

Validating highly educated refugees' qualifications

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Qualification certificates play a central role in the labour market integration of highly educated refugees but validating them presents considerable challenges. Sweden and Norway have introduced some positive developments to address such difficulties.

Whether doctors, teachers, engineers or IT specialists, the highly educated refugees I interviewed in Norway, Sweden and Germany between 2016 and 2017 aspired to continue working within their occupational fields. In order to do so they need to validate their foreign qualifications but the validation process for certain occupations is extremely lengthy, preventing some highly educated refugees from re-entering their professions for years.

Qualifications recognition and validation processes differ substantially between

different occupational groups, with the principal division between occupations regulated by law (for instance, medical doctors and teachers) and non-regulated ones (such as IT engineers). For individuals in non-regulated occupations, the qualifications validation process is often simple and short. For those in legally regulated occupations the experience is very different. In order to be able to continue working as, for instance, medical doctors and teachers, foreign professionals have to obtain national licences, usually needing to provide proof of destination-

country language skills, pass an exam, attend supplementary courses and (often) undergo a period of practical training.

All of the medical doctors and teachers who participated in my research project who embarked upon these licensing processes in Norway, Sweden and Germany described numerous difficulties. Some felt that the required knowledge tests and supplementary training ignored their existing knowledge and experience, and some medical specialists were sceptical that the destination country licence would equal the professional level they had achieved in their home country. Most of the research participants criticised the long duration of the licensing processes.

In Sweden, for instance, foreign teachers require an estimated five to eight years to obtain a Swedish teaching licence. In order to enable migrants to gain faster access to the labour market, the Swedish Public Employment Service, commissioned by the Swedish government and in cooperation with industry partners, established fast-track programmes.¹

Designed for occupations that experience labour shortages, the first programmes were initiated in 2015 and programmes currently exist for migrant chefs, social workers and those in regulated occupations such as teachers. The programme participants undergo a qualifications validation process, occupation-specific Swedish language courses, internships and supplementary theoretical courses. Participants take part in these activities simultaneously, thereby reducing the time it takes to get the national licence. Moreover, the programmes provide participants with an institutional framework that sketches out the steps they need to take in order to reach their goal and offers them guidance along the way.

One such fast-track programme is a 26-week programme aimed at foreign teachers in Malmö, Sweden. This consists of courses in pedagogy and about the Swedish school system that are taught in both Swedish and Arabic (since it is anticipated that most participants are Arabic-speaking), an internship at one of the local schools and a Swedish language course that is tailored for

teachers. Practical work experience enables the individual to enhance their Swedish language skills and establish the professional contacts necessary for future job seeking. Moreover, the decision about whether an individual must undergo a programme of supplementary training for foreign teachers in order to obtain their teaching licence – a decision taken by the Swedish National Agency for Education upon a request to validate their qualifications – can be re-evaluated depending on how that individual performs in the fast-track programme.

Physical possession of certificates

In order to be able to validate their qualifications, highly educated refugees have to be in physical possession of their qualification certificates. Many respondents recounted, however, how they had lost part or all of their certificates in the rubble of their bombed homes or on their journeys. Obtaining new certificates from the educational institutions where they studied was often a nearly insurmountable obstacle – state institutions were often reluctant, unwilling or even legally constrained from issuing educational certificates to individuals abroad.

In order to address this problem, and to meet the requirements of the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) developed a Recognition Procedure for Persons without Verifiable Documentation (also known as the UVD-procedure).² The UVD-procedure is oriented towards individuals with foreign higher education for whom the general recognition procedure is not appropriate, due to either missing, insufficient or unverifiable educational and/or identity documentation. Thereby, it is directed mainly at refugees and persons in a refugee-like situation. The UVD-procedure includes input by one or two NOKUT employees with knowledge about the educational system in the applicant's country of origin and two external experts with subject-specific expertise. An applicant's educational background is verified through a

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questionnaire, an interview and both oral and written assignments relating to the applicant's field of expertise. Although Norway is the only European country with the UVD-procedure, a couple of others, including Sweden, employ similar procedures.

Due to increasing numbers of refugees, the time-consuming and resource-intensive nature of the UVD-procedure, and the fact that an ever expanding group of refugees does not fulfil the requirements for evaluation according to the UVD-procedure, NOKUT has, along with the United Kingdom National Academic Recognition Information Centre, developed a new type of faster, cheaper evaluation procedure for those without verifiable documentation. The new Qualifications Assessment for Refugees³ combines an evaluation of

available documentation and a structured interview carried out by an experienced NOKUT case officer with the applicant.

The attempts outlined here are examples of positive developments aimed at addressing the difficulties of qualification recognition. It remains to be seen how these programmes will continue to evolve and how they can be implemented elsewhere.

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1. <http://bit.ly/SwedishGovt-fasttrack>
2. <http://bit.ly/NOKUT-UVD-procedure>
3. <http://bit.ly/NOKUT-QualPassport-2016>

