

# Qualifications Recognition Going Global: An International Convention under UNESCO's Auspices

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić

## Abstract

In November 2019, UNESCO's General Conference adopted a Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications. The convention is the result of preparatory work by experts, amendments put forward by governments, and consensus reached on the text over the period of eight years. This article presents its origins, the innovations that the convention brings to international mobility and migration, and the next steps in its implementation.

On November 25, 2019, in Paris, government representatives of UNESCO's 193 member states adopted the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education. The fact that consensus could be reached between countries as diverse as UNESCO's member states about what is primarily a national prerogative such as qualifications recognition and quality assurance in higher education should not be underestimated.

The main value of the Convention, however, lies in its basic principles. It underscores the greater rights of applicants to have their qualifications assessed for the purpose of further study or employment. Recognition should be nondiscriminatory and done in a fair, transparent, and timely manner. Recognition can be withheld *only* if the competent authorities of the receiving country provide evidence of substantial differences between the higher education systems of the sending and receiving countries.

The new elements introduced by the convention are reliability, consistency, and complementarity between qualifications recognition, quality assurance, and qualifications frameworks. It addresses nontraditional learning modes, puts forward learning outcomes, and introduces validation of prior learning. The greatest focus is on transparent information and networking, thus launching an international community of recognition practitioners and inviting them to cooperate closely with international quality assurance practitioners (who are more advanced in terms of international networking). While in the 1990s, recognition and quality assurance operated on parallel tracks, in the present process, mutual confidence and trust between the two are basic parameters for success.

Despite being an international treaty—the only existing one for higher education, the stipulations of this legal instrument are not supranational, as often feared. For most of its articles, the text that was adopted underlines that the stipulations should be based on existing national laws and includes the reassuring caveat for implementation “to the extent possible.” The convention itself offers a much-needed global framework for qualifications recognition, with a right for states parties to appeal.

## Greater Equity for the Most Vulnerable

As an important equity issue, the convention addresses the needs of a vulnerable segment of the population, refugees and displaced persons, by offering them opportunities to continue their studies in the countries that will accept them. (According to UNESCO, there were 70.8 million forcibly displaced people in the world in 2018, with only 3 percent of eligible refugees having equitable access to higher education studies.) The convention comes with a concrete instrument, the UNESCO Qualifications Passport for Refugees and Vulnerable Migrants (UQP), based on the methodology of the existing European Qualifications Passport initiative promoted by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT).

UNESCO successfully ran the first pilot of the UQP in September 2019, in Zambia, in cooperation with the Zambia Qualifications Authority, NOKUT, and UNHCR. Thirty potential passport holders were tested and 12 were selected to receive the UQP. The UQP does not replace a missing qualification, but has a validity of five years, which offers holders the opportunity to adapt to their new environment.

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### Next Steps

The next steps for the Global Convention will consist in distributing certified copies of the convention to member states and beginning the ratification process and its entry into force, once the 20<sup>th</sup> ratification instrument is deposited at UNESCO. Major receiving countries of international students such as Australia and Canada and a large number of European countries, among which Norway is the most vocal, have expressed great enthusiasm about the convention and are likely to speed up the ratification process. The Asia-Pacific region (especially China, Japan, and South Korea) has been most supportive, as well as most African countries. It is regrettable that the United States, no longer a member of UNESCO, will not be part of the implementation of this treaty.

### Toward a Better World?

Why was a global convention adopted at a time when higher education internationalization is changing as a result of populism and xenophobia and a general decrease of trust in public institutions? One of the reasons is a sense of ownership. The Global Convention will be implemented in close cooperation with the Council of Europe/UNESCO 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention and the recently revised regional conventions (2011 Tokyo Convention for Asia-Pacific; the 2014 Addis Ababa Convention for Africa; the 2019 Buenos Aires Convention for Latin America and the Caribbean, replacing the regional conventions of the 1970s). Another is the need to acknowledge the unbundling of higher education and its digitization, including new credentialing, through a global framework for recognition. A third reason is ever-increasing migrations. According to the International Migration Report, in 2017 there was an estimated 258 million people living in a country other than their country of birth, an increase of 49 percent since 2000. Finally, the convention fulfills UNESCO's objective for universality of higher education diploma recognition and crowns its long-standing activities for equivalence of degrees, which go back to the foundation of its higher education program in 1947.

Although by no means perfect, and with uncertainties as to its effectiveness and impact, the adoption of this particular convention brings hope. At a time when multilateralism is under threat, in a world marked by greater inequalities and societies closing themselves off, it opens the door to a better world for mobile students, researchers, and faculty. Its success will depend on the will of states parties to engage, but, even more, on the readiness of practitioners to share practices across borders. ▲

*Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić is former chief of higher education, UNESCO, and senior advisor for international affairs, Council for Higher Education Accreditation – CHEA. E-mail: [suvalictrumbic@gmail.com](mailto:suvalictrumbic@gmail.com).*