

SPECIAL REPORT



# RECOGNIZING REFUGEE QUALIFICATIONS:

Practical Tips for  
Credential Assessment

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# ACRONYMS

<b>BQFG</b>	<i>Berufsqualifikationsfeststellungsgesetz</i> (Federal Law on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications) [Germany]
<b>CICIC</b>	Canadian Information Center for International Credentials
<b>CLEP</b>	College Level Examination Program
<b>EAR</b>	European Area of Recognition
<b>ECFMG</b>	Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates [U.S.]
<b>ECRE</b>	European Council on Refugees and Exiles
<b>EEA</b>	European Economic Area
<b>ENIC</b>	European Network of National Information Center
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FAFSA</b>	Free Application for Federal Student Aid [U.S.]
<b>GED</b>	General Education Development (examination)
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institution
<b>NARIC</b>	National Academic Recognition Information Center
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>NOKUT</b>	Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education
<b>PEBC</b>	Pharmacy Examination Board of Canada
<b>PLAR</b>	Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
<b>SAR</b>	Scholars at Risk Network
<b>TAFE</b>	Technical and Further Education [Australia]
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>USCIS</b>	United States Citizenship and Immigration Service
<b>USNEI</b>	United States Network for Education Information
<b>WES</b>	World Education Services

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hundreds of thousands of people who have fled Syria and other distressed countries face a stark reality. Despite being skilled professionals or accomplished students, many refugees and asylum-seekers are suffering because their credentials are not recognized, and they cannot resume their careers or meet their academic goals.

World Education Services (WES) began to work on solving this issue in response to the unprecedented worldwide refugee crises occurring in 2015. This work started with research on international practices for the assessment of refugee credentials and qualifications, particularly those lacking full, official, or verifiable documentation. We reviewed the available literature and conducted interviews with officials from leading higher education institutions, licensing bodies, and international education authorities in Canada, the U.S., and Europe.

In this report, we contextualize the findings for Canada and the U.S. in particular. Our aim was to share this knowledge with other institutions and organizations that are trying to help refugees, as well as for WES to adopt or adapt these practices to provide an alternative form of credential assessment for refugees who cannot meet our documentation requirements.

One of the main issues that refugees in particular face involves their access to academic and professional documents. Many are unable to take all relevant documents with them when they flee. Perhaps more importantly, they often cannot access documents directly from their home institutions because those institutions are destroyed, closed, or unresponsive, or they refuse to issue documents to the refugee. Additionally, some refugee applicants may be fearful of requesting documents because of the persecution or retribution that they or their families may face. This creates a hardship for applicants applying for higher education, licensure/certification, or professional employment in Canada or the U.S., where many institutions require that official transcripts be sent directly from the home institution or be verified directly with the institution.

The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, known as the Lisbon Convention of 1997, requires that even those without verifiable documents be given a fair credential assessment. Canada and the U.S., as signatories of the Lisbon Convention, are thus obligated to find ways to help displaced people that lack the full documentation needed.

Using the methods explained in this report, host country institutions can develop alternative assessment processes for applicants without access to full, official, or verifiable documents. In creating policies and procedures for such cases, institutions should consider the institutional risks associated with providing such assessments, including what may happen if the assessment does not match the actual abilities of the applicant, as well as risks to institutional reputation. However, there are ways institutions can implement additional assessment strategies to corroborate the credential evaluation, or award conditional or partial recognition to mitigate these risks.

Institutions first need to determine who is eligible for such a process. When possible, it is best to send applicants through the regular process, if they have the appropriate documents, to maximize positive outcomes for both applicant and institution. If the applicant is reticent, then the institutional officer can explain the steps required in the alternative process, at which point many applicants may attempt to get the required documents. If the applicant is still reticent or unable to obtain the documents, an alternative process can be applied.

The first step in an alternative assessment process is to create a background paper, which is the detailed claimed academic (and professional, if relevant) history of the applicant. The background paper is then supported with a portfolio of evidence, or dossier, that the applicant is able to submit.

If the applicant has complete but nonofficial transcripts, the claimed history can largely be created from these. If there are gaps in the transcripts, or if they are missing entirely, the claimed history will need to be constructed from the applicant's memory and from any available sample documents that the institution has on file. Beyond transcripts, institutions can use alternative forms of documentary evidence, such as diplomas, certificates of completion, student ID cards, proof of tuition payment, copies of licenses, and statements of professional standing.

Institutions sometimes also ask applicants to supply a sworn statement (statutory declaration or affidavit), a written statement from the applicant explaining his or her background and circumstances. This document is often notarized for legal weight. It can be used both for reconstruction purposes and as a form of evidence to be assessed.

Institutions sometimes also opt to use witness statements, or testimonials, which are written statements from individuals personally testifying to certain claims made by the applicant, such as enrollment, graduation, or employment. These statements can also be notarized. Witnesses can be prioritized based on their relationship with the applicant (e.g., school official or professor over a peer) or by the country in which the witness resides (e.g., Canada or the U.S. over the home country).

Once the background paper and portfolio of evidence have been assembled, institutional officers can assess the claims against the available evidence, knowledge of the system of education, and facts on the ground. As needed, collected sample documents, research, and external resources can also be used.

If further corroboration is needed, institutions can then assess the competencies, or the knowledge and skills, of the applicant. Such ways to do so include skills assessments, examinations, interviews (with professors, experts, or longtime professionals), sample work, and special projects.

Finally, institutional officers need to make a determination about recognition of the credentials and practical results in terms of admission, placement, hiring, or continuation in a licensing or certification process. If full recognition is not possible, other types of recognition can be used, including alternative, conditional, and partial recognition.

There are some overall points that institutions receiving refugee applicants should consider:

- Develop flexible policies and avoid an all-or-nothing approach to assisting refugee applicants, as well as developing an understanding of their realities.
- Reduce or waive application and other fees where possible.
- Give applicants clear but comprehensive directions in simple language or in their native language, if possible.
- Keep in mind that degrees from other countries are equivalent but not exactly the same. The applicant may need to update some knowledge and skills relevant to the host society.
- Consider the bigger picture for the individual, such as the needs that he or she will have moving forward, such as financial, linguistic, cultural, and psychosocial support.

Almost all institutions in North America that have received or will receive refugee applicants can find ways to assist refugees in moving on with their lives in their new host societies.

# INTRODUCTION

*Imagine that you recently fled a disastrous civil war in your home country and have since resettled in a new host country. Back home, you were a prominent engineer who had practiced for several years. You had a bachelor's degree from a well-known institution in the capital city. In your new country, you are a taxi driver because you arrived with almost no money and need an income immediately to feed and house your family. You want to return to your profession for a number of reasons: the higher income it will generate for you and your family; the ability to contribute to your new country's economy; the simple dignity of doing the work you were trained to do.*

*However, you face unexpected hurdles. The first is recognition of your academic and professional credentials. The most basic problem is that you fled in the middle of the night, with only a handful of papers. Amid the conflict, the university you attended has shut down and cannot issue transcripts. The licensing body of engineers in your home country, meanwhile, does not respond to your requests to have an official copy of your license sent over, perhaps because they view you as a traitor for leaving or perhaps because they, too, cannot function amid the chaos. You managed to escape with a photocopy of your bachelor's diploma, but the authorities in your host country are hesitant to accept it in lieu of official transcripts. You are at a loss about what to do next.*

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While fictional, this scenario is close to the reality faced by hundreds of thousands of people who have fled not only Syria, but other countries suffering civil war, conflict, and natural disaster. Many of these refugees and asylum-seekers are skilled professionals or higher education students with their entire careers still ahead of them (European Council on Refugees and Exiles [ECRE], 2005). Yet, in their new host countries, whether in Europe, North America, or elsewhere, these displaced persons face numerous barriers to integration. As the scenario describes, one of the first barriers facing many is formal recognition of educational credentials, which are vital to entering or continuing higher education, or practicing many skilled professions, within their new host countries (see Financial Times, 2015).

Since 2015, World Education Services (WES) has been investigating best practices for credential assessment and recognition among refugees and other displaced people across a range of countries and institutions. As of the publication of this report, WES is developing policies and a new methodology for offering an alternative assessment for refugees who lack verifiable documentation. The new methodology will be piloted in Canada in the coming months.

This report offers an overview of our research findings. It is a synthesis of a comprehensive review of the literature on the topic, interviews with relevant institutional representatives from a range of countries, and WES knowledge and expertise gleaned from four decades of work in credential evaluation. We hope this information will be of use to educational institutions, professional licensing and certification authorities, and employers who require assessment of foreign credentials for admission, licensure/certification, or employment and wish to develop or enhance their own policies. We also hope to advance conversations about best practices in alternative document certification for displaced persons, and to provide institutions with ideas for how to best help applicants who are refugees or otherwise displaced.

The report is primarily directed at institutions in Canada and the United States, though many of the practices described can be utilized in many other countries. It gives an overview of the entire process of assessing the credentials of displaced people lacking verifiable documents and is thus aimed at institutions that do their own credential assessments. It may also be of use to those that accept external credential evaluation agency reports, which handle part (but not all) of the verification process.

# THE CHALLENGES OF EVALUATING CREDENTIALS FOR DISPLACED PEOPLE

## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The term “displaced people” can refer to individuals in a variety of different circumstances. The most commonly known type of displaced person is a refugee. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UNHCR, 2015b). Asylum-seekers<sup>1</sup> are similarly defined, but for practical purposes, an asylum-seeker<sup>2</sup> usually differs from a refugee in that the individual is already present in the host country or at a port-of-entry (i.e., airport, seaport, or border crossing) when asking for legal status (UNHCR, 2015a; United States Citizenship & Immigration Service (USCIS), 2015). By contrast, a refugee is granted status from outside of the applicant’s requested host country and is then resettled. It is important to note that although the previous definitions are recognized internationally, there might be some differences in legal definition declared by a specific country.

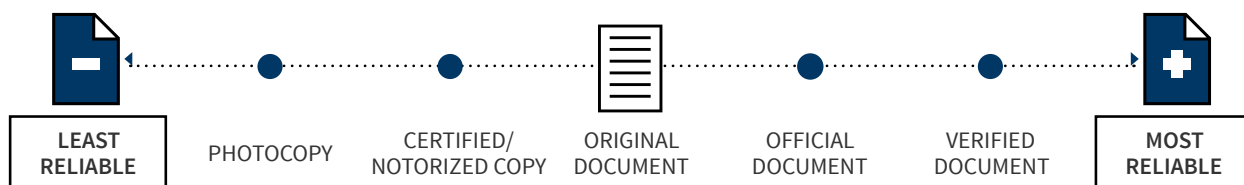
While this report focuses mostly on refugees, the methods discussed can and should be applied to asylees in most cases. We will use the term “refugee” to encompass all displaced people hereafter, except in a few specific circumstances.

## REFUGEES AND CREDENTIALS

As the introductory scenario indicates, student and professional refugees may arrive in a new host country with different levels of documentation and ability to prove their educational backgrounds. While some are able to escape with all of their educational and professional documents (and sometimes even original copies), many refugees must flee suddenly and leave most of their belongings, including important documents, behind (NGO Network of Integration Focal Points, 2006). Some may arrive in camps or new host countries with only some documents. Others may have only photocopies or even photographs of them taken on cellular phones. An unfortunate few arrive with nothing.

Even when refugees are able to bring some or all documents with them, institutional policies, including those of WES, typically rely on applicants’ ability to provide official documents directly from their home institutions. Normally, most institutions in North America, as well as in Europe and elsewhere, require that key documents for recognition purposes—generally transcripts, diplomas, or certificates—must be either official and sent directly from the home institution, or official copies verified directly with the home institution. These requirements have been established to be the most reliable methods of ascertaining the authenticity of the credentials (WES Canada, 2012), as Figure 1 below demonstrates.

**Figure 1: Document Authenticity Continuum**





However, in places of war or conflict, degree- or license-granting institutions may be destroyed, damaged, closed, or otherwise not functioning normally (WES Canada, 2012). In these cases, transcripts and other official documents may be difficult or impossible to obtain. It may also thus be impossible to verify official or original copies of documents with these institutions. Even when functioning, some institutions will not send official copies directly to institutions in other countries or will not answer verification inquiries, making the process more challenging for both applicant and institution of application. In some cases, institutions or government entities may refuse to send or verify documents for refugees because they are viewed as traitors for leaving the country.

Additionally, some refugees may be fearful of requesting documents from their home institution (or the Ministry of Education, in some countries) for well-founded reasons (WES Canada, 2012). They may fear retribution from the government, whether to themselves (particularly if still in-country when applying), or to their families or loved ones who may still live in the country. This can also be the case if the institution of application contacts the home institution for verification. Consequently, it is important for institutions of application to request permission of the applicant before contacting the home institution requesting records or verification of documents, if they would like to do so. (This point will be discussed in more depth later.)

## **RISK FOR INSTITUTIONS**

Institutions to which refugees apply—including higher education institutions, licensing/certification boards, and employers of various kinds (hereafter referred to collectively as “institutions”)—face at least some uncertainty in attempting to assess and recognize refugee credentials. One of the biggest barriers facing foreign-trained professionals is the lack of understanding of foreign credentials among employers and regulators (Sumption, 2013). By contrast, higher education institutions with a history of enrolling international students are usually more familiar with international credentials, as they more regularly view and assess them.

While refugees and asylees are usually not “international students” under U.S. or Canadian law (in that they are not present in the country on a student visa), they are similar in that they must have their foreign credentials assessed for admission and placement. The risk level inherent in assessing refugee credentials, where documentation is missing or non-verifiable, differs among different types of institutions (N. Sawh, interview, February 2016). For most North American universities and colleges, admitting refugee students to most programs, particularly at the undergraduate level, could generally be considered low risk. It would become clear with time if the student was truly ready for coursework at that level. In most cases, at worst the student would fail his coursework, and would need to restart at a lower level, or seek opportunities elsewhere. This scenario may be different for certain programs, especially at higher levels of study such as the doctoral level, and for rigorous professional degree programs such as law and medicine. Still, the overall risk of getting the evaluation wrong is relatively low.

For regulatory bodies—those who issue licenses or certifications for professional practice—the risk of getting the evaluation wrong is considerably greater. Regulators are charged with maintaining the public interest, particularly when it comes to health, safety, and general well-being. Thus, access to regulated professions tends to be “all-or-nothing,” (Sumption, 2013, p. 7) as regulators try to maintain certain standards. Licensure or certification for refugees who lack full documentation is particularly challenging, especially for those required to have licensure or certification to practice, as is the case in many health care professions, law, architecture, engineering, and accountancy.

For employers in nonregulated professions, the risks involved in hiring refugee professionals lacking full or authenticated credentials vary from job to job. As with regulated jobs, employers in professions

that deal with public health, safety, or well-being face greater risks than those that do not. Additionally, manager-level positions that deal directly with company finances, employees, or reputation may involve higher risk.

In most cases, however, assessing the credentials of refugees without full verifiable documentation is possible. When the risk is higher, the institution of application may simply need a higher burden of proof and more information from the applicant.

## BASIC FRAMEWORKS FOR EVALUATING NON-VERIFIABLE CREDENTIALS

### INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS AND EFFORTS

The right of refugees and others in similar circumstances to have their educational and professional qualifications assessed finds legal basis in international law. The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, commonly known as the Lisbon Convention (1997), established international standards for the recognition of refugee qualifications (Council of Europe, 1997). It places the burden on countries and their institutions to prove why they should not recognize an individual's qualifications based on major differences between education and professional systems (Scholten, 2007). Section 7 of the treaty calls on signatories to develop frameworks for assessing refugee qualifications in the absence of documents fairly and quickly (see Figure 2). The Convention was signed by all European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA) countries<sup>3</sup>, as well as others, most notably Australia, Canada, Israel, Turkey, and the United States<sup>4</sup>.

**Figure 2: Lisbon Convention, Section 7**

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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 fulfil 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.

Source: Council of Europe, 1997

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The main entities that work internationally to implement the Lisbon Convention are known collectively as the ENIC-NARIC Networks (ENIC-NARIC Networks, 2016b; see also Scholten, 2007). The ENIC Network (European Network of National Information Centers on academic recognition and mobility) was formed jointly by UNESCO<sup>5</sup> and the Council of Europe in 1994, while the NARIC Network (National Academic Recognition Information Centers) was set up by the European Commission in 1984. These two very similar networks, which usually work jointly (and host a joint Web site), encompass national information centers from each of the Lisbon Convention signatory countries. Generally,

national information centers in EU or EEA countries, as well as Turkey, are known as ENIC-NARICs (as they technically belong to both networks), while those located outside of Europe, including those in Canada and the U.S., are known only as ENICs. Canada's ENIC is called CICIC<sup>6</sup>, or the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials; the ENIC for the U.S. is called USNEI<sup>7</sup>, the United States Network for Education Information.

The role of these organizations is to facilitate the recognition of migrant qualifications in Europe and in other major destination countries. Most serve as information repositories, for (1) information about the education systems and credentials of countries around the world for use among domestic institutions, and (2) information about their own educational system for various audiences. These organizations serve as authoritative resources for credential evaluation on an international scale. Additionally, they have been facilitating much of the work worldwide on assessing refugee credentials since the signing of the Lisbon Convention and particularly recently in the wake of the Syrian crisis.

## EUROPE

Many European countries and the various systems of intra-European cooperation, such as the European Union (EU), have been on the forefront of developing methods for assessing credentials for those without verifiable documentation, most notably refugees. A number of pre-existing mechanisms, established at different points in time and under various authorities in order to ease migration among students, skilled workers, and asylum-seekers, have helped to provide a framework for these efforts. Among these mechanisms are the Lisbon Convention and the ENIC-NARIC Networks.

In order to facilitate the implementation of the Lisbon Convention, the European Commission funded the ENIC-NARIC Networks to develop the European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual (EAR Consortium, 2009). The manual details best practices in assessing foreign credentials and recognizing qualifications as determined by representatives from many of the major ENIC-NARICs, particularly in Europe. A version of the manual specifically for higher education institutions (HEIs) was developed in 2012, and then updated in 2016 (EAR Consortium, 2016). Chapter 12 in the original manual and Chapter 21 in the HEI manual specifically address refugees or those without verifiable documentation. These sections present some of the best descriptions of overall practice in assessing refugee credentials, though they are fairly general, as they are meant to be applied in a wide variety of different national and institutional contexts. As such, we have drawn much from these documents, but have worked to contextualize their recommended practices for North America.

In individual European countries, practices in assessing the credentials of displaced people without verifiable documentation have varied tremendously. One of the biggest factors explaining variation in individual countries, not just in Europe but worldwide, is the degree to which a given country's qualifications recognition system is centralized or decentralized (Schuster & Desiderio, 2013). Generally, major immigrant host countries exist along a centralization spectrum.

In more centralized governmental systems, such as those in the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, the qualifications recognition system is also usually centralized. Norway, for example, has centralized all foreign credential assessments for higher education and professional employment through its ENIC-NARIC, known as NOKUT, which in English would stand for Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT, 2016; S. A. Skjerven & M. Maligna, personal communication, 2016). Such assessments are either voluntary on the part of the applicant, or done at the request of the employer or institution. All decisions issued through NOKUT are legally binding. NOKUT has also developed a centralized process for assessing the credentials of those without verifiable documents, which is described in Figure 4 later. NOKUT is also the primary advocate for a proposed pan-European recognition scheme known as the European qualifications passport (Skjerven & Maligna, 2015b).

For less centralized, more federal governmental systems, such as in Germany, as well as in Canada and the U.S., qualifications recognition tends to more decentralized. In Germany, for example, all levels of academic and professional qualification are affected both by the national and *Länder* (state) levels (Bosswick, 2013). Generally, educational policy and administration at all levels falls in the *Länder* domain, and the recognition of foreign qualifications is at the national level. Various professions and occupations are governed by national law, while others fall under the *Länder* domain, making qualifications recognition processes less transparent and more complex and therefore more difficult for migrants to follow. Nevertheless, in April 2012, the federal government passed a law known as the Federal Law on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications (BQFG, for short, in German), which called for timely evaluations and, importantly, a “written positive assessment of skills and qualifications” (p. 68) in cases where formal recognition is not possible. Both regulated and nonregulated professions are covered by this system. As part of the law, other means can be used to assess the credentials of refugees who lack documents (through no fault of their own), such as “assessment tests, expert interviews, and practical and/or theoretical tests” (p. 79).

## **NORTH AMERICA**

Both Canada and the U.S. have highly decentralized education systems, which means that credential assessment and recognition are also decentralized. Neither federal government plays a direct role in credential assessment (see USNEI, 2008; CICIC, 2016). The ENICs in each play only a coordinating role and have no supervisory authority. Higher education institutions make their own determinations about recognition of credentials. Some do their own assessments, while others use credential evaluation services such as WES.

The system of licensure and certification in the U.S. is highly decentralized, with no national body in charge, and an often bewildering array of national, state, and local laws, regulations, and policies that are sometimes contradictory (Rabben, 2013). Many professional licenses, for example, are not transferrable across state lines.

Although Canada’s education systems and credential evaluation and recognition protocols remain decentralized, the licensure and certification process for foreign-educated individuals, including refugees, has become more open in recent years.

In Canada, having one’s credentials assessed, even when documentation is not fully available, has come to be seen as a legal right. In 2007, the Supreme Court of Ontario ruled, in a case involving an Iranian immigrant, that foreign-educated teachers have the right to obtain a Canadian teaching credential even if they cannot obtain official foreign credentials (Champassak, 2007). The case set a precedent that refugees had a right to be licensed or certified in their professions even when they are not able to access official documents from their home countries.

# **AN OVERVIEW OF BEST PRACTICES IN ALTERNATIVE CREDENTIAL ASSESSMENT**

A number of institutions and organizations worldwide, as well as the ENIC-NARIC Networks, have developed alternative assessment practices that are effective within their individual institutions, countries, and contexts. There are cases when applicants simply and genuinely cannot gain access to official documents or the documents presented cannot be verified with the home institution. In these cases, institutions of application can then turn to an alternative assessment process. In this section, we will present a summary of recommended practices in alternative credential assessment from our research.



Depending on their location, we invite the student to sit down with us, or we have more contact with them through other means. We become familiar with their background and determine, based on their circumstances, what they are able to provide, especially depending on where they were educated.



**Erika Danziger**  
Admissions Manager,  
Assessment & Evaluation  
Ryerson University

## ELIGIBILITY FOR AN ALTERNATIVE EVALUATION

Who is eligible for an alternative evaluation and how should the institution determine eligibility? Whenever possible, institutions should seek to have their applicants go through the regular application process. This standard process typically entails having applicants request that their home institution(s) send official documents to the institution of application. Depending on the policies in place at the institution of application, the documents can also be verified for maximum reliability. Most institutional representatives with whom we spoke mentioned that sometimes they must “push back” on applicants, who may not want to contact their home institution even when it is possible. In some cases, institutions attempt to reach out to home institutions directly to verify transcripts, usually following the authorization of the applicant.

Going the standard route (i.e., using official, verifiable documents) is best for both applicant and institution, as it maximizes good outcomes for both: The applicant is much more likely to have her qualifications fully recognized, and the institution is

able to both minimize risk and more effectively aid the applicant. Usually, once the institution explains the alternative process and its potential (usually poorer) outcomes for the applicant, those who can get official documents will do so. Thus, many who do not genuinely need the alternative process will be weeded out.

However, some applicants will truly not be able to access such documents, nor will the institution be able to request them from, or verify them with, the home institution. This inability is typically due to some combination of the factors described earlier, in particular destruction or closure of the home institution, or threat of persecution to the applicant or his or her family.

## THE BACKGROUND PAPER: RECONSTRUCTING AN APPLICANT’S BACKGROUND

In some cases, applicants may be able to provide either official copies or photocopies of their entire transcripts. This option provides applicants and institutions with “the happy path,” as one interview subject described it to us, because there is little, if any need to reconstruct an applicant’s educational background. (When transcripts are not official or verifiable through standard routes, they may need some additional corroboration, which will be described later.)

However, for applicants who either lack transcripts or only have partial copies, institutional officers must, with the help of the applicant, reconstruct the applicant’s background. This usually results in what the EAR Manual calls a **background paper** (EAR Consortium, 2009, 2016; see also Malfroy, 1999a), also called an **advisory statement** (Phillips, 2000). This statement becomes the official reconstruction, which can then be corroborated with as many different forms of evidence as possible.

The information that goes into a background may include many different elements, depending on the needs of the institution of application. Some possible types of information include:

- Basic identification information about the applicant
- A reconstruction of the applicant’s education, including degrees and diplomas received, dates of attendance and graduation, courses taken, grades/marks, etc.

- Information about all schools of attendance (as is relevant), including names, locations, accreditation information (if known), etc.
- Information about the applicant’s professional background (e.g., relevant work experience, licensure, certifications), if relevant
- A list of supporting evidence to corroborate the information above (described in the next section)

This document itself is not necessarily an evaluation, but it can be used to assess the applicant’s qualifications, and to help place him or her appropriately (described in a later section).

## THE PORTFOLIO: CORROBORATING THE APPLICANT’S BACKGROUND

Institutions will need to collect as many forms of evidence as possible to corroborate the information in the background paper. This collection of evidence is often known as a **portfolio** or **dossier**. The concept comes largely from attempts by many countries and institutions to recognize informal and nonformal learning (i.e., learning not done in a classroom or formal educational setting) among adults (Scholten, 2007; see also WES Canada, 2012). As a rule of thumb, the more forms of evidence, the better. Evidence can come from both documentary and nondocumentary sources.

### Partial and Nonofficial Transcripts

Transcripts, of course, are the best form of evidence possible, even if not complete, official, or verifiable. Even in cases where official or verified documents are not available, most applicants do bring at least partial transcripts in some form, according to many of our sources.



We handle each file on a case-by-case basis, but it really does start first with an interview with the applicant. We try to gather as much information and tell them about our process at the same time. We are looking to see how much documentation we could possibly have. We ask for documents to come directly from the institution, but it could be that they have documents in their possession, which is helpful. In some instances, they don’t. So, we need to know what degree of alternative documentation we are looking for. We interview for getting an idea of what the scope is.”



**Iona Mitchell**

Manager of Membership Records,  
Ontario College of Teachers

Many institutions accept only official or verified documents for standard credential assessments, as these documents are the most reliable means of establishing the authenticity of an applicant’s credentials. However, many institutions understand that situations vary from country to country. Institutions in a particular country, for example, may issue original copies of transcripts to the student (and only to the student) one time only. Given these variations, it is important for institutions of application to understand the practices in a particular country and to design correspondingly flexible policies and procedures that address those variations.

When it is established that an applicant cannot gain access to original documents, and that verification is not possible, institutions wishing to help refugees may need to turn to other types of transcripts, whether they are originals handed over by the applicant or photocopies (or even photographs captured by cell phone). Because such formats are less reliable, institutions may wish to substantiate them with additional forms of evidence and information (described in future sections). Additionally, institutions that frequently process applicants from particular regions may have in-house expertise—and a database of sample documents—that can help in determining the legitimacy of original or photocopied transcripts. At WES, for example, credential evaluators with expertise on the Middle East can—based on their expertise and experience, and our in-house database of documents—often fairly quickly determine whether a transcript from a known Syrian institution is fraudulent.

In the case of partial transcripts, where an applicant presents only some transcripts representing his claimed educational history, institutions will need to reconstruct the applicant’s claimed background from his memory, and possibly sample documents. The institution must then try to corroborate the claimed history in other ways. For applicants from countries in which the curriculum is centralized, as is the case for higher education in Syria, it may be possible to backfill missing years or semesters in a transcript based on completion of a later year or semester. For example, if an applicant claims completion of two years of undergraduate education in Syria but can only present the second-year transcript, it can be assumed that she completed the first year. Coursework from the first year can be backfilled using existing knowledge of the university coursework and collected sample transcripts. One important component that would be missing in this example, of course, is grades.

In cases where previous years or semesters cannot be backfilled (such as if the second-year transcript were missing instead of the first), then the institution may want to try other means of corroborating the applicant’s claimed history. If that cannot be done, the student or professional applicant may need to repeat some coursework, or other means may be used to assess the applicant’s knowledge and skills (discussed later).

## Alternative Forms of Documentary Evidence

When transcripts are nonofficial or incomplete, other sources of documentary evidence may be used to help corroborate the background paper on the applicant (Malfroy, 1999b; Phillips, 2000; EAR Consortium, 2009, 2016; WES Canada, 2012). These include:

- Diplomas and certificates of completion
- Student ID cards
- Published lists of students
- Proof of tuition payment
- Proof of admittance to state examinations
- Professional licenses or certificates
- Statements of professional standing/status (from a regulatory body)
- Membership cards for professional associations

Often, the best course of action once it is determined that official or verified transcripts are impossible to acquire is to ask the applicant what she has available. What can she send to the institution of application as evidence?



## SWORN STATEMENTS, STATUTORY DECLARATIONS, AFFIDAVITS

Another common alternative practice is use of some version of an applicant's written statement that is legally binding. Such statements (hereafter referred to as "sworn statements") can go by a variety of different names, such as **sworn statements** (especially in European countries) (EAR Consortium, 2009, 2016), **statutory declarations** (Canada and other British Commonwealth countries), or **affidavits** (United States). In a sworn statement, the applicant is asked to narrate and describe his educational and professional history, as is relevant for the institution of application, in as much detail as possible. That statement is then taken to a notary public or a lawyer to be notarized, or be made legally binding some other way (see ENIC-NARIC Networks, 2016a). This procedure gives the statement legal weight.

In many cases, institutions that accept sworn statements give detailed instructions to the applicant about what to include in the statement, and how to have it notarized. Details to be included vary based on the needs of the institution, but common elements include:

- The applicant's circumstances, and a detailed explanation about why he or she could not obtain official documents from the home institution(s)
- Names of all secondary and tertiary institutions attended
- Detailed information about these institutions, especially tertiary institutions, as much as is possible, including location, type of institution, and accreditation status
- Names and descriptions of all courses taken (as can be remembered without transcripts)
- Dates of graduation
- Awards received and (approximate) dates of receipt
- Information about the applicant's professional background, including licensure/certification information (with dates), and a summary of work history in the field, if relevant

Syllabi can also be helpful to supplement an applicant's memory in reconstruction of academic background, if the applicant brought any along or if they are available online. Syllabi can also be submitted as part of the portfolio.

Ideally, once the initial statement is complete, the applicant would take it to a notary public (or other relevant authority) within the host country to be notarized. Some institutions have notary publics on campus or premises to which they prefer to direct applicants. If the applicant is still in his country or in a third country, he may need to take the statement to a lawyer. Such statements notarized in outside countries, particularly from countries with very different legal systems, may be less reliable.

Many institutions do not accept a sworn statement alone and require at least some other type of evidence to accompany it. However, sworn statements can provide a form of evidence that can be analyzed and evaluated at least to some extent. One recommendation is that institutions ask broad, open-ended questions, rather than very specific questions, because evaluators can then determine whether the description of the applicant's background matches the reality of education in that country and at the institution described (if known). Numerous or major discrepancies between the information in the sworn statement, and known facts about the context may warrant requests of further evidence from or additional follow-up with the applicant.

Several of our interview subjects also mentioned the importance of getting to know the applicant and of communicating regularly with him or her, in person if possible. Such one-to-one relation-



ships can add further weight and insight into an applicant's sworn statement (and other alternative evidence), making decisions regarding the applicant more assured.

Once the institution receives the notarized statement, it can work to verify the applicant's circumstances (e.g., his home institution is closed due to conflict). Then, evaluators can determine the best course of action for additional verification, and determine the types of additional evidence that need to be collected in order to develop a comprehensive background paper.

## WITNESS STATEMENTS

**Witness statements**, also known as **testimonials**, can also be used to corroborate an applicant's claimed background (Malfroy, 1999b; Phillips, 2000). In these cases, the institution asks firsthand witnesses to make a statement attesting to the truth of certain claims made by the applicant. Relevant claims would include, for instance, an applicant's enrollment at or graduation from a specific institution or professional employment. Witnesses can be school officials, professors, teachers, peers, colleagues, or employers.

There are some recommended practices for gathering and accepting witness statements:

- Ask the applicant for a list of witnesses who can attest to major background claims, such as enrollment in or graduation from an institution or employment at a specific company.
- Develop a preference list of types of witnesses, based on assumed reliability of their statements. For example, prioritize school officials, teachers, and professors, followed by peers. As another example, prioritize witnesses currently residing and working in your country first (e.g., the U.S.), followed by other major host nations with a similar legal system (e.g., Canada), followed by the home country (e.g., Syria) or a third country (e.g., Lebanon). Exclude relatives as potential witnesses.
- Develop clear instructions for witness, and a checklist of items to include in the statement.
  - Allow witness statement to be open-ended (like the sworn statement) for opportunities to compare it against the applicant's claims and the context.
  - Instruct the witness to describe his or her relationship to the applicant, including how many years they have known each other.
  - Have the witness provide evidence of his or her identity, if possible.
  - Ask the witness to have the statement notarized or signed by a lawyer for further legal weight.

The number of witness statements needed will likely depend on the amount of other evidence the applicant can supply, the degree to which the institution of application needs to mitigate risk (as discussed earlier), and the number of witnesses available to the applicant, among others.

Licensing and certification boards in both Canada and the U.S. have been known to use this practice in particular. The Pharmacy Examination Board of Canada (PEBC) uses witness statements, along with other corroborating evidence, in rare cases (see Figure 3). Likewise, ECFMG (the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates), the main licensing body for foreign-educated medical professions in the United States, has historically allowed for use of witness statements in cases where medical schools in specific countries (most of those in political crisis) would not respond to requests for academic documents (Hallock & Kostis, 2006). In these cases, applicants are required to have three physicians actively licensed in the U.S. provide an affidavit, sworn in the presence of a notary public, attesting to personal knowledge of the applicant's attendance at or graduation from medical school.

### Figure 3: Case Study – Witnesses Statements

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The Pharmacy Examination Board of Canada (PEBC), which certifies all pharmacists and pharmacy technicians in Canada as a prerequisite for licensure in individual provinces and territories, has developed a novel approach to alternative certification. Applications from individuals who are unable to provide official documentation sent directly from the issuing institution are rare; however, PEBC has developed a protocol to assist these individuals by offering an alternative route that relies on sworn witnesses, along with other supporting evidence. PEBC uses its database of all pharmacists certified in Canada to find potential licensed witnesses who attended the same institution as the applicant at roughly the same time. These individuals are then asked if they can attest to the enrollment or graduation of the applicant. These witnesses are presumed likely to provide a truthful, accurate statement because of the potential impact on their certification and licensure in Canada. When PEBC is unable to find enough witnesses in its database, it will often ask the applicant to supply names and contacts of certified pharmacists in Canada, or in rare cases the United States, who can attest to some of the individual's claims. If the applicant is able to pass this portion of the certification process, she then would need to sit for the certification examinations required of international applicants, and continue through the process as normal.

Source: J. Pugsley, interview, February 2016

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### ASSESSING THE BACKGROUND PAPER AND PORTFOLIO

Once the applicant's claimed history has been reconstructed in the background paper, and the portfolio of evidence—including sworn statements and witness statements, and any available documents, partial, verified or otherwise—has been assembled, the evaluator usually then assesses the material (Malfroy, 1999a; EAR Consortium, 2009, 2016). Background research, access to the right resources and tools, and evaluator expertise are critical in the assessment phase. Common in-house resources and methods include:

- Any available in-house expertise. (Knowledge of relevant countries and education systems, as well as of relevant languages, is crucial.)
- A database of sample documents against which nonofficial transcripts, degrees, licenses, and other documents can be compared
- Research (usually online), that focuses on the situation in a particular country and at particular institutions
- External resources, including those available publicly from WES<sup>8</sup> and the ENIC-NARIC Networks<sup>9</sup>

## On working to admit a Syrian refugee



I read through his application materials. I checked on the institution that he said he had been attending: Was it accredited? What kind of documents do they issue? Did what he said in his explanation of all of this match with that? I found an article on the Web about the closing of the university. I tried to do my due diligence in terms of detective work, and all of it matched. And it certainly was an exception to our process, but that's something we were able to do in this case.



**Jeanie Bell**

Senior Assistant Director of International Admissions,  
University of Colorado Boulder

## ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCIES

In addition to the alternative assessment methods discussed in the previous section, institutions can also assess the competencies—that is, the skills and knowledge acquired—for recognition purposes (see EAR Consortium, 2009, 2016). Some of the theoretical foundations for the assessment of non-verifiable credentials, specifically for refugees and others similarly situated, comes from theoretical and practical work done in the realm of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), particularly in Europe (see Scholten, 2007; Schuster & Desiderio, 2013). In PLAR, the focus is on informal learning<sup>10</sup> and nonformal learning<sup>11</sup>, rather than formal learning (i.e., learning done in a school or formal training program). Europe often makes a point of distinguishing between qualifications, or official products (e.g., diplomas, certificates) based on formal assessment and conferred by official bodies (e.g., schools, licensing boards), and competencies, or learning outcomes that can be applied to specific contexts. In reality, both qualifications and competencies can be assessed to determine whether the applicant meets certain criteria.

For higher education institutions, competencies assessment can be used to determine at what level of coursework to place a student whose higher education was interrupted by conflict, once admission has been granted. For many, if not most of these forms of assessment, the academic department or program may need to administer and evaluate the assessment.

Regulatory bodies often (though not always) use some form of assessment, usually examinations, as part of their process. Some specific forms of assessment may be developed, however, for applicants lacking full, required documentation to determine whether the applicant has met minimum requirements to continue to the next stage of licensure or certification, or to determine if the individual needs additional training or coursework.

I will first discuss practices that are most useful for employment and licensing/certification processes before moving to more academically oriented practices, though most of these practices can be used in professional and academic contexts, albeit in different forms.



As regulators develop policies for assessing refugee qualifications, a key consideration is whether they have a separate, competency-based assessment prior to certification or licensure. For those that do, the potential risk factors associated with an alternative credential assessment are lower. For those whose regular assessment of qualifications is solely paper-based, however, a thorough case-by-case approach to documenting various kinds of evidence is more important.



**Natasha Sawh**

Coordinator,

CICIC (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials)

## SKILLS ASSESSMENT

For employment and licensing/certification purposes and for disciplines that are more skills-based, **skills assessments** (sometimes also called **skills audits**) are often utilized (NGO Network of Integration Focal Points, 2006; Sumption, 2013). These can include demonstration of specific tasks or participating in simulation activities while seasoned professionals or faculty members observe and evaluate. For example, an individual looking to become licensed as a nurse again, or students applying for transfer credit into nursing school, may be asked to demonstrate specific nursing skills, such as taking a patient's blood pressure and administering medication intravenously. (In this specific case, the activities may first be performed on a dummy before being performed on a live volunteer.)

## EXAMINATIONS

Examinations may be the most common form of assessment of skills and knowledge. As mentioned, many licensing and certification bodies use standard examinations as a regular part of the process. Employers may be able to utilize a range of examinations depending on their needs, from standardized certification exams in their respective fields to partnering with local academic or technical institutions to develop assessments for job applicants.

In academic settings, examinations can come in many forms, from large-scale psychometric tests, such as the SAT or GRE, to individual course challenge exams, in which applicants attempt to “test out” of certain courses by demonstrating proficiency in the course's subject matter. One good practice is to offer to refugee and other displaced applicants the same examination opportunities as domestic applicants. For example, the University of Colorado Boulder accepts the GED (General Education Development), perhaps the most prominent high school equivalency examination in the U.S. and Canada, to refugee applicants, as well as domestic students, in lieu of a high school diploma (J. Bell, interview, February 2016). Such an exam may be a good alternative for freshman-level undergraduates or for those who have completed little college-level work or who cannot produce verifiable documentation.

Beyond large-scale tests, smaller exams, such as subject-specific examinations or course challenge exams may work well, especially in combination with documentary evidence or even other forms of competencies assessment in academic institutions. Australia's TAFE (Technical and Further Education) colleges, for example, have tests for specific technical fields to help assess refugee knowledge (Hannah, 1999). Numerous commercial examinations are available. Alternately, academic

departments and programs may develop their own tests to assess fit and placement of students. At the undergraduate level, some institutions may opt to use the CLEP (College Level Examination Program) for college-level credit (see Scholten, 2007). For subjects that are sequential in nature, such as mathematics or foreign languages, test results that determine an applicant to be at a certain level may allow for the backfilling of earlier courses, which would help the applicant avoid retaking courses unnecessarily. For example, if an applicant passes a comprehensive calculus examination, the institution can generally assume that the applicant has taken or acquired the skills for algebra and trigonometry, which are generally prerequisites to calculus.

One issue that can sometimes come up is the complexity of the language in many examinations. It is often more complex, particularly if geared towards specific disciplines or occupations, than that for which the applicant is prepared (Sumption, 2013).



We ask applicants for a CV, references, and sample work and do our own online research. We generally think that gives us a good sense of what the scholar's scholarship is."

**Clare Robinson**

Director of Protection Services,  
Scholars at Risk Network

## INTERVIEWS

Another common form of assessment for admittance, placement, or hiring is an interview with one or more professors, experts, or seasoned professionals in the field of application. Professors, experts, and longtime professionals are well-positioned to determine the suitability of applicants attempting to obtain transfer credit for certain levels of study or readiness to work in a specific field or profession. In tertiary institutions, this practice may already be a part of the process in programs in which the department makes the admissions decision, but it can also be a good practice for programs where admissions departments themselves make the final decision. Or, it can be used purely to determine for which courses the student should receive transfer credit.

## SAMPLE WORK

Sample work may be another good assessment of competence and achievement, particularly for scholars and researchers, as well as some high-level students (e.g., PhD candidates), and art and design students at any level. The Scholars at Risk (SAR) Network, which places displaced and threatened scholars in host institutions particularly in North America and Europe, requires sample work from applicants (C. Robinson, interview, February 2016). Scholars and researchers may already have published sample work, which helps further corroborate their backgrounds. (The one concern at the SAR Network is occasional plagiarism, particularly when viewing unpublished work. Luckily, plagiarism is easier to spot with the help of the Internet.)

The same might also work in professional contexts, if applicants were fortunate enough to bring work with them or even photos of physical creations, such as graphic design products (see Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, 2016).

## SPECIAL PROJECTS

In cases where sample work is unavailable, as well as for the sake of greater reliability, assigning a special project to an applicant may be another way to assess skills and knowledge. In academic settings, working with a professor from the department or program of evaluation, the applicant can be assigned a paper (either research-based or not), a presentation, a creative project, or another type of project to work on for a specified period of time and to be assessed by the faculty member (or a panel) at the end. The faculty member or panel can then make a recommendation about admission or placement. This may be particularly useful for graduate and post-graduate applicants.

In professional settings, applicants may be able to work with employment centers or coaches prior to applying for jobs to create from scratch work samples for a portfolio of work to demonstrate ability (see Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, 2016), particularly in design and creative fields. For example, architects may be able to develop a portfolio of drafts to submit as part of a job application or during the interview process. Employers, however, as part of the hiring process could ask an applicant to develop and submit one or several small examples of his or her work that could feasibly be completed in a certain timeframe.

## RECOGNITION AND ADMITTANCE: PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Once the applicant's credentials have been assessed and evidence compiled, the last steps in the process are to determine the level of recognition of the applicant's claimed background and determine admittance and placement.

### TYPES OF RECOGNITION BASED ON ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

Due to the likelihood of significant gaps in records and collected evidence on the background of an applicant, institutions of application may not be able to grant recognition and admittance to the same degree for applicants with full, verifiable documentation. However, there are alternative forms of recognition for qualifying applicants lacking full, authenticated documentation, as defined by the EAR Manual (EAR Consortium, 2016):

- **Alternative recognition** acknowledges the available experience for a different qualification than the one of application. For instance, an applicant with a claimed educational and professional history as a doctor may be allowed to work in a different position within the medical field or be retrained into nursing.
- **Conditional recognition:** allows the applicant to enter a program on the condition that he or she meets future requirements, such as taking certain courses and receiving specific minimum grades or credits, or pursuing additional training and certification. For example, a student may be admitted into the second year of an undergraduate architectural program provided that she passes all second-year courses in the first semester with at least a B. Employers in nonregulated fields may be able to hire a refugee employee on a probationary basis and allow him to demonstrate his abilities in the first few weeks or months on the job. Licensing and certification bodies may be able to provide conditional registration (described later) to applicants.
- **Partial recognition in an academic context** recognizes the evidence presented as part of a degree program, rather than the entire degree program. The applicant would then have the opportunity to take any remaining courses or enter into a dedicated education or training program. In this case, for example, a job applicant may claim to hold an MBA from her home country but only part of her graduate program can be substantiated. Thus, she is required to retake some graduate-level courses before her MBA is recognized.
- **Partial recognition for employment in an unregulated profession** can mean offering an internship, or a junior or entry-level position for which the person may be overqualified, with a clear pathway to full employment so long as the applicant can demonstrate proficiency in the job. Referral to a job development program or an accelerated schedule of performance reviews provides ways for the applicant to demonstrate additional competencies and career potential.

The goal, where possible, is to avoid applicants' having to start completely at the beginning, which could be a significant drain on money and time for refugee transfer students, higher level students (e.g., master's candidates), and professionals.

## PATHWAYS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Between the applicant providing at least some documentation and the institution or department assessing some of the competencies of the applicant, a student can be admitted reasonably congruently with her claimed background. She may need to take some lower-level courses that involve learning about specifically relevant Canadian or U.S. practices or institutions, such as a business student taking courses about American business practices and standards. The institution can use one of the types of recognition for alternative assessment mentioned earlier and monitor the progress of the student over the course of her first semester or year.

Here are a few recommendations for higher education institutions evaluating the credentials and qualifications of refugee applicants:

- Tailor your processes based on what the applicant is able to supply and the level and type of program that he or she is trying to enter. For example, more evidence of suitability will be needed for doctoral students than for master's-level students and for some subjects over others.
- Where possible, backfill courses for students with partial transcripts (see Al-Shaikhly, 2015) or who are able to pass subject-based examinations at a certain level.
- Involve the academic department or program in the admission and placement process for those with limited documentation. Ask them to develop procedures for assessing competencies of students, whether through examinations, interviews, projects, sample work, or skills assessments.

## PATHWAYS FOR PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

Most professional jobs in Canada and the United States (CICIC, 2016; Rabben, 2013) are not regulated, either by government or the industry itself, which means that applicants generally do not need to become licensed or certified to practice the profession. A credential evaluation is usually then done by agencies such as WES in order to understand the applicant's foreign educational background. Along with employment-related documents such as résumés or curriculum vitae (CV), employers use credential evaluations to assess suitability for a position, or sometimes to determine starting salary.

One possibility for applicants with gaps in their educational or professional records is for employers to try **provisional employment** (Malfroy, 1999b); that is, an applicant is hired with the idea that he will demonstrate his ability to do the job over a period of time. On-the-job training, professional development opportunities, accelerated performance reviews, and mentorship under an experienced company professional can help make the refugee employee's chances of success greater, regardless of whether the employment is conditional or not.

## PATHWAYS FOR LICENSING AND CERTIFICATION

For regulated professions, the procedures for becoming licensed or certified can be very complex and extremely difficult for refugee professionals. Yet, several such bodies in Canada with whom we spoke have been able to work with refugees with limited documentation.



When immediate return to the applicant's profession is not possible, there may be other options available. One is **career laddering**, in which the refugee professional<sup>12</sup> starts in a lower-level job within the same field, giving the individual the opportunity to train, often through **bridging programs** (see Phillips, 2000), and gain experience within the host country in order to return to his or her original occupation (Rabben, 2013). One example from the UK is the Building Bridges Program, which works to retrain refugees in London to reenter their respective professions in the medical field by first starting in lower-level positions (Building Bridges Partnership, 2013).

There are other ways for refugee and migrant professionals to be phased into licensing or certification, avoiding the all-or-nothing approach that licensing and certification boards traditionally take in Canada, the U.S., and elsewhere. Hawthorne (2013) gives two such approaches for migrant professionals that could be applied specifically for refugee professionals:

- **Limited scope of practice:** The migrant professional is allowed to practice the profession with some limits, particularly in regards to management and high-level decision-making, and with some supervision.
- **Conditional registration:** The migrant professional is registered conditionally and allowed to practice on the condition that he or she participate in additional training opportunities, such as bridging programs, or pass certain examinations.

#### Figure 4: Case Study: NOKUT and Credential Assessment for Refugees in Norway



Norway has been a leader both in Europe and worldwide in the assessment and recognition of refugee credentials. NOKUT is Norway's main agency for international education and is in charge of foreign credential assessment for the entire country. Unlike in Canada and the U.S., Norway's approach to foreign credential assessment is centralized. They are responsible for conducting all assessments for foreign educated individuals for general recognition purposes, namely for employment in nonregulated fields and for admission to higher education. From 2011 to 2012, NOKUT conducted a pilot project on credential assessment for refugees and others lacking verifiable documentation (see Egner, 2015). The procedure was then scaled up to full national implementation in 2013, centralized through NOKUT, and is called the UVD (*uten verifiserbar dokumentasjon*) procedure.

The general procedure goes as follows (see Skjerven & Malgina, 2015a):

1. The applicant first applies for general recognition and then is referred to the UVD procedure.
2. NOKUT then reconstructs the applicant's background and suitability for further assessment, including language abilities and legal status within Norway.
3. NOKUT conducts a preliminary interview with the candidate for an initial assessment and then appoints a committee of experts and one NOKUT official for assessment of level and placement of the applicant.



4. The committee assesses the qualifications of the applicant using written and oral methods and evaluates him or her using set criteria.
5. NOKUT makes the final assessment and decision regarding general recognition.

While the strong decentralized nature of credential assessment in North America limits the transferability of many of NOKUT's policies, there are some take-aways from this procedure. NOKUT has been able to use methods other than verifiable documents to assess the qualifications of refugees and other such applicants successfully. In the first year and a half, NOKUT was able to apply this procedure for over 100 individuals of various national and professional backgrounds, many of whom were able to return to their fields of specialty or access Norwegian higher education (Skjerven & Malgina, 2015a).

Sources: S. A. Skjerven & M. Malgina, personal correspondence, February 2016

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## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

### FLEXIBILITY AND UNDERSTANDING



Serving refugees will require more flexibility on the part of institutions.



**Michelle Manks**

Student Refugee Program & Campus Engagement, World University Service of Canada

Among all institutional representatives that we interviewed, the biggest recommendation was to be flexible. Most stated that every situation is different, and every applicant without full documentation is able to provide something different. It is thus important that policies and procedures be put in place, but also that such applicants be handled individually, on a case-by-case basis. One practice to help deal with the disparities among such applicants is for multiple officials to handle the applicant's file, with perhaps a more experienced official serving as the final arbiter. These individuals can work collaboratively on the individual's file. This is the case for some of the institutions with which we spoke.

Another related top recommendation was for institutional representatives to be understanding of the situations in which refugees and other similar individuals find themselves. Each individual has unique needs and circumstances, and international standards for credential evaluation based on the Lisbon Convention call for applicants to be treated fairly and honestly.

In a related point, several institutional representatives mentioned the importance of not restricting a flexible, alternative process to just one group of people, such as Syrian refugees. It is important that such processes be made available to all groups in need. In fact, many institutions often do not ask for the individual's status (in part because of potential legal repercussions) but instead ask about individual circumstances as they relate directly to the application process (e.g., the individual cannot obtain official or verifiable documents for a specific reason).

## **COST**

The cost of performing a credential assessment of any kind, whether standard or alternative, is often prohibitive for many refugees. These applicants often arrive in North America with little or no money and rely on government or sponsor financial assistance before transitioning to “survival work.” Additionally, if admitted to an educational institution, they likely will have to pay at least some tuition, fees, or other related costs, even with financial aid. For licensing and certification, there are often costly exams and other fees that are part of the process beyond the initial credential assessment. Thus, where possible, application and credential assessment fees should be reduced or waived entirely (Phillips, 2000).

## **LANGUAGE AND CLARITY**

Refugees often find themselves suddenly in a very different culture where usually a different language altogether is spoken. While many of the refugees who land in Canada or the U.S. know at least some English (or French), the complexity of the language surrounding applications and instructions related to credential evaluation may be bewildering to them. Simple language should be used, while at the same time, instructions for application and assessment should be comprehensive (Phillips, 2000). This will maximize the chances that the applicant completes the application and additional requests for information such as sworn statements completely, accurately, and promptly. If possible, instructions can be given in some languages spoken by major refugee groups applying to the institution (e.g., Arabic for Syrian applicants).

Language in general is frequently cited as one of the biggest challenges among refugee students and professionals, beyond credential assessment. Many will need language support and may need to start in an intensive English program or technical English courses related to their disciplines before starting regular coursework or completing licensing exams that use complex, technical language.

## **EQUIVALENCE OF DEGREES**

It is always important to remember that a degree from one country is not exactly the same as a degree from another country, despite any name similarity (Sumption, 2013). This is largely why the term “equivalence” is frequently used in credential assessment. In addition to some slight differences in course offerings as part of a program, technical practices may differ between countries. For example, certain advanced medical technologies may not be used yet in some developing countries in comparison to North America. Additionally, norms, ethics, and institutions differ between countries. Thus, an Iraqi business student may need to take coursework about business culture and practices in Canada, even if most or all equivalent coursework had been completed in Iraq. In general, most refugee applicants may need some additional coursework or training to make them competitive within the host country.

## **THE BIG PICTURE**

Lastly, institutions should consider that recognition and admittance are only the first steps in a long process for most refugees. Whether returning to school or working towards licensing or certification and employment, the applicant could spend months or often years in the process. They likely will also face huge costs, whether in direct fees or opportunity costs associated with working less in order to achieve their educational and career goals. This can impact credential assessment, recognition, and placement.

One good example of this is financial aid in colleges and universities. In the U.S., resettled refugees have access to federal and state financial aid (by completing the Free Application for Federal Student

Aid, or FAFSA, form), unlike international students, as they are considered permanent residents for such purposes. However, in many cases, an applicant may have trouble securing financial aid due to state or provincial residency requirements (for lowered tuition) or lack of a credit history (Tobekin, 2006). Such realities should be taken into consideration when advising, admitting, and placing potential students.

Additionally, many refugees will grapple with mental and emotional health issues related to experiencing and surviving conflict, persecution, or trauma, as well as the dislocation of finding themselves in a new country and different culture. They may need extra support and patience and kindness from those who work with them.

## CONCLUSION

Refugees and other displaced people who are completing higher education or were educated professionals in their home countries can contribute their skills and talents to their new host countries. But they cannot do so meaningfully unless their overseas education and professional backgrounds are recognized. Many refugees do not have the luxury of repeating their education and training, due to the time and expense, as well as the demoralization resulting from having to do so.

Institutions and organizations in Europe, Canada, and the United States have demonstrated that they can admit and recognize refugees despite serious limitations in the documentation of these candidates' foreign credentials. They can assist refugees in moving on with their lives. Additionally, many around the world have concluded that recognition of educational and professional qualifications is a basic human right. The educational and professional experience of educated refugees can be broadly leveraged by institutions and employers across North America so that these talented individuals can reach their fullest potential in their new host countries.

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# ENDNOTES

1. In Canada, asylum-seekers are sometimes known as “refugee claimants” (Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada (IRB), 2013). Refugees in general are sometimes called “convention refugees,” in reference to the 1951 Refugee Convention.
2. While not found often in the official literature, there is an important distinction between an asylum-seeker, who has applied for asylum status in the host country and is awaiting a decision, and an asylee, who has been granted asylum status.
3. The European Economic Area (EEA) refers to all Member States of the European Union (EU) plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway, which collectively form a common market across Europe (see European Free Trade Association, 2016).
4. While Canada and the U.S. both signed the Lisbon Convention, neither country ratified it, though both countries make at least some attempts to follow its precepts.
5. UNESCO stands for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.
6. See <http://www.cicic.ca>. CICIC is under the auspices of the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC), a national body of education ministers from Canada’s provinces and territories.
7. See <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/edlite-index.html>. US-NEI is under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education.
8. Available at [https://www.wes.org/wes\\_tools/](https://www.wes.org/wes_tools/).
9. Available at <http://www.enic-naric.net/>.
10. Informal learning is “learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family, and leisure” and is usually “unintentional” in terms of learning (Schuster & Desiderio, 2013, p. 22).
11. Nonformal learning is “learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning” and is generally “intentional” on the part of the learner (Schuster & Desiderio, 2013, p. 22).
12. This practice is not specific to refugees and can be used for foreign-educated migrants of all types.



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