions in a language other than English or French, the Government of Canada should provide funding for translation of these documents.

Bridging Programs

In cases where credential evaluators identify a significant difference between the refugees' qualifications and the local ones, suitable courses designed to bridge the gaps and shortfalls should be organized. Wherever possible, refugees should be able to avoid restarting their education and training from scratch by having their qualifications taken into account.

Canadian Context: Part-time or modular courses and programs are needed to permit greater access to education that would bridge the gaps identified by evaluators. Work in this area is already underway at some post-secondary institutions in Canada as a way of providing access to individuals who have received partial credit through prior learning assessment and recognition.

Information Sharing

The sharing of information is especially critical when dealing with credentials for refugees as sources of information can be very limited and yet extremely valuable to the credential evaluator. The following recommendations were made in relation to sharing information:

- Credential evaluators from all jurisdictions (credential evaluation services, post-secondary education, immigration, regulatory bodies, etc.) should seek ways to share information about their methodologies and results of refugee qualification evaluation so that the benefit of research and knowledge can be built upon and expanded.
- The concept of having an internationally accessible website on refugee qualifications was discussed in the workshop. Key sources of information for countries that have experienced turmoil resulting in an upset to their education system could be posted to this site. (There is a possibility that either the Danish Refugee Council or the World University Service will take up this task in the future.)
- Meetings between evaluating agencies, refugee-assisting organizations, and government officials should occur on an ongoing basis to increase the awareness of recognition problems and work toward solutions. This is particularly important in the case of dealing with defined groups of refugees where appropriate strategies and solutions can be developed by bringing together the key players.

Developing a Policy on Recognizing Refugees' Qualifications

Canadian Context: Many of the alternative approaches suggested above are already in place with some evaluation authorities in Canada, while for others these may present new concepts that they may or may not be able to implement for legal, fiscal, or other reasons. Organizations, authorities, and individuals dealing with recognition and integration matters may wish to work together to analyze the wide-ranging recognition practices in Canada and consider these

suggestions in developing policies for fair assessment adapted to the circumstances of refugees.

SECTION V: ADVISORY STATEMENT

In addition to the discussions about guidelines for recognizing refugees' qualifications, there was discussion about what form the result of this assessment should take. It was recommended that the assessment on behalf of a refugee result in an advisory statement. A sample of this advisory statement was presented by the Working Party and discussed at the seminar in some detail.

The advisory statement is intended to be a tool for the credential evaluator to reconstruct the educational background of the refugee in order to facilitate future assessment and recognition. This paper would act as a tool to assist the refugee in a job search, for career or education planning, and for as many other uses as possible. The advisory paper itself is not necessarily an evaluation, but a descriptive reconstruction of the academic achievements established according to a professional assessment of available documents and other supporting evidence.

The academic reconstruction contained in the advisory statement would provide:

- a) *An overview of the claimed educational background and the supporting evidence provided for each - the sample discussed looked like this:*

Educational Background	
Qualification	Supporting Evidence
Secondary Education	Diploma
Higher education - first degree	Student ID Transcript of 1st year
Higher education - second degree	No formal educational documents, but Teacher statement Employment contract

- b) *a checklist of relevant information that has been gathered, which may include:*

- Identification of the holder of the claimed qualifications
- Refugee's claimed educational background and achievements
- Level of the qualification(s) in the home country
- Contents of the program and results gained
- Function of the qualification
- Studies not completed
- Additional information found relevant by the evaluator

The suggested advisory paper is being updated by the Council and will be posted on the ICES Website when available.

Canadian Context: Some evaluation services in Canada will produce a report that is similar to the above advisory statement. For example, the International Credential Evaluation Service

offers a “Program Evaluation” report in cases where formal educational documentation and supporting evidence are unavailable (**Appendix 5**). This report, requested by the refugee on the basis of a sworn statement about the educational credential they claim to have completed, serves most of the purposes of the suggested advisory statement. However, it does not confirm that the refugee completed the credential.

In special circumstances, evaluation services in Canada may wish to consider broadening the types of evidence that they accept to validate credentials for evaluation purposes and produce reports that connect the credential with the individual. This approach would more closely resemble the concept put forward at the seminar in Strasbourg.

SECTION VI: REFUGEES FROM SOUTH EAST EUROPE

The ENIC Statement on the Crisis in South East Europe

The European National Information Centres (ENICs) provide information on the education systems of their countries to those in other countries for the purpose of facilitating recognition. The ENIC Statement on Recognition and Mobility Issues Related to the Crisis in South East Europe, adopted by the ENIC Network on 15 June 1999, references Section VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. In it, the ENIC Network appeals to the parties and signatories to the convention to apply the principles outlined in Section VII to recognition of qualifications of refugees from the former Yugoslavia. Institutions are encouraged to show a high degree of flexibility in cases where qualifications cannot be documented and to recognize the parallel and often non-formal Albanian education system which was in operation in Kosovo for a number of years prior to the crisis in 1999. Further information on the parallel system is outlined below.

The Current State of Education in Kosovo and Serbia

In Kosovo, a parallel, non-official education system for the Albanian population was in place for a number of years prior to the events in South East Europe in 1999. In the latter part of this year, a similar situation began to occur for the Serb population of the region. Credential evaluators are encouraged to give some level of recognition to these parallel or “shadow” education systems. While they fall outside the officially recognized education system of the region, it is important to note that there have been times when they are the *only* education available in a system that bars students on the basis of their ethnic origin. Like access to medical treatment, the assessment of qualifications should be fair to all. While the majority of refugees from South East Europe are currently of ethnic Albanian origin, the same flexibility should be accorded to the evaluation of credentials for refugees of Serbian or any other ethnic origin.

Two presentations on the status of education in Kosovo and Serbia were given during the seminar in Strasbourg. The first presentation, entitled *The State of Higher Education in Kosovo* (**Appendix 6**), was given by Elmar Pichl who worked in the Prishtina office of the World University Service for most of 1999. His presentation, based on first hand experience

with the parallel system of higher education set up by Albanians in Kosovo, was both helpful and enlightening.

Of particular help is a Website hosted by the World University Service in Austria, located at <http://www.wus-austria.org/kosovo>. This Website includes, under the University of Prishtina link, sections on the situation in higher education and on securing university documents. It also includes contact information for the University of Prishtina. At this time, please note that postal service is not available in Kosovo and Serbia but that you might expect a reply via email.

The second presentation, entitled *Slovenian Experience with Certificates from Serbia and Kosovo* (**Appendix 7**), was presented by Eva Vilfan of the Ministry of Education and Sport, Republic of Slovenia. As current neighbours and part of the former Yugoslavia until 1991, the experts from Slovenia were also very helpful. The focus in this presentation was on primary and secondary levels of education. Sample educational documents from Serbia and Kosovo that have been seen in Slovenia were presented.