

Evaluation of European recognition criteria to promote good practice

Prepared by UK NARIC
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1. Background and Introduction

This project has been completed with the support of European Commission Socrates funding.

The project aims to examine criteria and procedures for recognition across Europe. Flanders (Belgium), France and the United Kingdom were selected as case studies, representing different approaches to recognition procedures within Europe.

The terms in this report are used in the same sense as the terms defined in the Lisbon Recognition Convention¹ (LRC) and reference is made to the definition of these terms in Section I of the LRC.

Recognition is defined as “a formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign educational qualification with a view to access to educational and/or employment activities”.

In the context of European higher education reform, with the increasing influence of learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks, UK NARIC proposed to undertake an analysis of recognition criteria to promote good practice across the NARIC network.

The report will first outline the comparative investigation of the procedures, criteria and outcomes applied to applications for recognition of international qualifications in France, Flanders (Belgium) and the United Kingdom, as a cross-section of practice in Europe. It will then seek to analyse the outcomes of these different approaches to evaluation and then address the feasibility of developing generic recognition criteria.

This report will not analyse the criteria used for *professional* recognition in line with the European recognition directives because these have their own legal framework, methodology, conditions and stringent criteria.

¹ The Lisbon Recognition Convention is the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, Lisbon, 11 April 1997.

2. Processes

The following section describes the processes employed to evaluate foreign qualifications by recognition centres in the featured countries. It focuses on the core NARIC role of providing recognition information to individuals seeking to continue their education or further their career abroad.

2.1 United Kingdom

The UK NARIC Information Team responds to over 50,000 individual requests for recognition assistance per year. The Statements of Comparability provided help facilitate applications to university, work permit requests, professional recognition, career advancement and employment for trained individuals from across the globe. The UK NARIC also exercises an important advisory role for organisations, although this is not covered within this report. The information is provided on the basis that it is not legally binding, instead it is provided in an advisory capacity.

All assessment applications are conducted in the same manner to ensure that each is treated as fairly and efficiently as possible. Each application for the Standard Evaluation Service for individuals follows the procedures below:

- Papers submitted are analysed by an experienced Information Officer who determines whether correct documentation has been provided
- The decision is made as to whether assessment can be provided and, if so, the fee is processed
- Qualifications are evaluated in accordance with NARIC guidelines²
- Validity of certificates considered
- Response drafted
- Verification of all responses and evaluations is conducted by senior members of staff

It is inevitable that in certain cases additional research is required, such as rare, new or discontinued qualifications. Such applications follow these additional steps:

- Appropriate authorities will be contacted in order to obtain further information on the qualification. If the appropriate authority fails to respond within a week, further requests are sent. Allowance is sometimes provided, depending on the country in question. The applicant will be informed if the process will take longer than the standard timescale.
- Information request chased up on a weekly basis until received.

² <http://www.naric.org.uk/index.asp?page=25§ion=4>

- Once a response has been received, the value of this information is considered: if the response is insufficient to provide an evaluation, further information requests are considered.
- Qualifications are then evaluated in accordance with the new information and in the context of previous evaluations for the country in question.
- The conclusions of these research-oriented cases are then presented to the Team Leader or Head of Section and senior evaluators. If the findings are then confirmed, a verified response is dispatched.

Information Management

These recognition statements are based upon the data held by the Information Team. Information management is therefore essential to maintain an efficient service. To ensure that the gathering and processing of information and research is consistent and fair, UK NARIC has developed a set of procedural guidelines.

In the context of Recognition of Qualifications, the Information Management process is itself comprised of two elements: firstly, award-specific research, which is conducted on an ad hoc basis, when the Information Team receives an application for the assessment of unusual, new or as yet unfamiliar qualifications. Secondly, there is the research related to the comprehensive system data, which reviews the main body of information available on a given country or region on a rolling basis. This allows the Information Services team to remain up-to-date with educational development across the 180 countries featured in the core UK NARIC Information Products.

Additional information on both qualification-specific and system specific information management procedures are provided in the appendices.

Appeals Procedure

If an individual is dissatisfied with the assessment provided they are entitled to make an appeal. The following are considered appropriate grounds for appeal:

- Disputing the comparable level of a qualification
- Disputing the information provided in the assessment
- Disputing level of service and conduct towards an individual during the assessment process

Once an appeal has been received, UK NARIC undertakes to re-examine the information originally provided, which will always be carried out by a senior member of staff as the Appeals Officer. There is no charge for the reassessment process (should the application meet the grounds of appeal listed above).

The Appeals Officer will undertake a re-evaluation of the assessment using all available evidence and will seek further clarification from appropriate authorities where necessary. In addition the assessment will be peer reviewed by the Team Leader / Head of Section.

There are a number of different potential outcomes of this re-examination:

- Original Decision Upheld: The grounds upon which the appeal has been raised are considered unfounded. The individual is therefore informed that the original guidance is considered accurate and reasons for this outcome are provided.
- Further Detail Required from the Individual: The line of argument used by the individual is based upon evidence that has not been provided (or perhaps insufficiently). It is therefore requested that new documentation should be obtained from an authoritative source in the home country.
- Further Research Required by UK NARIC: The line of argument suggests that the information held by UK NARIC is insufficient to reach a definitive conclusion. In this situation, more in-depth research is conducted by a senior evaluator in order to determine the merit of the argument.
- Original Decision Reversed: The appeal is upheld and a reassessment of the qualification(s) is provided. This reassessment is then used to inform the enquiry team and to improve UK NARIC publications.
- Decision referred to Appeals Committee. Further information on the Appeals Committee can be found in the appendices.

2.2. Flanders (Belgium)

There are three focal points to the recognition work conducted by the Flemish NARIC Centre (NARIC-Vlaanderen) with regard to recognition work, all of which refer to higher education.

Firstly, the NARIC-Vlaanderen provides advisory statements regarding access to higher education programmes.

Secondly, advisory statements on the level of foreign qualifications are prepared, which generally relate to the recognition status of foreign higher education qualifications in the education system of origin.

Finally, the NARIC-Vlaanderen is also the competent authority for the recognition of foreign higher education qualifications and the *professional* recognition of teachers trained abroad in line with the European recognition directive 89/48.

The recognition of foreign qualifications leads to a legally binding decision. The Flemish recognition procedure includes content comparisons (checking the essential programme components) of programmes leading to a foreign qualification, to ensure there are no substantial differences – itself a contested

concept – as well as an evaluation against a range of other criteria. The issue of substantial differences between qualifications of the same level is being considered by a working group within the ENIC and NARIC networks. The criteria used by NARIC-Vlaanderen are discussed in the next section. The recognition procedure examines both academic status and associated rights (e.g. to further study) and also professional rights (access to the regulated profession).

The following procedure represents the main steps in the recognition process:

Step 1: Application

- Informal advice is offered about the possibilities and procedures
- If deemed appropriate, a standardised application form is completed
- Receipt of the application is acknowledged
- Applicants receive information on the estimated time required to process the recognition application, which should not exceed eight weeks

Step 2: Verification

- Checklist of required documents against those submitted
- Verification of the authenticity of the documents
- Use of previous cases for current ones
- Verification of awarding institutions and programmes (status, type, level and accreditation)
- Consultation of ENIC/NARICs

Step 3: Assessment of the qualification

- In the case that consulted experts from at least two higher education institutions don't come up with substantial differences, full recognition is provided
- In case there are substantial differences, all reasons are stated using the pre-defined criteria, suggestions for alternative or partial recognition are made and information is provided concerning the possibilities for appeal.

There are special procedures in place for refugees who cannot document the qualifications they claim and for individuals holding older or outdated qualifications.

In 2005, NARIC-Vlaanderen processed 2247 applications for the legally binding recognition statement, in addition to advisory statements such as those for the purpose of entry to higher education, and counselling by email, telephone and in person. NARIC-Vlaanderen does not process applications related to the recognition of vocational qualifications or short cycle tertiary qualifications.

Where clients are dissatisfied with the outcome of the assessment procedure, NARIC-Vlaanderen have an appeal process in place, which has three key steps. The first is the internal, non-formal appeal that relates in most cases to correcting errors and resolving misunderstandings about the qualification assessment. If this step should fail to lead to a satisfactory outcome, an external appeal, involving again at least two experts from higher education institutions may be launched. Finally, and where appropriate, a legal appeal may be activated at the “Raad van State”, the highest administrative court in Belgium.

2.3 France

The NARIC Centre of France deals primarily with the recognition of higher education qualifications, but also provides guidance about secondary and vocational secondary qualifications. The main focus of the recognition process is to establish the standing of the qualification in the country of origin in order that a decision about educational and professional opportunities might be made. It should be noted, however, that there is no legal principle governing the comparability of qualifications from abroad with those of France.

In 2005, the French NARIC Centre received 1747 individual files, of which 1547 were related to gaining recognition for foreign qualifications by clients resident outside France, and the remaining 200 being requests for information.

The Centre also serves as a point of contact for the *rectorats* who provide information regionally (according to the *Académies* – regional education authorities) to individuals already residing in France.

The Centre also offers specialised, individual responses to enquiries from other ENIC / NARIC Centres, companies and French and foreign officials. Enquiries from organisations may often relate to requests for professional recognition, which must be presented by the potential employer or *concours* (entrance examination for higher education course or job) organiser rather than the individual. However, foreign qualified individuals hoping to access regulated professions should contact the Ministry appropriate to their sphere of activity who will decide upon their eligibility.

The concrete steps for handling requests for comparability are described below. The guidelines apply generally to both individual applications for qualification recognition and for information requests from relevant bodies.

Upon receipt of the application requesting comparability guidance or information, a file is created in a tailored spreadsheet to register the details of the case. In the near future, it is envisaged that files will be numbered for ease of classification. The assistant then verifies that all the documents required have been submitted, and that any omissions in individual applications are rectified. A complete portfolio of documents consists of:

- Copies of the qualification diploma,
- Copies of diploma supplement or similar transcript
- Certified translations of the same
- Letter explaining the applicant's reasons for seeking an appraisal of their qualifications

The person responsible for the case will consult the database to ensure that no duplication of research is undertaken if the qualification has already been processed by the Centre in the past, and should use the new case to elaborate on any information already held in the database. The leader will then make a decision as to how to deal with the case. Once this is decided, a letter explaining the decision is prepared and dispatched by courier to the applicant, which completes the process.

This process is summarised in the flow diagram on the following page.

3. Evaluation Criteria

Application procedures described in section 2 demonstrate the manner in which working practices are structured. However, it is also worth considering the set of criteria used in order to interpret or analyse the information gathered and how they lead to a justified recommendation on a given qualification.

3.1 United Kingdom

Having outlined the process in section 2.1, the factors taken into account during the evaluation are as follows.

- Stud Load of programme
- Entry Requirements
- Learning outcomes
- Orientation and structure of programme
- Degree of subject specialisation
- Type of institution, including recognition status
- Nature of qualification (academic, vocational or occupational)
- Progression possibilities

3.2. Flanders (Belgium)

The criteria applied to academic recognition cases are as follows:

- Comparison of programme content (the essential programme components) to establish degree of similarity
- Status, type and level of awarding institution
- Status, type and level of programme
- Accreditation of the institution and / or programme
- Structure and characteristics of the foreign education system
- Previous education or training
- Access and admission conditions of the programme
- Study load of the programme
- Relevant professional experience
- Access to regulated professions
- Access to further studies
- Prior learning assessments and recognitions

3.3. France

As the French ENIC / NARIC Centre plays a primarily informative role, it does not apply specific criteria in order to reach a recognition decision. Instead, the status of the qualification in the country of origin is outlined in order to help facilitate recognition. Advisory statements detail the following aspects:

- Study load of programme
- type of programme
- status of the institution where the qualification was received
- overall recognition status of the qualification in the country of origin.

Evaluation Criteria need to reflect the concerns of the national system. These concerns centre on whether internationally trained applicants are:

- sufficiently well-trained to perform a specified occupational or professional role (taking into account European Directives and other relevant transnational legislation or arrangements) or;
- adequately qualified to enter the further or higher education system in the country in question.

This confirmation is provided in order to enable individual organisations (to whom the qualification will be presented) to make an informed decision about suitability for further study, professional status or employment. Such bodies will then be in a position to determine whether an individual meets their criteria.

The Rectorats of individual Académies apply the same criteria as those defined nationally. The principal difference between the Rectorats and the CIEP is that assessment tends to be carried out by administrative officials who may lack the knowledge and experience of international education, given their largely national remit.

4. Outcomes

4.1 United Kingdom

Individuals seeking recognition or assessment of their qualifications will typically receive a letter summarising the key features of their qualification; title, institution and year of qualification, and, crucially, the statement of comparability. Although the statements do not make reference to particular UK qualifications in a given field of study, the comparability is specific in that it provides guidance about the level of the qualification (in relation to the National Qualifications Framework) and the type of qualification (academic, vocational or occupational) by suggesting comparable types of UK qualification. Indeed, the comparability is issued as one of a number of UK NARIC Band Framework Statements.

The UK NARIC evaluates and offers recognition information on the full range of international and national qualifications, including both higher and secondary and, also, academic and vocational qualifications. In order to ensure consistent guidance on diverse, international qualifications, UK NARIC evaluations are based upon the UK NARIC Band Framework.

The framework is broadly oriented around the structure of the National Qualifications Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. It is based upon the needs of stakeholder groups, who require the ability to distinguish between different styles of qualification and learning outcomes. This is reflected in the set of Descriptors for each UK NARIC Band. The current NARIC Band Framework seeks to adequately represent all the different types of foreign qualification and provide meaningful linkages to the most similar UK qualifications. The term Band is used to reflect the broad grouping of international qualifications that may be categorised together. This Framework is intended to not only cope with formal qualifications but also lifelong learning and transnational education experiences as required in the modern climate.

The UK NARIC Band Framework therefore has two purposes. It is firstly an important method of categorising foreign qualifications. However, it is also a framework that enables the differences between the foreign qualifications to be expressed in a meaningful but relatively straightforward manner.

The Descriptors that accompany each UK NARIC Band of the Framework are generic summaries and not designed to illustrate anything more than broad characteristics of international qualifications, such as its purpose / learning outcome and progression possibilities. They do not generally outline specific details such as volume or particular units of study that are considered pre-requisites of qualifications at a given level. The format may therefore differ from those used by standard setting bodies or qualification framework developers.

Criteria analysed within the context of credential evaluation (as outlined within Evaluation Criteria) underpin the UK NARIC Band Framework.

The Descriptors have been designed to underpin the Band Framework and provide greater transparency of the system by helping to demonstrate to stakeholders how the Bands may be applied and interpreted.

List of UK NARIC Band Framework Descriptors:

<p><i>Band Descriptors:</i></p> <p><i>Band 0:</i></p> <p>Qualifications falling below the first nationally assessed level in UK secondary schools and includes basic level adult education that also does not constitute a national award.</p> <p><i>Band 1:</i></p> <p>Awards at this level demonstrate a basic to moderate grasp of the principal elements of the given subject without demonstrating a deeper understanding or an ability to converse with its more technical aspects. In vocational areas, individuals would be directly supervised in the workplace.</p> <p><i>Band 2:</i></p> <p>Qualifications at this level provide holders with a solid grounding in the fundamental areas of the subject or occupation and allow progression to upper secondary / technician level awards.</p> <p><i>Band 3:</i></p> <p>International awards that fall between lower and upper secondary in standard, which provide a level of specialisation beyond that of a basic skilled worker.</p> <p><i>Band 4:</i></p> <p>Qualifications that provide for admission to higher education only in certain circumstances. Normally, the volume of study and degree of specialisation is insufficient for access to degree programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, these awards may be considered more appropriate for higher education entry, as degrees are longer in duration.</p> <p><i>Band 5:</i></p> <p>Qualifications that closely match the higher education entrance level in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Equally, those that reflect workers demonstrating competences such as the application of knowledge in a broad range of varied work activities, with some responsibility or autonomy. See Scotland note under Level 4.</p> <p><i>Band 6:</i></p> <p>Qualifications, usually vocational, that go beyond the outcomes associated with first-level responsibilities, usually in a further education setting. These awards generally lack sufficient volume of tertiary level study to be considered higher education.</p> <p><i>Band 7:</i></p> <p>Qualifications that broadly match the outcomes associated with one year of full-time higher education or higher technician staff whose range of tasks are quite limited.</p>

Band 8:

Qualifications that broadly match the outcomes associated with two years of full-time higher education or higher technician staff whose range of tasks are relatively broad.

Band 9:

The course of study leading to this qualification is based on a strongly multi-disciplinary curriculum. This may not in itself readily offer the extent of specialist knowledge or academic preparation normally demanded of students seeking to progress directly into a UK academic programme at postgraduate level.

Band 10:

The course of study leading to this qualification indicates that students have followed a specialist curriculum. The course also generally requires submission of a final thesis or dissertation, which is examined as part of the requirements for the award. Graduates are likely to be securely prepared for progression directly into a UK academic programme at postgraduate level.

Band 11:

Qualifications that provide further training, usually occupationally-specific in nature, for graduates and higher technicians. The programme is generally orientated towards classroom-based study, involve the minimum amount of academic study for a postgraduate award and often combine this with professional content.

Band 12:

Academically-based, postgraduate qualifications that are based predominantly upon classroom-based study and are usually designed for the purposes of further specialisation.

Band 13:

Second cycle higher education programmes that combine classroom-based study and a research element.

Band 14:

Second cycle higher education programmes with a strong orientation towards research work.

Band 15:

Postgraduate research awards with significant dissertations that may form the basis of doctoral programmes.

Band 16:

Awards that require the completion of a lengthy thesis based upon original research.

Band 17:

Post-Doctoral awards to reflect higher academic achievements, usually confined to university staff.

The comparison statement list is based on UK NARIC experience of expressing the value of foreign qualifications, the outcomes of which are

achieved under different education models and are designed to reflect national objectives. The comparisons have developed from in-country and UK institution feedback and have since gradually formalised towards a hierarchical structure of evaluation statements, encompassing academic and vocationally oriented qualifications. In this context, UK NARIC has sought to evolve the list of statements in order to eradicate inexact or excessively broad statements. It exemplifies a bottom-up approach to the issue of evaluation statements, in that the Framework is based upon what is seen.

The UK NARIC Band Framework may also be represented in tabular format, which shows how the Bands broadly articulate with NQF Levels.

The following table demonstrates the articulation of UK NARIC Band Framework (from Bands 1-8) with qualifications and levels of the UK National Qualifications Frameworks:

NARIC Band	NQF level	Academic	Vocational	Occupational	Other
NARIC Band 8	NQF level 5 QAA level I SCQF level 8	Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) / Year 2 of Bachelor degree	BTEC / SQA Higher National Diploma (HND)	N/SVQ level 4 / City & Guilds level 4	
NARIC Band 7	NQF level 4 QAA level C SCQF level 7	Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE) / Year 1 of Bachelor degree	BTEC / SQA Higher National Certificate (HNC)		
NARIC Band 6	Between NQF levels 3 and 4		Between BTEC / SQA National Diploma and BTEC / SQA Higher National Diploma	Between N/SVQ level 3 / City & Guilds level 3 and N/SVQ level 4 / City & Guilds level 4	
NARIC Band 5	NQF level 3 SCQF level 6/7	Overall GCE Advanced standard / Scottish Advanced Higher	AVCE / BTEC National Diploma	N/SVQ level 3 / City & Guilds level 3	English Advanced Apprenticeship / Scottish Modern Apprenticeship / Welsh Advanced Modern Apprenticeship
NARIC Band 4	SCQF level 6	GCE Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level / Scottish Higher	VCE Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level / BTEC National Certificate / Scottish Higher		
NARIC Band 3	Between NQF levels 2 and 3	A standard between GCSE	Between BTEC / SQA First Diploma and BTEC / SQA	Between N/SVQ level 2 / City & Guilds level 2 and N/SVQ level 3 /	

		and GCE AS level	National Diploma	City & Guilds level 3	
NARIC Band 2	NQF level 2 SCQF level 5	GCSE (grades A*-C) / Credit Standard Grade	VGCSE (grades A*-C) / BTEC First Diploma / SQA Intermediate 2	N/SVQ level 2 / City & Guilds level 2	English Apprenticeship / Welsh Modern Apprenticeship
NARIC Band 1	NQF level 1 SCQF level 4	GCSE (grades D-G) / General Standard Grade	VGCSE (grades D-G) / SQA Intermediate 1	N/SVQ level 1 / City & Guilds level 1	
NARIC Band 0	NQF level 0 SCQF levels 1-3	Below GCSE / Standard Grade.	Below VGCSE.	Below N/SVQ level 1	

4.2. Flanders (Belgium)

The advisory statement regarding access to higher education will confirm whether or not the presented qualification gives access to higher education in the country of origin, which is an important consideration to Flemish admitting higher education institutions.

The purpose of the advisory statements on the level of foreign qualifications is to confirm that a given foreign qualification is a recognised one and has been awarded by a recognised/accredited higher education institution and may also detail the official nominal study load of the particular programme (where applicable). These advisory statements do not include an exact comparison with any Flemish qualification.

Full recognition of a foreign higher education qualification will result in the individual being conveyed full academic (e.g. access to further study) and professional rights (access to regulated professions), as held by the equivalent professional qualified in Flanders. In Flanders (Belgium) most of the higher education qualifications include direct access to related (and regulated) professions.

The following matrix represents the recognition possibilities of foreign qualifications in terms of the scope of work of NARIC-Vlaanderen, the nature of the recognition result and the purpose for which recognition is sought.

nature of recognition result

- informative
- advisory
- legally binding

	Academic recognition giving access to higher education programmes	Academic recognition for the use of an academic title	Recognition giving access to the labour market	Professional recognition in line with EU directives
School-leaving certificate	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Vocational Education and Training Qualifications	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Short cycle education (e.g. Associate degree)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
First cycle education (e.g. Bachelor)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Second cycle education (e.g. Master)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Third cycle education (e.g. Doctor)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

4.3. France

As previously discussed, assessment of foreign qualifications by the French NARIC Centre does not result in a legally binding judgment or even a guidance statement on how the qualification should be recognised, but instead consists of a letter offering information about the qualification. The qualification is described in the context of its own education system, and may offer details such as any pre-requisites for the admission to, or completion of the programme, duration, progression possibilities and a guide to the title of the qualification if any misinterpretation is possible.

5. Analysis

The sections above have outlined the procedures for applications for recognition, the evaluation criteria applied and the outcomes generated by the NARIC Centres in the UK, Flanders, and in France. This section seeks to compare and contrast these methodologies and working practices in order to identify the key similarities in approach between the three countries and to formulate generic recognition criteria.

5.1. Processes

Procedures relate to the way in which applications for recognition information are handled by the NARIC Centres concerned.

It is considered best practice to acknowledge the receipt of applications. However, while this is done by both the French and Flemish NARICs, due to the high demand and relatively short turnaround time of the majority of applications to the UK NARIC, (generally 10-15 working days) an initial acknowledgement is only sent where insufficient information has been submitted. Individuals seeking confirmation may telephone the customer services team who will be able to issue them with a case number enabling them to check the status of their enquiry online.

5.2. Evaluation Criteria

Recognition bodies from different countries consider some of the same factors, however the emphasis placed upon each consideration varies. Whilst duration/volume of study and learning outcomes may be broadly similar, the concepts are employed to different extents in the recognition process. In the UK, the recognition process is one that provides guidance on the level of a qualification in terms of the framework, with decisions on professional suitability left to sectoral and professional organisations. This has the advantage that an individual's UK NARIC statement of comparability is flexible, and may be employed for a wide variety of purposes. In Flanders, legislative requirements mean that the interpretation of criteria must be undertaken in a far stricter fashion. In France, the decentralisation of the decision making process means that criteria are described in Step 1 (CIEP) and then evaluated in Step 2 (Rectorats).

5.3. Outcomes

The different nature of the individual NARIC Centres means that each organisation offers a slightly different recognition service to foreign qualified individuals. Working in tandem with the *rectorats*, the French NARIC offers recognition information of a general nature. UK NARIC is able to accept applications for recognition information about academic, vocational and

occupational qualifications ranging from secondary education to post-doctoral standard. NARIC-Vlaanderen focuses on higher education qualifications, although – as part of the Ministry – it is closely linked to sections responsible for recognition of other forms of learning.

UK NARIC comparability statements refer to the Qualification Frameworks in place across the United Kingdom. The UK NARIC Band Framework uses the structure of qualifications represented in all national qualifications frameworks as outcomes and distinctions as required by stakeholders. This is possible since the concept and practical realisation of an NQF is well entrenched in the UK, whereas other European countries are still in various stages of the implementation process, timetabled to be completed by 2010.

The UK NARIC Band Framework approach allows differences between qualifications to be expressed on the comparability statement. The descriptors, to which each Band refers, describe the type of UK qualifications to which foreign qualifications are most comparable.

The position of refugees varies between countries. They often leave their country of origin without evidence of qualifications and this clearly has implications for recognition. Flanders has developed some special procedures for refugees, but in the UK, without documentary evidence, UK NARIC is only able to provide general advice. Other initiatives have been offered through UK NARIC with other agencies including the Refugee Council, which is a UK based charity.

6. Feasibility of development of generic EU recognition criteria

As the report has observed there are differences and similarities of the recognition processes adopted in these three European countries. The following section of the report seeks to examine potential areas of European best practice, which could be adopted.

It is valuable that recognition procedures reflect the education, training and employment systems of the host country and reflect the needs of the stakeholders. This could be enhanced by some common approaches to recognition procedures.

45 nations have signed up to the Bologna Process and its aim to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. The development of some common recognition criteria will aid mobility. Furthermore, formulating a clear set of objective factors to consider when assessing foreign qualifications will increase the transparency of the recognition procedure, thus making work and study abroad easier and more secure for individuals and the recruitment of foreign trained workers easier for employers.

6.1. Common Procedure for Recognition

This section relates to the criteria for judging the standards of service that individuals should receive when applying for recognition of their educational achievements abroad.

Availability of information on the recognition procedure

Information on how to instigate the recognition procedure should be easily available, ideally in a variety of formats and languages according to the profile of the body of applicants. This should be as clear and comprehensible as possible.

It is recommended that all applicants automatically receive standardised information on the procedures and criteria for the assessment of foreign qualifications

Acknowledgement of applications

Applicants should receive as soon as possible the acknowledgement of the receipt of their application. In addition, centres could offer the applicants innovative systems, such as on-line tracking to check progress of the application.

Service turn-around

The service turn around should be within four months as recognition can have crucial implications for the future study and career options of the applicant.

Right of appeal

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) foresees the right of appeal. The recognition decision should be accompanied by a formal policy statement, detailing the procedure for requesting that a case be reconsidered.

In the LRC, the onus is on the non-recognising body to demonstrate that the presence of substantial differences is a ground for non-recognition. The grounds are themselves in the process of being determined more precisely and are an important element towards formulating a standard set of process-oriented criteria.

6.2. Common Criteria for Recognition

Recognition is largely based on the needs of the NARIC preparing the comparability. This report has looked at the needs depending on the country and different factors that are important such as study loads (ECTS) and learning outcomes. The report now analyses which aspects of a qualification should routinely be taken into account of in the recognition process.

At the 2006 ENIC / NARIC Network conference in Tallinn, a paper was presented on the theme of understanding substantial differences in qualification recognition. It argues that there are five elements that make up a qualification: level, workload, quality, profile and learning outcomes. It is suggested that each of these should be considered in the recognition procedure.

Level

Consideration of the level of a qualification within the education system of the country of origin is a highly informative step in the recognition procedure. However, as the Tallinn report points out, and supported by experience, while a qualification may nominally be equivalent, other relevant factors may prove otherwise. Therefore, in order to reach an accurate recognition decision, other factors must be accounted for to ensure consistency.

Workload

ECTS are increasingly being used across Europe, although this credit system only supports higher education learning and is not designed to provide a framework to reflect achievement on vocational education and training programmes. The proposal for ECVET is designed to fill this gap.

Comparative duration and the number of hours of theoretical study assigned to the programme are also good measures of the workload, although it is recommended that such considerations do not constitute the backbone of recognition decisions.

Quality

The Tallinn report highlights that level and workload alone are not true indicators of the nature of a qualification. In order to gain equivalent recognition, a qualification must also be of sufficient quality. Credential evaluators must also be able to consider the quality of the educational provision that an educational institution is able to provide, and the rigour of the curricula and examination procedure to confirm its standing. The requirement for European states to implement accreditation or quality assurance procedures within the higher education sector will continue to contribute to the ability of recognition officers to take objective assessments of quality into account in their work, rather than relying on more subjective or anecdotal sources.

Profile

Profile describes the type of institution and individual characteristics of the programme. Firstly, the profile of the institution relates to the consideration of such factors as quantity of independent research or professional practice undertaken as part of the programme. The profile of the qualification can relate to the degree of specialisation of a given programme, for example, whether it is a Bachelor of Arts in Social Science, which is likely to be multi-disciplinary in nature, or a more subject-specific Bachelor of Sociology. This also relates to the way that some countries include Liberal Arts modules, or a very comprehensive, broad based introductory phase to their qualifications.

Learning outcomes

The report of the Tallinn Substantial Differences Working Group describes learning outcomes as “what a graduate knows and is able to do on the basis of a qualification”. It also acknowledges that this is a challenging approach to recognition given that learning outcomes can be difficult to describe and assess. However, the UK can be seen as an example of how it is possible to achieve an education culture based upon a learning outcomes-oriented approach to qualification design and assessment. This has been attained through broad-based and extensive consultation, although this is a process that may also be successfully replicated elsewhere, especially if the process can be linked into a common discussion at European level. The European Qualifications Framework with its Descriptors could potentially be considered a starting point for discussions aiming to develop a common understanding across Europe of how the Descriptors should be interpreted in relation to the national education systems.

6.3. Implications and outcomes

While this report has commented upon the possibilities and limitations of developing a common European approach to procedures and criteria for the recognition of foreign qualifications, it is also suggested that attempts to harmonise the outcomes of recognition work are not always appropriate. Recognition also needs to take into account the needs of each individual country.

7. Conclusions

The following have emerged as the main findings of the research-based exercise:

- There are similarities and differences between the procedures, criteria and outcomes of the recognition process in the three countries examined for this study;
- Differences reflect the varying structures of the professions and their regulation, and different academic cultures and the different needs of stakeholder groups;
- Moves to develop common procedures can be positive, although they too reflect the differences between the NARIC Centres;
- In terms of outcomes of the process, it is possible to use common descriptors as a basis for a recognition approach that involves learning outcomes more consistently;
- However, there are likely to be problems in the practical implementation. These difficulties relate primarily to differences in interpretation.

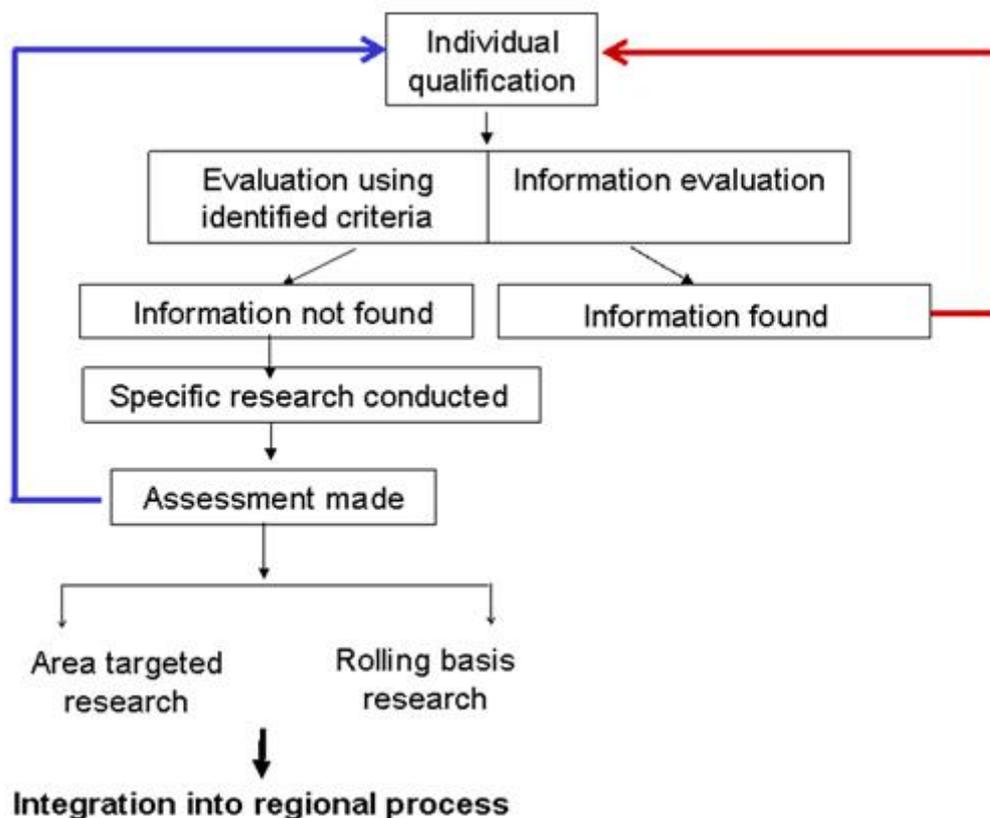
Appendix 1 – Award specific information

Award-specific information ties in closely with the Enquiry and Individual Assessment Service, which provides details of qualification comparabilities to both member organisations and individuals in writing and over the telephone. The UK NARIC Information and Skills Team answers over 30,000 such enquiries annually.

Upon evaluation, an individual award may conform to the established, generic comparability statements accorded to a type and range of qualifications. Equally, it may challenge the established recommendations and therefore generate the need for revision of information. Once the information is collected, it will in turn supplement and support individual evaluations.

Chart 1 on the following page demonstrates how award-specific information feeds into the Information Management Process.

Chart 1: The Enquiry Service (Award-Specific Information) and the Information Management Process



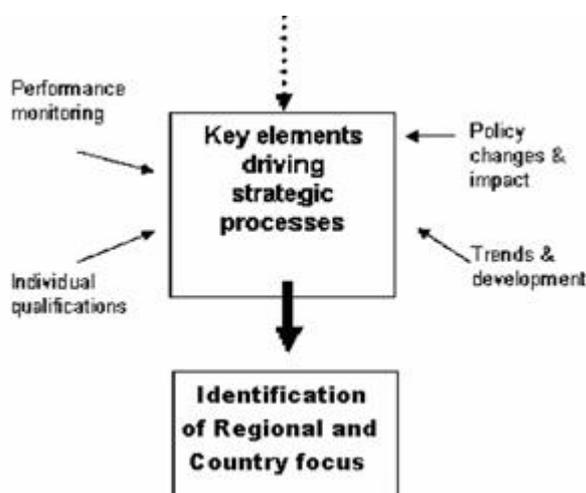
Appendix 2 – system specific information

To ensure that evolving standards and new education provision are properly reflected in a recognition centre, it is necessary to implement a structured information updating process. This is predominantly a geographical and periodically based process, leading to a managed and continuing evaluation of comparability recommendations.

A structured information updating and review process needs to take into consideration a number of factors enabling rational prioritisation and planning.

Chart 2 that follows demonstrates some key elements and the consequential actions.

Chart 2: The Role of Information Development (System-Specific Information) in the Information Management Process



This process of systematic information development should be structured logically into stages, and the Editorial team sets annual targets for information review. The structure of this process is described below.

Appendix 3 – Structure of Editorial Process

In the process of information management and information development a clearly defined structure should be followed. The UK NARIC structure follows the pattern described below. While this procedural structure relates predominantly to the systematic research of targeted countries, individual award can also be fed into this process.

Stage One: Desk-Based Research

Different relevant issues exist for each country. Once the need for a country update has been determined, a period of desk-based research is initiated to determine areas for information development. This involves a review of feedback received from stakeholders / service users (Here, the Customer Service function feeds the comments received back through to the Information Development function) in order to recognise key issues and demands for information useful to admissions staff, professional / sectoral bodies, government departments and individual enquirers.

This initial stage of research provides an audit of data held and information required, enabling knowledge gap identification and leading to a logical regional / country prioritisation.

The importance of the review exercise is determined and gauged on three factors: (a) number of enquiries received from the country each year; (b) duration since the last visit and the extent to which information needs to be overhauled; (c) the degree of sensitivity attached to the visit and the importance to policy development.

Following the identification of priority regions / countries, importance of the meeting and specific information required, consideration is then given to the data collection process, which involves liaison with partner organisations such as British Council offices outside the UK, the local Ministry of Education, along with other sector-based organisations where appropriate.

Ultimately, the outcome of desk-based research is a summary sheet of information needs and the level of involvement required, which determines the composition of the review team, staff costs and a realistic timeframe.

Aspects for Consideration are:

- Review of Feedback received from stakeholders / service users
- Audit of data held and information required – Knowledge Gap Identification
- Importance of the Review Exercise
- Data Collection Process and In-Country Contacts
- Development of a Summary Sheet of Information Needs

Stage Two: Review Team and In-Country Reviews

Important review exercises are usually undertaken by at least 2 UK NARIC members of staff.

The composition of the review team is determined following consideration of three main issues. The first of these is the regional specialisations of NARIC staff, often related to the sub-division of NARIC enquiry work or because of specific projects undertaken in the past. All members undertaking in-country review exercises have at least one year's experience in the field of credential evaluation.

The second aspect to consider is linguistic competence: if there are people fluent in a particular language, they are frequently best placed to undertake the review exercise. Equally, though, linguistic ability can relate to a similar or common language, which will help facilitate the flow of information.

Aspects for Consideration are:

- Number of Staff Required
- Regional Specialisations of Staff
- Linguistic Competence
- Cultural Considerations

Stage Three: Review Process

The British Council are usually in the position to help UK NARIC to organise an appropriate itinerary for the in-country review. The objectives of the study and organisations of particular interest are forwarded to the local office in good time to allow representatives to arrange meetings.

The meetings themselves take a variety of forms dependent upon the availability of staff, the sectors skills of the people involved (including policy development, quality assurance, college administration or teaching) and the formality of the situation. In developing countries, available reference resources are more difficult to obtain.

It is also difficult to provide a full list of questions that may be asked of country representatives, although they focus upon two key areas: (a) qualification structures, durations, entry criteria, outcomes, quality assurance mechanisms etc; (b) more subjective discussion topics such as political, economic and geographical factors, amount of facilities, relative quality of education, difficulties with funding etc.

Aspects for Consideration are:

- Organisation of Appropriate Meetings
- Specialism and therefore Perspective of Organisations Visited
- The Type of Information that can be obtained from specific sources

Stage Four: Information Analysis

Aspects for Consideration are:

- Collation of Information and Determination of Knowledge Gaps
- Documentation of In-Country Review Exercises
- Requests for Comments and Further Information
- Analysis of Type of Information
- Editorial Process to ensure suitability of information for publishing

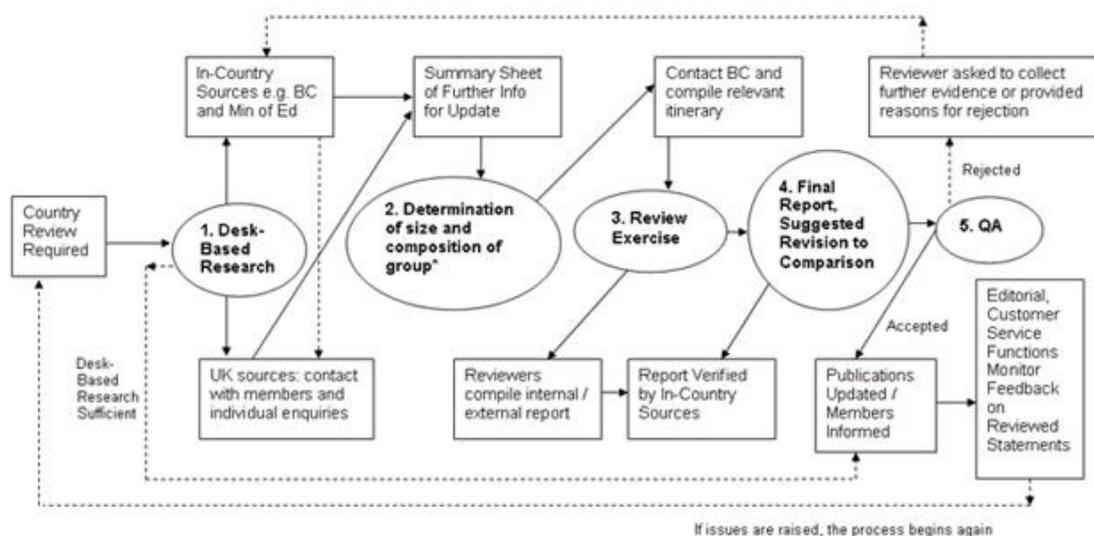
Stage Five: Quality Assurance Mechanism

There are two main forms of quality assurance processes currently in place to monitor the outcomes of In-Country Review Exercises. The first is the internal process, with a Validation Committee. The second is external quality assurance, which takes the form of feedback from member organisations and from the external agencies in the country under review.

In terms of external quality assurance, it is important that the information obtained has been properly verified with authorities in the country, although naturally it is more difficult to obtain impartial advice on the relative value of qualifications and users of the NARIC service in the UK provide valuable feedback on former applicants. A number of other informal channels are used to ensure accuracy of information, such as conferences, training events and informal exchanges of information with third countries.

Chart 3 provides a flow chart in which these five stages are highlighted.

Chart 3. Information Development Process in Detail



* Group determined by availability, regional specialisations, linguistic competences, importance of exercise and sector-specific nature of research.

Appendix 4 – Appeals Committee

The Appeals Committee meets four times a year and includes senior members of staff and external assessors. The Appeals Committee represents an external source of objective evaluation and comment from a selection of professional representatives.

This committee serves the following functions:

- To consider appeals received by NARIC and to advise on courses of action to ensure fair recognition.
- To analyse and validate information as a consequence of specific cases.
- To meet quarterly, with a mandate to meet more frequently in extraordinary cases.

The Appeals Committee will be served by UK NARIC whereby designated Information Officers responsible for the enquiry present the case and the sources of information to the Committee along with the nature of the appeal.

The Appeals Committee will examine each case and determine the appropriate course of action, based on their body of knowledge and experience in credential evaluation, quality assurance and international education. The potential decisions of the Committee fall into three categories:

- Decision to amend assessment – the case for adjusting the level of the award relative to the UK education system is agreed upon unanimously.
- Decision to undertake further targeted research – the case remains uncertain, with a number of concerns raised. The NARIC team concerned is then provided with specific points to follow up and present at the following Committee Meeting.
- Decision to leave assessment unchanged – the case is not strong enough to merit changes to the existing evaluation.

Appendix 5 – Synthesised European Qualification Framework Level Descriptors (21/04/06)

Level 1

Qualifications at Level 1 require basic general knowledge. These qualifications recognise the capability of the holder to apply basic skills to carry out simple tasks and to work and study under direct supervision in a familiar and managed context.

Level 2

Qualifications at Level 2 require basic knowledge of a field of study or work. These qualifications recognise the capability of the holder to apply basic cognitive and practical skills to use relevant information and to solve problems using simple rules. They also recognise the capability to work and study under supervision with some autonomy in simple and stable contexts.

Level 3

Qualifications at Level 3 require knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study. These qualifications recognise the capability of the holder to apply a range of cognitive and practical skills to solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools and materials and information. They also recognise the capability to take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study in stable contexts and to adapt their own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems

Level 4

Qualifications at Level 4 require practical and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts relevant to a field of work or study. These qualifications recognise the capability of the holder to apply specialised cognitive and practical skills in generating solutions to problems and to self-manage within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change. They also recognise the capability to supervise routine work of others and take some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities.

Level 5

Qualifications at Level 5 require comprehensive practical and theoretical knowledge within a specialised field of work or study and an awareness of the limits to the knowledge base. These qualifications recognise the capability of the holder to apply a comprehensive range of specialised cognitive and practical skills to develop creative solutions to concrete and abstract problems and to manage and supervise work and study activities in situations where

there is unpredictable change. They also recognise the capability review and develop performance of self and others.

Achievements at level 5 in higher education learning contexts are also described by the descriptors for the short cycle within the first cycle in the EHEA framework³.

Level 6

Qualifications at Level 6 require advanced practical and theoretical knowledge of a field of work or study involving a critical understanding of theories and principles. These qualifications recognise the capability of the holder to apply advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, in a complex and specialised field of work or study and to manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work and study contexts. They also recognise the capability lead groups in work and study.

Achievements at level 6 in higher education learning contexts are also described by the descriptors for the first cycle in the EHEA framework⁴.

Level 7

Qualifications at Level 7 require highly specialised practical and theoretical knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking. These qualifications recognise the capability to apply critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields and to apply specialist research and problem-solving skills, including analysis and synthesis, to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields. They also recognise the capability to demonstrate leadership and innovation in work and study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches and to take responsibility for continuing personal professional development, for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and for reviewing the strategic performance of teams.

Achievements at level 7 in higher education learning contexts are also described by the descriptors for the second cycle in the EHEA framework⁵.

Level 8

Qualifications at Level 8 require knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields. These qualifications recognise the capability to apply the most advanced and specialised research techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, to solve critical problems and to extend and redefine existing knowledge and/or professional practice. They

³ EHEA framework reference

⁴ EHEA framework reference

⁵ EHEA framework reference

also recognise the capability to demonstrate substantial leadership, innovation and autonomy in work, study and research contexts and to demonstrate scholarly integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes.

Achievements at level 8 in higher education learning contexts are also described by the descriptors for the third cycle in the EHEA framework⁶.

⁶ EHEA framework reference