



Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee at its second meeting, Rīga, 6 June 2001)

Preamble

The Committee of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region,

Considering that the aim of the Council of Europe and UNESCO is to achieve greater unity between their members, and that this aim can be pursued notably by common action in cultural matters;

Having regard to the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region;

Having regard to the European Cultural Convention;

Having regard to European Conventions Nos. 15 on the Equivalence of Diplomas leading to Admission to Universities, 21 on the Equivalence of Periods of University Study, 32 on the Academic Recognition of University Qualifications, 49 Protocol to the European Convention on the Equivalence of Diplomas leading to Admission to Universities and 138 on the General Equivalence of Periods of University Study as well as European Agreement No. 69 on the portability of student grants;

Having regard to the UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning higher Education in the States belonging to the Europe Region;

Having regard to the two declarations on the application of European Convention No. 15 and to the General Declaration on the European Equivalence Conventions;

Having regard to the Declaration of the European Ministers of Education in Bologna on 19 June 1999;

Having regard to the Diploma Supplement elaborated jointly by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO, to the UNESCO/Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in the provision of transnational education and to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS);

Having regard to the practical action in favour of improving the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education carried out by the Council of Europe/UNESCO European Network of national information centres on academic recognition and mobility ("the ENIC Network");

Considering that the Council of Europe and UNESCO have always encouraged academic mobility as a means for better understanding of the various cultures and languages, and without any form of racial, religious, political or sexual discrimination;

Considering that studying or working in a foreign country is likely to contribute to an individual's cultural and academic enrichment, as well as to improve the individual's career prospects;

Considering that the recognition of qualifications is an essential precondition for both academic and professional mobility;

Recommends the governments of States party to the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region¹:

- i. to take into account, in the establishment of their recognition policies, the principles set out in the appendix hereto;
- ii. to draw these principles to the attention of the competent bodies concerned, so that they can be considered and taken into account;
- iii. to promote implementation of these principles by government agencies and local and regional authorities, and by higher education institutions within the limits imposed by the autonomy of higher education institutions;
- iv. to ensure that this Recommendation is distributed as widely as possible among all persons and bodies concerned with the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education;

Invites the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and the Director-General of UNESCO, as appropriate, to transmit this Recommendation to the governments of those States which have been invited to the Diplomatic Conference entrusted with the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention but which have not become parties to that Convention.

¹ In this Recommendation, this Convention will be referred to as "the Lisbon Recognition Convention".

APPENDIX TO THE RECOMMENDATION ON PROCEDURES AND CRITERIA FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF FOREIGN QUALIFICATIONS AND PERIODS OF STUDY

I. General considerations

1. The present Recommendation is adopted within the framework of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and applies to the Parties of this Convention. The principles and practices described in this Recommendation can, however, also equally well be applied to the recognition of qualifications issued in other countries under transnational education arrangements or to the recognition of qualifications in countries other than those party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

2. The Recommendation codifies established best practice among credential evaluators and builds on this practice in suggesting further improvements. The provisions of the Recommendation are in particular directed at recognition cases where a complex assessment is required. It is realised that cases involving well-known qualifications may be treated in a simpler way.

II. Definitions

3. Terms defined in the Lisbon Recognition Convention are used in the same sense in the present Recommendation, and reference is made to the definition of these terms in Section I of the Convention. Terms that specifically refer to the provision of transnational education are defined in the UNESCO/Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in the provision of Transnational Education.

III. General principles

4. Holders of foreign qualifications shall have adequate access, upon request, to an assessment of their qualifications.

5. The provisions referring to the assessment of foreign qualifications shall apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the assessment of periods of study.

6. Procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications should be transparent, coherent and reliable, and they should periodically be reviewed with a view to increasing transparency, taking account of developments in the education field and eliminating requirements leading to undue complications in the procedure.

7. In the assessment of foreign qualifications concerning higher education, the international and national legal frameworks should be applied in a flexible way with a view to making recognition possible. In cases where existing national laws conflict with the present Recommendation, States are encouraged carefully to consider whether national laws may be amended.

8. Where, after thorough consideration of the case, the competent recognition authority reaches the conclusion that recognition cannot be granted in accordance with the

applicant's request, alternative or partial recognition should be considered.

9. In all cases where the decision is different from the recognition requested by the applicant, including in cases where no form of recognition is possible, the competent recognition authority should inform the applicant of the reasons for the decision reached and his or her possibilities for appealing against it.

10. The assessment criteria contained in this Recommendation have been drawn up with a view to increasing the consistency of the procedures and use of criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications, thus assuring that similar recognition cases will be considered in reasonably similar ways throughout the European region. It is nevertheless realised that a margin of flexibility in making recognition decisions is essential, and that decisions will to some extent vary according to national systems of education.

11. The procedural recommendations contained in the present document aim at making assessment procedures more consistent and transparent and at assuring all applicants a fair consideration of their application. The recommendations on procedures and criteria to be followed are equally valid regardless of whether the outcome of the assessment procedure is:

- (i) a recognition decision;
- (ii) advice to the competent recognition authority making the decision;
- (iii) a statement addressed to individual(s), institution(s), potential employer(s) or others.

It is recommended that applicants have access to an assessment relevant to the case.

12. While the aim of assessments should be to assess applicants' foreign qualifications in qualitative terms, it is realised that quantitative criteria will have to be used to a certain extent. Their use should, however, be limited to cases where quantitative criteria are relevant to quality and may supplement qualitative criteria.

IV. Assessment procedures

Information to applicants

13. The competent recognition authority should give all applicants an acknowledgement of the receipt of their application.

14. National information centres, competent recognition authorities and other assessment agencies should publish standardised information on the procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications concerning higher education. This information should automatically be given to all applicants as well as to persons making preliminary inquiries about the assessment of their foreign qualifications.

15. The time normally required to process recognition applications, counted from such time as all relevant information has been provided by applicants and/or higher

education institutions, should be specified to applicants. Applications should be processed as promptly as possible, and the time of processing should not exceed four months.

16. National information centres, competent recognition authorities and other assessment agencies should provide advice to individuals enquiring about the possibilities and procedures for submitting formal applications for the recognition or assessment of their foreign qualifications. As appropriate, in the best interests of the individual, informal advice should also be provided in the course of, as well as after, the formal assessment of the applicants' qualifications, if required.

17. National information centres and competent recognition authorities should draw up an inventory of typical recognition cases and/or a comparative overview of other education systems or qualifications in relation to that of their own country as an aid in making recognition decisions consistent. They should consider whether this information could be made available to applicants with the proviso that this information serve only as an indicative guide, and that each application will be assessed on an individual basis.

Information on the qualification for which recognition is sought

18. The responsibility for providing information on the qualification for which recognition is sought is shared by applicants, higher education institutions at which the qualifications in question were awarded and the competent recognition authority undertaking the assessment as specified in the Lisbon Recognition Convention, in particular in its Articles III.3 and III.4. Higher education institutions are strongly encouraged to issue a Diploma Supplement in order to facilitate the evaluation of the qualifications concerned, in particular by credential evaluators and potential employers.

19. In cases where refugees, persons in a refugee-like situation or others for good reason cannot document the qualifications they claim, credential evaluators are encouraged to create and use a Background Paper giving an overview of the qualifications or periods of study claimed with all available documents and supporting evidence.

Fees

20. The competent recognition authorities and other assessment agencies should consider whether it is possible to provide for assessment of foreign qualifications as a public service free of charge. Where this is not feasible, fees should be kept as low as possible and should not be so high as to constitute a barrier to the assessment of foreign qualifications.

21. In deciding the size of any fees charged, due account should be taken of the cost of living and the level of salaries and student support in the country concerned. Special measures aimed at low income groups, refugees and displaced persons and other disadvantaged groups should be considered in order to ensure that no applicant is prevented from seeking recognition of his or her foreign qualifications because of the costs involved.

22. Any fees charged for the assessment of foreign qualifications should, without exception, be payable in the currency of the country in which the assessment is undertaken.

Translation

23. Requirements for the translation of documents should be carefully weighed and clearly specified, especially as concerns the need for authorised translations by sworn translators. It should be considered whether requirements for translation could be limited to key documents, and whether documents in certain foreign languages, to be specified by the competent recognition authority, could be accepted without translation. The countries concerned are encouraged to revise any current laws preventing the acceptance of documents in non-national languages without translation. Attention is drawn to the fact that the use of the Diploma Supplement may help reduce the need for translation of other key documents.

24. As a rule, titles of foreign qualifications should be provided in the original language, without translation.

Verification of the authenticity of documents

25. In view of the increasing occurrence of falsified diplomas and other documents, verification of the authenticity of documents is becoming increasingly important. Such verification seeks to establish:

- (i) whether the documents in question are genuine, i.e. whether they have been issued by the institution indicated in the document and whether they have not subsequently been unlawfully altered by the applicant or others; and
- (ii) whether the documents in question have in fact been rightfully issued to the applicant.

26. While the need to establish the authenticity of documents as a part of the assessment procedure is therefore very real, this need should nonetheless be balanced against the burdens placed upon applicants. The basic rules of procedure should assume that most applicants are honest, but they should give the competent recognition authorities the opportunity to require stronger evidence of authenticity whenever they suspect that documents may be forged. While certified photocopies of documents will be sufficient in most cases, the competent recognition authorities should be in a position to require original documents where this is considered necessary for the purpose of detecting or preventing the use of forged documents.

27. States are encouraged to review any national laws requiring overly complicated and costly authentication procedures, such as full legalisation of all documents. Modern communications make it easier to verify the authenticity of documents in less cumbersome ways, and competent recognition authorities and higher education institutions of home countries are encouraged to react swiftly and positively to requests for direct information on documents claimed to have been issued by them.

28. In the case of refugees, displaced persons and others who for good reasons, and in spite of their best persistent efforts, are unable to document their claimed qualifications, it should be considered whether alternative ways of recognising these qualifications may be found. Such measures should be adapted to the circumstances of their recognition application and could include ordinary or specially arranged examinations, interviews with staff of higher education institutions and/or the competent recognition authority and sworn statements before a legally competent authority.

V. Assessment criteria

Status of the institution

29. In view of the wide diversity of higher education institutions and of the developments in transnational education, the status of a qualification cannot be established without taking into account the status of the institution and/or programme through which the qualification was awarded.

30. The credential evaluator should seek to establish whether the higher education institution belongs to the higher education system of a State party to the Lisbon Recognition Convention and/or belonging to the European Region. In the case of qualifications awarded by higher education institutions established through transnational arrangements, the credential evaluator should analyze these arrangements on the basis of the principles stipulated in the UNESCO/Council of Europe Code of Good Practice in the provision of transnational education.

31. Some countries have established a system of formal assessment of their higher education institutions and programmes. When evaluating qualifications from such systems, credential evaluators should take due account of the results of the formal assessment process.

Assessment of individual qualifications

32. Recognition of foreign qualifications may be sought for a variety of purposes. The assessment should take due account of the purpose(s) for which recognition is sought, and the recognition statement should make clear the purpose(s) for which the statement is valid.

33. Before undertaking the assessment, the competent recognition authority should establish which national and international legal texts are relevant to the case, and whether these require any specific decision to be reached or procedure to be followed.

34. The assessment should also take into account past practice in similar recognition cases, in order to ensure consistency in recognition practice. Past practice should be a guide, and any substantial change of practice should be justified.

35. The assessment of a foreign qualification should identify the qualification in the system of the country in which recognition is sought which is most comparable to the foreign qualification, taking into account the purpose for which recognition is sought. In the case of a qualification

belonging to a foreign system of education, the assessment should take into account its relative place and function compared to other qualifications in the same system.

36. Qualifications of approximately equal level may show considerable differences in terms of content, profile and learning outcomes. In the assessment of foreign qualifications, these differences should be considered in a flexible way, and only substantial differences in view of the purpose for which recognition is sought (e.g academic or *de facto* professional recognition) should lead to partial recognition or non-recognition of the foreign qualifications.

37. Recognition of foreign qualifications should be granted unless a substantial difference can be demonstrated between the qualification for which recognition is requested and the relevant qualification of the State in which recognition is sought. In applying this principle, the assessment should seek to establish whether:

(a) the differences in learning outcomes between the foreign qualification and the relevant qualification of the country in which recognition is sought are too substantial to allow the recognition of the foreign qualification as requested by the applicant. If so, the assessment should seek to establish whether alternative, partial and/or conditional recognition may be granted;

(b) the differences in access to further activities (such as further study, research activities, the exercise of gainful employment) between the foreign qualification and the relevant qualification of the country in which recognition is sought are too substantial to allow the recognition of the foreign qualification as requested by the applicant. If so, the assessment should seek to establish whether alternative, partial and/or conditional recognition may be granted;

(c) the differences in key elements of the programme(s) leading to the qualification in comparison to the programme(s) leading to the relevant qualification of the country in which recognition is sought are too substantial to allow the recognition of the foreign qualification as requested by the applicant. If so, the assessment should seek to establish whether alternative, partial and/or conditional recognition may be granted. The comparability of programme elements should, however, be analysed only with a view to the comparability of outcomes and access to further activities, and not as a necessary condition for recognition in their own right;

(d) a credential evaluator can document that the differences in the quality of the programme and/or institution at which the qualification was awarded in relation to the quality of the programmes and/or institutions granting the similar qualification in terms of which recognition is sought are too substantial to allow the recognition of the foreign qualification as requested by the applicant. If so, the assessment

should seek to establish whether alternative, partial and/or conditional recognition may be granted.

38. Where formal rights attach to a certain foreign qualification in the home country, the qualification should be evaluated with a view to giving the holder comparable formal rights in the host country, in so far as these exist and they arise from the knowledge and skills certified by the qualification.

39. The recognition of qualifications issued several years ago may be more problematic than the recognition of recent qualifications. To what extent a qualification is outdated will depend on the field concerned as well as the activities undertaken by the applicant since the qualification was issued. In general terms, older qualifications should be recognised along the same lines as similar qualifications issued in the country in which recognition is sought. It may be considered whether relevant work experience may compensate for updated qualifications.

40. Competent recognition authorities and other assessment agencies should be encouraged to focus on the learning outcomes and competencies, as well as the quality of the delivery of an educational programme and to consider its duration as merely one indication of the level of achievement reached at the end of the programme. The assessment process should acknowledge that recognition of prior learning, credit transfer, different forms of access to higher education, double degrees and life-long learning will all shorten the duration of some academic qualifications without diminishing the learning outcomes and a decision not to grant recognition should not be motivated by duration alone.

41. The assessment of a foreign qualification should focus on the qualification for which recognition is sought. Previous levels of education should be considered only where these levels have a serious bearing on the outcome of the assessment and should, as far as possible, be limited to qualifications of a level immediately preceding the qualification for which recognition is sought.

42. In undertaking the assessment, the competent recognition authorities and other assessment agencies should apply their know-how and best professional skills and take note of all relevant published information. Where adequate information on the learning outcomes embodied in the qualification is available, this should take precedence in the assessment over consideration of the education programme which has led to the qualification.

VI. The outcome of the assessment

43. Depending on national law and practice, the outcome of the assessment of a foreign qualification may take the form of:

- (a) a recognition decision;
- (b) advice to another institution, which will then make the recognition decision;
- (c) a statement to the applicant or to whom it may concern (e.g. current or prospective employers, higher education institutions etc.) providing a comparison of the foreign qualification with similar

qualifications in the country in which recognition is sought, without being a formal recognition decision.

44. The ENIC Network as well as competent authorities should elaborate models for standardised assessment statements at European and/or national level. To facilitate international recognition, assessment agencies should use these standardised statements as far as possible.

45. Where recognition cannot be granted according to an applicant's request, the competent recognition authority or assessment agency should, as far and as precisely as possible, assist the applicant in identifying remedial measures the applicants may undertake in order to obtain recognition at a later stage.