

# Assessment and Recognition of Refugee Credentials

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**A**mong the millions of refugees worldwide are many who either hold postsecondary degrees or are eligible to access higher education. In North America, Europe, and elsewhere, higher education institutions, professional associations, governments, and others have tried to figure out how to reduce or eliminate the barriers that these refugees face in accessing higher education and finding employment that makes use of qualifications that they already hold. Among these barriers are evaluation and recognition of refugees' academic credentials when they are unable to access complete, official documentation. This article examines efforts to address this barrier in Canada and the United States, as well as by UNESCO.

## **Abstract**

The current worldwide refugee crisis has provoked the examination of access and integration of refugees into higher education in host countries. The issues of access to, and assessment and recognition of, educational credentials are crucial for such access. Professional employment for those with higher education credentials is similarly challenging. Some initiatives are showing promise, particularly as UNESCO and the United Nations system in general begin to tackle the challenge on a global scale.

**The Challenge for Refugee Students and Professionals**

For myriad reasons, refugees, asylum seekers, and people displaced by natural disasters are likely to encounter difficulties meeting the requirements for standard evaluation of academic credentials. For instance, they may not be able to take all their documents with them when forced to flee. Obtaining official documents from the issuing institution may be impossible due to the educational system’s incapacity to manage archives and respond to graduates’ requests.

For these individuals, the lack of proof of academic attainment is a challenge that must be overcome, as they seek to build new lives in a new country. Without proof, finding commensurate employment or obtaining the further education they need to build meaningful careers is often impossible. Many become stuck in jobs that do not fully utilize their education, skills, and experience.

**The Lisbon Recognition Convention**

North American and European efforts to address the credentials barrier for displaced migrants stem in large part from a 1997 international agreement called the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, more commonly known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). Section 7 of the LRC commits signatories 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 programs or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence.”

The LRC also helped to codify a series of national information centers for international education qualifications, known collectively as the ENIC–NARIC Networks. Under the LRC, each signatory country must have one national information center that is part of this network. It is within these organizations that much of the recent innovation surrounding assessment and recognition of qualifications for those lacking full official documentation has happened. For example, the ENIC–NARIC Networks across Europe collaborated to develop the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR), an alternative assessment procedure for assessing qualifications using available documentation and interviews of applicants.

**Canadian Responses to the Assessment and Recognition Challenge**

Since the beginning of large-scale resettlement of Syrian refugees in late 2015, Canada has taken strides to improve the recognition of credentials held by refugees. Canada formally ratified the LRC in 2018. The ratification obligates Canada to develop methods of assessing refugee qualifications, even in the absence of full official documentation.

Ahead of Canada’s ratification of the LRC, Canada’s ENIC–NARIC Network member organization, the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC), led high-level discussions with major stakeholders from across Canada on the topic of assessing refugee credentials. The Assessing the Qualifications of Refugees initiative led by CICIC sought to develop best assessment practices within a Canadian context and was funded by the federal government.

One major Canadian initiative to identify and implement such practices comes from World Education Services (WES), a leading credential evaluation organization that operates in Canada and the United States. The WES Gateway Program provides credential assessments to individuals who have been displaced by political unrest, conflict, or natural disasters, and who also lack access to verifiable documents.

During a one-year pilot project, WES created an assessment methodology based on documents in the applicants’ possession and worked with community referral partners to help bring applicants into the program. Based on 45 years’ worth of educational records and sample documents in its database and its expertise in credential evaluation, WES was able to assess credentials where a transcript was available and to “reconstruct” qualifications and offer an assessment in cases where only partial documentation was available. As a result, 337 Syrian refugees received a credential assessment report.

Encouraged by the success of the pilot, WES established a full-scale program that is available to eligible individuals from additional countries. The WES Gateway Program

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was launched in late fall 2018 in Canada, serving clients with education from seven countries where access to academic documents remains problematic: Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, and Venezuela. Over the past year, 452 individuals received assessments through the WES Gateway Program. Sixty of them had the reports sent to postsecondary institutions in Canada.

### US Responses

Attempts to address the assessment and recognition challenge in the United States have been more limited. Progress is hampered by a much larger and diffuse higher education sector, as well as a tougher sociopolitical climate regarding immigration and refugees. A US higher education association, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), convened a working group of experts on the topic of admissions (specifically credential requirements) for refugees in US higher education. In early 2019, AACRAO released a report synthesizing this group's knowledge and recommendations for addressing the credential recognition barrier when admitting refugee students into US colleges and universities.

AACRAO has also teamed up with the University of California, Davis, and the American University of Beirut in Lebanon to develop a cloud-based online storage program for the academic and professional documents of refugees. This storage system is known as the Article 26 Backpack. (Article 26 refers to the article in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guaranteeing all people a right to education.) Documents stored in the Backpack can be accessed anywhere in the world for whatever need, including assessment by a credential evaluation organization, admission to a university, or gaining employment. So far, the program has been piloted mostly in Lebanon with Syrian refugees. There are plans to roll it out more widely, including in the United States.

### Toward Worldwide Responses

Worldwide momentum is growing to ensure that all globally mobile individuals, including refugees, have access to a fair evaluation of academic qualifications. In November 2019, UNESCO ushered in the [Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education](#). Like the LRC and other regional conventions, the Global Convention commits nations to fairly evaluating credentials from other countries. The convention also requires that refugees be given a fair assessment of their qualifications, even in the absence of full documentation. In the face of this momentum and of the increased focus on identifying and implementing best practices in evaluation and recognition, more countries and their higher education institutions are likely to find ways to assess and recognize the qualifications of deserving refugee students and professionals, to the greater benefit of both individuals and the countries in which they settle. ▲

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