

Criteria and Guidelines: Evaluation of Foreign Qualifications



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DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

Please note:

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACE	Admissions officers and Credential Evaluators (a professional section of EAIE)
AEI-NOOSR	International Education Network / National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition
CEEQ	Centre for the Evaluation of Educational Qualifications
CICIC	Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials
DoE	Department of Education
DoL	Department of Labour
EAIE	European Association for International Education
EU	European Union
ICES	International Credential Evaluation Service
IQAS	International Qualifications Assessment Service
NACES	National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (USA)
NAFSA	Association of International Educators
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centre
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PAC	Provincial Assessment Committee
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RVQ	Relative Value Coefficient
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SEC	<i>Service des Évaluations Comparatives</i>
UK NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom

DEFINITIONS

Similar definitions may be used, but have slightly different meanings in various countries or contexts. The purpose of this glossary is to define terms as generally used in international tools and instruments for recognition, unless the meanings differ substantially, or were created or adapted to specifically suit the South African situation.

Academic recognition

The recognition of (foreign) qualifications for the purpose of further studies.

Access

The status of having the general right to apply and to be considered for admission to a next level of education and training, or to compete for a job.

Access qualification

Any qualification issued by a competent authority attesting the successful completion of an education and training programme which gives the holder the right to be considered for admission to any level of higher education.

Admission

The institutional act of, or system for, allowing qualified applicants who meet the selection criteria to pursue studies in a given programme at that institution.

Assessment (evaluation) of (foreign) qualifications

The analysis and written appraisal, by a competent body, of an individual's foreign qualifications.

Competent recognition authority

A body officially charged with making binding decisions on the recognition of foreign qualifications.

Credential

A qualification obtained by completing an education / training programme.

De facto recognition

The recognition of qualifications aimed at non-regulated professions / careers.

De jure recognition

The recognition of qualifications aimed at regulated professions.

Evaluation (assessment) of (foreign) qualifications

The analysis and written appraisal, by a competent body, of an individual's foreign qualifications.

Higher education (and training)

All types of courses of study, or sets of courses of study, training or training for research at the post secondary level, which are recognised by the relevant authorities in a particular country as belonging to its higher education and training system.

Higher education (and training) qualification

Any degree, diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting the successful completion of a higher education programme.

Higher education institution

An establishment providing higher education and training recognised by the relevant authority in a particular country as belonging to its system of higher education.

Professional recognition

Recognition for the purpose of employment.

Programme (of study)

A course of study recognised by the relevant authority as belonging to its formal, national system of education and training, and the completion of which provides the student with a recognised qualification.

Recognition

The formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the appropriateness of a foreign qualification to access educational and/or employment activities in the receiving country.

Regulated profession

A profession which is regulated by law.

Requirements

Conditions that must be fulfilled for access or for admission to education and training programmes (or to employment)

General requirements

Conditions that must in all cases be fulfilled for admission to a given level of higher education, or for the award of a higher education qualification at a given level.

Specific requirements

Conditions that must be fulfilled, in addition to the general requirements, in order to gain admission to a particular higher education programme, or for the award of a specific higher education qualification in a particular field of study.

Study period

Any component of an education and training programme, which has been evaluated and documented and, while not a complete programme of study in itself, represents a significant acquisition of knowledge or skill.

Sworn Translation

An official document constituting the verbatim (word for word) translation, by a legally sworn or certified translator, from a foreign language into English.

INTRODUCTION

The objectives of the National Qualifications Framework highlight how the NQF is instrumental in meeting various social needs. A key service offered by the South African Qualifications Authority, namely the evaluation of foreign qualifications, is centrally linked to one of these objectives: to facilitate access to, and *mobility* and progression within education, training and career paths.

The evaluation function is, however, not an isolated activity, but forms part of a bigger picture: the recognition of foreign qualifications in general. Neither the difference, nor the relationship between these two concepts is necessarily commonly known. The *Criteria and Guidelines: Evaluation of Foreign Qualifications* therefore, in the course of three chapters, aims to do the following:

- 1 Provide background on the need for recognition of foreign qualifications and clarify what it entails, in order to:
 - contextualise the evaluation of foreign qualifications undertaken at SAQA and elsewhere.
- 2 Describe the nature of the central (SAQA) evaluation function in relation to other roles played in the overall recognition process and give content to the various links of other role players with SAQA as the national information centre, in order to:
 - clarify jurisdictions;
 - give an overview of various practices for reference purposes; and
 - describe relationships in the recognition process.
- 3 Document the generic guiding principles and criteria applied by the Centre for the Evaluation of Educational Qualifications and describe the format of its evaluations, in order to:
 - set up a code of good practice for internal and external use;
 - build capacity and ensure a coherent approach at other levels of evaluation and/or recognition activity;
 - enhance the understanding of CEEQ recommendations; and
 - ensure transparency by making all the above information publicly available.

The recognition of foreign qualifications is, per definition, an activity that takes place in the international domain. The evaluation service offered by SAQA therefore recognises and continuously strives to incorporate international best practice.

International recognition practice, as documented in a range of legal instruments and other formal guidelines, has been integrated into and in fact serves as a foundation for this document. This not only ensures that local practice is formally in tune with the existing code and promotes consistency and coherence of approach, but allows tapping into expertise and experience available on a worldwide scale, thus enhancing legitimacy as well as building capacity and professional confidence.

The following major documents were consulted to inform the compilation of *Criteria and Guidelines: Evaluation of Foreign Qualifications in South Africa*:

- **Lisbon Convention (1997)**, including **Explanatory Report**
- **Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications (2001)** (which encourages the principles and practice it outlines to be applied equally in countries other than those party to the Lisbon Convention), including **Explanatory Report**
- ACE tools for best recognition practice, with special reference to:
 - ✕ **Recognition of Foreign Qualifications**
- **ANAFSA Guide to Selecting a Foreign Credentials Evaluation Service**
- **NACES Code of Ethics, Membership Criteria and Principles of Good Practice**
- **Arusha Convention (1981)**, as revised in 2002

In addition, cognisance was taken of guiding principles, procedures and criteria as documented by leading peer evaluation agencies, with special reference to the following:

- **AEI-NOOSR**, the Australian national information center, which was established in 1989 and forms part of the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST)
- **UK NARIC**, the British national information center, which is an agency under contract to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES)
- **PAC (Provincial Assessment Committee)**, representing the following assessment agencies and other role players in Canada:
 - † **ICES** (International Credential Evaluation Service, British Columbia)
 - † **IQAS** (International Qualifications Assessment Service, Alberta) **SEC** (*Service des Évaluations Comparatives*, Quebec)
 - † **Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation**
 - † **CICIC** (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials)

Ultimately this publication wishes to establish a conceptual framework for the recognition of foreign qualifications in South Africa, so as to promote credible and coherent evaluation methods leading to recognition decisions that are consistent and inter-exchangeable, as far as possible, among various jurisdictions. Working collaboratively to address the many issues emerging from recognition will serve all role players, international mobility as such and above all the qualification holders.

CHAPTER 1

Overview: the recognition of foreign qualifications**1 What is meant by the recognition of foreign qualifications and why is this necessary?**

The free movement of students and scholars between universities, which was a normal characteristic of the academic life in the Middle Ages, changed dramatically alongside the establishment of nation States and the emergence of national identities and symbols (including language). The International Association of Universities (1970: 11) describes how, by the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become common for universities to identify with their national situation, which resulted in huge diversity and weakened links across borders. In contradiction to this, the knowledge explosion forced upon academics the need for mutual access to academic work and the renewed interest of the younger generation to gain knowledge and experience beyond the borders of their home countries. Of necessity, ways of *assessing* foreign qualifications were established and reached a high by the end of that century. The essential aim of this was to create a vehicle for the *recognition* of foreign qualifications.

In the current milieu of economic globalisation and the internationalisation of education, learner and worker mobility more than ever requires the recognition of qualifications across borders. Qualifications (or, as they are often referred to, education credentials) obtained in the education and training system of one country is still not necessarily known in another. From the point of view of qualification holders wishing to enter either education and training, or the job market in a country other than the one in which their qualifications had been obtained, the recognition of their qualifications usually needs to be taken care of before such entry can take effect. From another perspective, prospective recipients of foreign qualifications into home systems are faced with the need to understand foreign credentials as accurately as possible, and therefore *be in a position* to recognise these.

The position of a foreigner in a host country and the need for qualifications to be interpreted by authorities and recognized are clearly illustrated by the following e-mail received in the SAQA offices:

"I am currently living in France, but am South African, I also studied at the University of Pretoria and obtained a B-ADMIN (International Relations) degree. The problem is here in France they have a completely different system of education. In my search for employment this has become an obstacle. My question is, in my letters of application, would I be correct in saying that university education in South Africa is based on the UK system? I hope you can help me with this, because here the university plays a major role in the success of an application and because South Africa's education is not known it really has become an obstacle".

Broadly speaking, the consequences of a lack of a formal recognition process include a loss of skills and the negative impact of this on the socio-economic development of the country. In the transfer and mobility ambit, it simply means that the assimilation of a foreign qualification holder into a host system is blocked.

2 A closer look at the concept

Recognition can be defined as follows:

- The *holistic* process which facilitates an understanding of foreign qualifications and the subsequent placement of foreign qualification holders for work or study purposes.
- The formal end result of the above process, constituting the *decision* taken by an employer or education and training provider, or any other relevant party, *to accept* the qualification for a particular purpose.
- The *formal acknowledgement* by a competent authority of the appropriateness of a foreign qualification, which enables the qualification holder to access educational and/or employment activities in the receiving country.

For further clarification, related concepts are illuminated below.

2.1 Recognition versus equivalence

The essential approach in the establishment of the standing of a foreign qualification, by the end of the nineteenth century and halfway through the twentieth, was that of determining *equivalence*. Towards the second half of the previous century, however, it had become clear that the equivalency concept was problematic in the sense of cultural bias and a desire to preserve, as well as of ambiguity. Guiton (1977: 10) alludes to the confusion created by the various perceptions, stipulated below, of what equivalence implied:

- A mere relation between the end results of two study programmes, which may be comparable more easily in principle than in practice and therefore not necessarily identical.
- An approximation of identity between features such as duration, content and intrinsic quality.

Rauhvargers (2003: 6) considers the wide diversity in the indicators determining the make-up of programmes and qualifications and concludes that no two qualifications, even if awarded by different institutions in the same country, can be equivalent in principle or in practice - let alone two qualifications awarded in different countries. For this reason, the major international legal instrument for academic recognition, the Lisbon Convention of 1997, is not about equivalence, but about recognition.

The trend (and as a matter of fact the recommended approach) reflected in a number of other international legal instruments and tools for best practice, is that competent recognition authorities should move away from merely indicating equivalence, to actively supporting and facilitating the recognition of foreign qualifications.

In practice the term equivalency still prevails in the documentation of many evaluation agencies, while others refer to *comparability*. None of these terms seem to contradict, however, that foreign qualifications are compared to local ones with a view to recognising the former.

2.2 Recognition versus evaluation

The evaluation of foreign qualifications does not constitute the sum total, but forms a central part of the overall of the recognition process.

Evaluation can be viewed as the process whereby foreign qualifications are analysed in terms of their home contexts and points of difference and/or similarity in relation to local qualifications, or the local context, determined. This process constitutes the function of the Centre for the Evaluation of Educational Qualifications (CEEQ) of SAQA and similar central or national advisory bodies worldwide. Acceptance of a particular qualification (i.e. recognition) is not the responsibility or prerogative of, but is very often informed by, *inter alia*, the evaluation process and the recognition recommendations made by a central body.

Essentially distinguishing between the activities *recognition* and *evaluation*, international legal instruments generally refer to two types of bodies:

- Competent (recognition) authorities (*bodies* officially charged with making formal and binding decisions the recognition of foreign qualifications), as opposed to
- National information centres for purposes of giving advice and information on recognition matters and of evaluation (assessment) of qualifications.

An important difference between these two types of bodies is that, whereas national information centers offer advice, but do not usually have the jurisdiction of making binding decisions, competent recognition authorities may have in place internal systems for evaluation which lead to binding decisions. These internal evaluation processes are, however, relevant to specific contexts and evaluation outcomes are not necessarily universally applicable.

The evaluation of foreign qualifications is dealt with in greater depth in chapters 2 and 3.

2.3 Academic versus professional recognition

In the sense of opening up a pathway to further prospects, qualifications serve multiple purposes. The table below summarises the view of Rauhvargers (2003: 4) in this regard:

<p>⇒ Access (general or restricted) to higher levels of education and training</p>	<p>⇒ Access to the labour market (either general, or to a specialized area, or to a regulated profession)</p>
<p>⇒ Access (general or restricted) to further studies at a given level</p>	<p>⇒ Access to professional training</p>

Broadly speaking, recognition is sought by qualification holders either for the purpose of further study, or for that of employment. Subsequently the need for recognition manifests mainly in two areas:

- Academic recognition, of which the purpose is to determine whether the candidate can be admitted into a programme of further study. According to the EU Commission (in Rauhvargers: 2003: 5), two subcategories can be distinguished:
 - ✓ *Cumulative* academic recognition, (the qualification holder completed studies at one level and applies for admission to subsequent level of studies)
 - ✓ Academic recognition *by substitution* (the prospective qualification holder wishes to undertake studies abroad which are to substitute for a part of the programme offered in the host country)
- Professional recognition, aiming to determine whether the qualification holder possesses the sufficient skills and competencies to pursue the profession or career in question in the receiving country.
 - ✓ *De jure* professional recognition (either the education leading to, or the pursuit of the profession is regulated by law)
 - ✓ *De facto* professional recognition (neither the professional activity, nor the appropriate education is regulated by law)

The distinct difference between the above purposes may render the various outcomes of the two types of recognition different, i.e. there is a possibility that the same qualification may be recognised *differently* for each of these purposes. Various (national and international) legal instruments may guide the recognition process and different bodies may be involved in each case, as indicated by the table below :

Academic recognition (for further studies)	Professional recognition (for employment purposes)
Regulated by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Conventions • Bi-lateral / multi-lateral recognition agreements among states • Co-operation programmes at institutional level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National legislation • Regional directives • Agreements which are adopted internationally by professional bodies
Assessment carried out by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National recognition information centres • Education and training providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers (often as advised by national recognition information centres) • Governmental Bodies • Professional Bodies
Decisions taken by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National recognition bodies (some countries) • Education and training providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers (non-regulated professions) • Professional or governmental bodies (regulated professions)

Source: Rauhvargers (2003)

The various types of bodies involved in the assessment and/or recognition of foreign qualifications are described in Chapter 2, with emphasis on such specific role players in South Africa, as well as the relevant roles and relationships.