

# Policy Paper **37**

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## What a waste: Ensure migrants and refugees' qualifications and prior learning are recognized

**I**n recent years, more people have been moving across borders, voluntarily or forcibly, in search of opportunities that range from better employment to safe haven from persecution and conflict. Education can be an asset for migrants and refugees, but its advantages cannot be realized if the learning and qualifications achieved before moving are not recognized elsewhere. So that migrants and refugees as well as destination countries can reap the full benefits of mobility, all the world's regions are taking steps to improve the process through which qualifications and prior learning are recognized, validated and accredited (**Box 1**).

To ensure migrants' and refugees' inclusion, their qualifications and prior learning must be recognized so that they can continue their education and find employment that corresponds to their skills. But recognition is particularly challenging when learning has occurred outside formal education pathways or when people do not carry proof of their qualifications. Those who have been chased away from their homes or set off for a perilous journey are less likely to carry with them degrees and certificates. Their children may struggle to prove what they have already learned to enable them to enter at the right level in the host country's education system.

Faced with the challenges posed at local, national and international levels by migration and displacement, in September 2016, all 193 United Nations Member States signed the New York Declaration for

Refugees and Migrants to strengthen and refine responsibility-sharing mechanisms (United Nations, 2016). The declaration set in motion two processes addressing the issue of recognition of qualifications and skills: the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees. Both are to be adopted by the end of 2018.

The country-led Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration includes education for the first time in the migration agenda. One of its 23 objectives is dedicated to the facilitation of mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences.

The Global Compact on Refugees, led by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), revisits and updates commitments already made under Article 22 of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees that refugees should receive 'treatment as favourable as possible, and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances with respect to ... the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees' (Art. 22) (**Table 1**).

This paper reviews global progress toward the recognition of qualifications and of prior learning at all education levels and identifies examples where countries have made special provisions for migrants and refugees.



**BOX 1:****Common terms used on recognition of learning outcomes**

**Recognition:** Process of granting official status to skills and competences through (i) award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles); or (ii) grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers, validation of gained skills and/or competences (CEDEFOP, 2011).

**Assessment:** Process of appraising knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences of an individual against predefined criteria (learning expectations, measurement of learning outcomes). Assessment is typically followed by validation and certification (CEDEFOP, 2011).

**Validation:** Confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification (CEDEFOP, 2011).

**Accreditation:** Process of quality assurance through which an education has been approved by the relevant legislative or professional authorities by having met predetermined standards (CEDEFOP, 2011).

**Certification:** Process of issuing a certificate, diploma or title of learning outcomes formally attesting that a set of learning outcomes acquired by an individual have been assessed and validated by a competent body against a predefined standard (CEDEFOP, 2011).

**Qualification:** Formal outcome (certificate, diploma or title) of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent

body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards and/or possesses the necessary competences to do a job in a specific area of work. A qualification confers official recognition of the value of learning outcomes in the labour market and in education and training. A qualification can be a legal entitlement to practise a trade (CEDEFOP, 2011).

**Prior learning:** (i) Formal learning takes place in education and training institutions, is recognised by relevant national authorities and leads to diplomas and qualifications. Formal learning is structured according to educational arrangements such as curricula, qualifications and teaching-learning requirements. (ii) Non-formal learning is also structured according to educational and training arrangements, but more flexible. It usually takes place in community-based settings, the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, non-formal learning can also lead to qualifications and other recognitions. (iii) Informal learning is learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and through interests and activities of individuals. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, competences gained in informal learning can be made visible, and can contribute to qualifications (UIL, 2012).

See the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report glossary for definitions related to migration and displacement.

## RECOGNIZING ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS MAXIMIZES THE BENEFITS OF MOBILITY FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Migrants and refugees need their academic qualifications recognized so that they can find employment abroad that corresponds to their skills, continue learning at the right level, and ensure that any further qualifications earned are accepted when they return to their home country.

Recognition carries clear economic benefits for individuals. In Germany, four years after their arrival in the country, migrants with fully recognized qualifications were around 45 percentage points more likely to be employed and earned hourly

wages around 40% higher than immigrants without recognized qualifications (Brücker et al., 2015). In Italy, results of a survey of 30,000 migrants with a foreign academic degree showed that qualification recognition substantially reduced unemployment (IOM, 2013). The benefits of recognition are not just economic; the recognition process itself can also potentially increase individuals' capacity to learn by building up their self-esteem and confidence, encouraging them to engage in lifelong learning.

Host country governments also have an interest in ensuring efficient use of migrants' and refugees' skills. Over one-third of immigrants with tertiary education in European countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) were overqualified for their jobs – in other words, they were employed at a level below the level of their

**TABLE 1:**  
Recognition of qualifications and prior learning in the two global compacts

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration	
<p><b>OBJECTIVE 18. Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences</b></p> <p>34. We commit to invest in innovative solutions that facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences of migrant workers at all skills levels ... to optimize the employability of migrants in formal labour markets in countries of destination and in countries of origin upon return, as well as to ensure decent work in labour migration. To realize this commitment, we will draw from the following actions:</p> <p>a) Develop standards and guidelines for the mutual recognition of foreign qualifications and non-formally acquired skills in different sectors in collaboration with the respective industries with a view to ensuring worldwide compatibility based on existing models and best practices.</p> <p>b) Promote transparency of certifications and compatibility of National Qualifications Frameworks by agreeing on standard criteria, indicators and assessment parameters, and by creating and strengthening national skills profiling tools, registries or institutions in order to facilitate effective and efficient mutual recognition procedures at all skills levels.</p> <p>c) Conclude bilateral, regional or multilateral mutual recognition agreements or include recognition provisions in other agreements, such as labour mobility or trade agreements, in order to provide equivalence or comparability in national systems, such as automatic or managed mutual recognition mechanisms.</p>	<p>d) Use technology and digitalization to evaluate and mutually recognize skills more comprehensively based on formal credentials as well as non-formally acquired competences and professional experience at all skills levels.</p> <p>...</p> <p>i) Enhance the ability of migrant workers to transition from a job or employer to another by making available documentation that recognizes skills acquired on the job or through training in order to optimize the benefits of upskilling.</p> <p>j) Develop and promote innovative ways to mutually recognize and assess formally and informally acquired skills, including through timely and complementary training to job seekers, mentoring, and internship programmes in order to fully recognize existing credentials and provide certificates of proficiency for the validation of newly acquired skills.</p> <p>k) Establish screening mechanisms of credentials and offer information to migrants on how to get their skills and qualifications assessed and recognized prior to departure, including in recruitment processes or at an early stage after arrival to improve employability.</p> <p>l) Cooperate to promote documentation and information tools, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, that provide an overview of a worker's credentials, skills and qualifications, recognized in countries of origin, transit and destination, in order to enable employers to evaluate the suitability of migrant workers in job application processes.</p>
Global Compact on Refugees	
<p><b>2.1 Education</b></p> <p>69. ... Support will also be provided where needed to facilitate recognition of equivalency of academic, professional and vocational qualifications.</p> <p>...</p> <p><b>2.2 Jobs and livelihoods</b></p> <p>71. Depending on the context, resources and expertise could be contributed to support: ... mapping and recognition of skills and qualifications among refugees and host communities.</p> <p>77. The empowerment of refugee and host community youth, building on their talent, potential and energy, supports resilience and eventual solutions. The active participation and engagement of refugee and host community youth will be supported by States and relevant stakeholders, including through projects that recognize, utilize and develop their capacities and skills, and foster their physical and emotional well-being.</p>	<p>...</p> <p><b>3.3 Complementary pathways for admission to third countries</b></p> <p>95. The three-year strategy on resettlement ... will also include complementary pathways for admission, with a view to increasing significantly their availability and predictability. ... Other contributions in terms of complementary pathways could include ... labour mobility opportunities for refugees, including through the identification of refugees with skills that are needed in third countries. ... Other contributions in terms of complementary pathways could include ... educational opportunities for refugees (including women and girls) through grant of scholarships and student visas, including through partnerships between governments and academic institutions; and labour mobility opportunities for refugees, including through the identification of refugees with skills that are needed in third countries.</p>

formal qualifications – as compared to one-quarter of non-migrants (OECD and European Union, 2015). One of the reasons for overqualification was the lack of recognition of learning outcomes. Immigrants in OECD countries whose qualifications are formally recognized have, on average, a 10 percentage point lower overqualification rate for their job, after accounting for the field of study and the country in which the qualification was obtained (Bonfati et al., 2014).

Nearly one in four immigrants with post-secondary degrees in the United States end up in low-skilled jobs or are unable to find employment. Holding a non-US post-secondary degree increases the risk of low-skilled employment among immigrant graduates by 44% for men and 62% for women. This results in an annual cost of US\$39 billion in foregone wages and US\$10.2 billion in lost taxes (Batalova et al., 2016). Analysis for the *Global Education Monitoring Report* shows that, in OECD countries, only 30% of those with tertiary degrees gained outside Europe and Northern America work in high-skill occupations. Less than 15% reported their level of education matched their jobs, compared to almost 70% among other immigrants who studied in the host country and nearly 75% among natives.

Countries follow different approaches in recognizing foreign academic qualifications. Some countries unilaterally establish a legal right to recognition. In 2016, Austria granted the right to assessment of education certificates and diplomas at all levels through a law on foreign qualification recognition (OECD, 2017). Many countries sign bilateral agreements aiming at equivalence of academic degrees in tertiary education. China, for instance, has agreements with Germany (2002), the United Kingdom (2004) and France (2015) (China Ministry of Education, 2015). But the process of concluding such agreements can be costly, which may discourage some governments from pursuing this approach.

## REGIONAL CONVENTIONS RECOGNIZING ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS ARE GATHERING MOMENTUM BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN

International collaboration is a more cost-effective approach. There is a clear trend towards increasing collaboration at the regional level: a series of conventions have been drawn up in recent years, with the aim of improving on an earlier, relatively ineffective set of conventions dating from the last quarter of the 20th century.

The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Recognition Convention) was adopted in April 1997 and legally ensures qualifications recognition among participating countries (Rauhvargers, 2004). As of August 2018, 54 countries have ratified it, including 7 outside Europe (Australia, Canada, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, New Zealand and Tajikistan) (Council of Europe, 2018).

European and partner countries established a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010. This was the culmination of the Bologna Process, begun in 1999, involving the European Commission, the Council of Europe and representatives of tertiary education institutions, quality assurance agencies, students, staff and employers. Currently, 48 countries take part. The Bologna Process and associated reforms made it easier to recognize qualifications among EHEA countries. But it did not make recognition automatic – in other words, it did not ensure that applicants holding a qualification of a certain level had an automatic right to be considered for entry to the labour market or a programme of further study at the next level (Nuffic, 2018).

The target of achieving automatic recognition by 2020 was largely compromised by the absence of transparent quality assurance processes (Skjerven and Meier, 2018). With higher and upper secondary education recognition procedures still, too often, ‘complicated, expensive, time-consuming’ in some countries, the European Union has set a target of mutual recognition for its members by 2025 (European Commission, 2018).

Good practice and common understanding of recognition further require strong country involvement and good information systems to turn international agreements into national law. The European Network of Information Centres in the European Region/ National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (ENIC/NARIC) is an initiative in 55 countries to improve transparency in international recognition procedures through information on national qualifications.

Conventions in other regions have also been gathering pace in recent years, in spite of weak or non-existent governance mechanisms (UNESCO, 2016). The Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education, adopted in 2011, was ratified by China and Australia in 2014 and New Zealand in 2016, while its recent ratification by Japan and the Republic of Korea (in December 2017) brought the convention into force (UNESCO, 2018). In 2015, the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to create a single market and allow the free flow of skilled labour. ASEAN is receiving EU technical assistance to create a qualifications reference framework, quality assurance mechanism and credit transfer system. It also aims to introduce an academic mobility initiative based on lessons learned from Europe's Erasmus+ mobility programme.

The 2014 UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States (known as the 'Addis Convention') entitles applicants to a fair recognition of their qualifications within a reasonable time limit, according to transparent, coherent and reliable procedures (UNESCO, 2014). It foresees the establishment of mechanisms for accreditation and quality assurance, but codes of good practice or recommendations and guidelines will also need to be drawn up (Woldegiorgis and Knight, 2017). As of December 2018, six countries have ratified the Convention (Congo, Djibouti, Gambia, Mauritius, Senegal and Togo). It is expected to enter into force in 2019 with four more ratifications.

African countries have also engaged in mutual recognition procedures at the sub-regional level. The six countries of the East African Community established a Common Higher Education Area in 2017 based on regional quality assurance systems and the East African Qualifications Framework with the aim of developing regional standards, guidelines and national commissions and councils. Students will be able to enrol in any of the region's 110 universities without a special examination, and credits will be transferable (Ligami, 2017; Waruru, 2017).

At the third Regional Conference on Higher Education in June 2018, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean reaffirmed their duty to foster stronger regional integration in tertiary education and approved the Cordoba Charter to create a Latin American and Caribbean Higher Education Area (CRES, 2018). A revision of the Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean is expected to be adopted in 2019. Finally, Arab countries agreed on a revised version of the 1978 Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States, expected to be adopted in 2019.

With the aim of building on these regional recognition conventions, UNESCO has drafted a Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications to be tabled for adoption in 2019. It aims to 'secure inter-regional recognition of qualifications in a fair, transparent and non-discriminatory manner' (UNESCO, 2017). In addition, it aims to provide a normative commitment to higher education quality assurance bodies. States party to the convention will commit to introducing procedures for the recognition of qualifications giving access to higher education and higher education qualifications. They will also have to establish recognition authorities, provide public information about national tertiary education systems, and offer qualifications holders the right of assessment (UNESCO, 2015, 2017). The parallel regional recognition conventions will continue to coexist with the Global Convention to address issues that are specific to each region. The Global Convention would represent a milestone of international cooperation.

Regional conventions are only one route to the recognition of academic qualifications. Among the efforts undertaken towards improving transparency and information in recognition procedures, UNESCO has also advanced the concept of world reference levels. This has involved a comparative study of qualifications across countries; an analysis of level descriptors; and a study on the way qualifications frameworks relate to each other, with a focus on referencing processes (ETF/CEDEFOP/UNESCO, 2018).

## THE RECOGNITION PROCESS FOR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES WHO CANNOT PROVE THEIR ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS NEEDS TO BE IMPROVED

Migrants (especially those who are irregular and undocumented) and refugees may be unable to provide physical evidence of their qualifications and certificates. In conflict contexts, displaced people may be unable to carry with them any or all of their documents when they flee. Their contact with home institutions may also be constrained, since the latter may also be affected by conflict or may refuse to provide documents. There is insufficient information on how many refugees lack any form of education documentation at all. Partial documentation may be sufficient to overcome problems and organizations in host countries need to be flexible (Loo, 2016).

The draft UNESCO Global Higher Education Recognition Convention enshrines the right of people without proper documentation to apply for the recognition of qualifications and envisages actions for the recognition of partial studies and qualifications held by these groups.

Article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention calls on signatories to take steps to recognize refugee qualifications that cannot be fully documented. Yet by 2016, over two-thirds of signatories had taken few or no such measures (UNESCO and Council of Europe, 2016). To address this issue, the Lisbon Recognition Convention committee adopted in November 2017 a new Recommendation on Qualifications held by Refugees, Displaced

Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation (UNESCO, 2017).

Following the refugee influx in Europe since 2014, ENIC-NARICs have been faced with an increased number of requests for qualification recognition (ESU, 2017). The ENIC network, in a project led by Norway, has established a toolkit for the recognition of refugees' qualifications involving several principles, tools and approaches that institutions should use to evaluate insufficiently documented qualifications, based on the 2017 Lisbon Convention Recommendation (ENIC/NARIC, 2018; NOKUT, 2018). An additional methodological tool is provided by the chapter in the European Area of Recognition project e-manual dedicated to refugees (ENIC/NARIC, 2014).

Some countries have adjusted procedures to reflect refugees' needs. In Flanders, Belgium, the fees for the recognition procedure were waived for refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced people. An adapted procedure is also offered when full documentary evidence of qualifications is unavailable. In 2016, the Flemish NARIC and the Association of Flemish Universities launched a pilot project towards recognition for master's degree students in science, engineering, economics and business. Applicants attend a limited number of courses or a seminar in English in a discipline related to the area of study, go to practical training sessions, and write a paper. Academic supervisors are expected to supply NARIC with advice on students' qualifications (European Students' Union, 2017).

In Italy, the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research has invited higher education institutions 'to make all necessary efforts to introduce internal procedures and mechanisms to evaluate qualifications of refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, even in cases where all or part of the relative documents certifying the qualifications are missing'. The National Coordination for the Evaluation of Refugee Qualifications, an informal network of experts, has been set up, with the aim of sharing 'evaluation procedures, problem cases, sources of information and methodological practices' to help evaluate qualifications held by refugees with or without documentation (CIMEA, 2018).



Poland established a new process for recognition of the qualifications of people who lack documentation in 2015. It consists of an interview with a committee of teachers appointed by the education superintendent, which aims to assess the educational background of the interviewees. But with no cases reported within a year of its introduction, it was not clear whether the process had been communicated to potential beneficiaries, which is a common problem in programmes of this sort (Duda, 2017).

In 2013, Norway introduced a national Recognition Procedure for Persons without Verifiable Documentation. Expert committees appointed by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education use academic assessments, take-home assignments and mapping of work history to assess skills (NOKUT, 2016a). An applicant survey suggested that over half the refugees whose skills were recognized in 2013 either found a related job or entered further education (OECD, 2016b).

However, greater numbers of refugees entering the country meant the number of applications to be processed increased, and more and more frequently, refugees could not be assessed according to the criteria foreseen in the procedure. This gave rise to a new type of assessment, the Qualifications Passport, which uses an interview as well as an evaluation of available documents and a self-assessment by the candidates as basis for the evaluation. In addition to assessing qualifications, the passport provides information on credible relevant competences like work experience, language skills, membership in professional organizations and online courses. It also gives the refugees individual advice for further study in the host country (NOKUT, 2016b; Mozetic, 2018).

In 2015, the Norway and United Kingdom NARICs put forward a European Qualifications Passport for Refugees with a streamlined methodology and portability of results from assessments across borders. In 2017, based on methodology developed in Norway, the Council of Europe developed the project in partnership with ministries or ENICs/NARICs in Greece, Italy, Norway and the United Kingdom for a European Qualifications Passport for Refugees, which provides an assessment of post-secondary qualifications based on available documentation and a structured interview. It includes information on work experience and

language proficiency. In 2017, as part of a pilot exercise in Greece, 92 refugees were interviewed and 73 were issued with a qualifications passport. Armenia, Canada, France, Germany and the Netherlands are joining the second phase of the project (Council of Europe, 2018; UNHCR, 2018). Norway also partnered with Lebanon and Turkey in 2017 to test the Passport methodology outside Europe (HOPES, 2018).

In Sweden, there are two recognition tracks with different outcomes. Under the first track, applicants get full recognition eventually if they can provide at least one of two official qualification documents or a verification of their qualifications. They then have to fill in an alternative, more thorough application form relating to the missing documents. Under the second track, where there is no official qualification documents or possibility of verification, applicants may be able to provide some supportive documentation, such as a student identity card, with the ultimate aim of obtaining a background paper. This describes the applicant's educational background and can be used 'as a basis for further validation' (Sweden Council for Higher Education, 2018).

Canada and the United States have highly decentralized education systems. The federal government plays no direct role in credential assessment and the information centres in each country play only a coordinating role and have no supervisory authority. The Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials has published a set of best practices and guidelines for establishing a qualifications assessment procedure for refugees without documents which includes 5 different approaches, 13 recommended best practices and guidelines, and a practical worksheet (TAICEP, 2018).

One of these approaches was followed by World Education Services (WES), a non-profit organization, which implemented a pilot project that examined any Syrian refugee request for recognition accompanied by at least one from a range of possible types of evidence of previous study. For instance, a complete or partial transcript or degree certificate would be assessed, whether an original, a photocopy, or an electronic copy. At the end of the process, WES issued an advisory report on the nature of the credential and its equivalency in Canada and information on the method used and the Syrian educational system to assist the

interpretation of results. Based on the results of the pilot, it will extend the service to refugees from other countries and will implement a similar pilot in the United States (WES, 2018).

In the United States, the Association for International Credential Evaluation Professionals supports best practices and training in recognizing and evaluating refugee qualifications (EUA, 2018).

Recognition commitments for refugees are also beginning to appear in low and middle income countries, where the majority of refugees reside. At the regional ministerial meeting in December 2017, education ministers of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) included in their declaration a call upon all member states (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda) to 'ratify and domesticate the Addis Convention as a basis for recognition of refugee and returnees' qualifications' (IGAD Declaration, 2017).

## RECOGNITION OF ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS ALSO AFFECTS PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Recognition of education credentials can also pose problems for migrant and displaced children and youth in primary and secondary education.

In Sweden, the Education Act has special provisions on unaccompanied minors from the age of seven. They have the right to enrol in upper secondary school and be assessed and placed at the appropriate level within two months of arrival in the country. School attendance can also enable them to receive prolonged permits of residence when asylum is not given permanently. Guidance material is provided to school staff, focusing on literacy, mathematics, specific subject content knowledge and past experiences (Sweden National Agency for Education 2018a; 2018b).

In Turkey, children undergo an equivalence assessment by the Provincial Education Directorate to determine the appropriate grade in which to enrol. When no documentation is available, the determination is

based on an interview or a short written assessment (ECRE, 2017; UNHCR, 2017). The government relaxed documentation requirements for Syrian nationals wishing to enrol in tertiary education and provided for the recognition of secondary graduation certificates issued by Syrian authorities. The Ministry of National Education also made special provision for those who had completed grade 12 in temporary education centres to sit for ministry-administered examinations that conferred certificates recognized in Turkish university applications (Yavcan and El-Ghali, 2017).

In the Kurdistan region, Iraq, access to university requires equivalency recognition of students' high school certificates. The Ministry of Education can issue a temporary equalization based on a stamped copy of the Syrian diploma, which allows students to register. In theory, students need to present the original document within 20 days to receive official equalization, but in previous years, the period for submission has been extended up until the time of graduation. However, in the 2018/19 academic year, the Ministry issued a new instruction, which no longer allows for temporary equalization, creating a serious protection concern for refugees who may risk returning to Syria or obtaining their original certificate by dangerous methods in order to access tertiary education.

In Lebanon, out-of-school children sit for a placement test or may enter a bridging programme before enrolling in the appropriate primary school grade. At the secondary school level, they need to provide their grade 9 certificate to resume their studies. However, those who hold certificates from education institutions in areas previously controlled by the Syrian opposition may face challenges, as the curriculum used in those areas is not recognized. Likewise, while there has been progress overall in recognizing the equivalence of grade 12 certificates to enter university, it has been reported that students who sat for the grade 12 examination in opposition-held areas have enrolled in vocational schools at grade 11 and studied for 2 years to overcome enrolment constraints.

In Costa Rica, the Ministry of Public Education and UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding in 2014 for access to primary and secondary education and the recognition of qualifications for refugees and asylum seekers (MIRPS, 2017). The Mexican



Commission of Assistance to Refugees made it possible for refugees to have their primary and secondary education recognized in 2012. Those who cannot present the original, certified document may eventually take a general knowledge examination enabling them to be placed at the correct educational level (Cruz Leo et al, 2015). In Panama, the National Office for the Attention of Refugees, with the support of UNHCR, drafted a ministerial decree in 2015 to regulate the recognition of academic diplomas and overcome some of the challenges that refugees face in accessing education.

In Western Cape, South Africa, district offices of the Education Department have established a placement committee to determine the most suitable grade for the admission of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees who have no documentary evidence (Western Cape Government, 2013).

At the last IGAD meeting, the Ministers of Education of the IGAD Member states signed an agreement to 'recognise and validate the qualifications of refugees and returnees across all levels of education' (IGAD, 2017)

Non-formal education programmes may also be recognized. During the conflict in Chechnya, Russian Federation, in 2000, which resulted in large-scale displacement to Ingushetia, an emergency education programme was delivered by the International Rescue Committee (IRC). IRC collaborated with the Ministry of Education in Chechnya and Ingushetia to allow all internally displaced children from Chechnya to sit for final examinations and obtain formal qualifications (UNICEF, 2015).

A special case are the stateless who lack a recognized nationality. For some, this is due to past or current migration. About 700,000 live in Côte d'Ivoire, brought as labourers from neighbouring countries in colonial times. Access to primary school requires proof of nationality, although schools' goodwill may overcome this barrier in practice (UNHCR, 2015). Secondary and tertiary enrolment requires birth certificates, identity cards and residence permits, which they may lack (Nonnenmacher and Yonemura, 2018).

## **BOTH INDIVIDUALS AND COUNTRIES CAN BENEFIT FROM PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS RECOGNITION**

Recognition of professional qualifications serves to determine whether the holder possesses the required skills and competencies to pursue a particular profession or career in the host country (OECD, 2014).

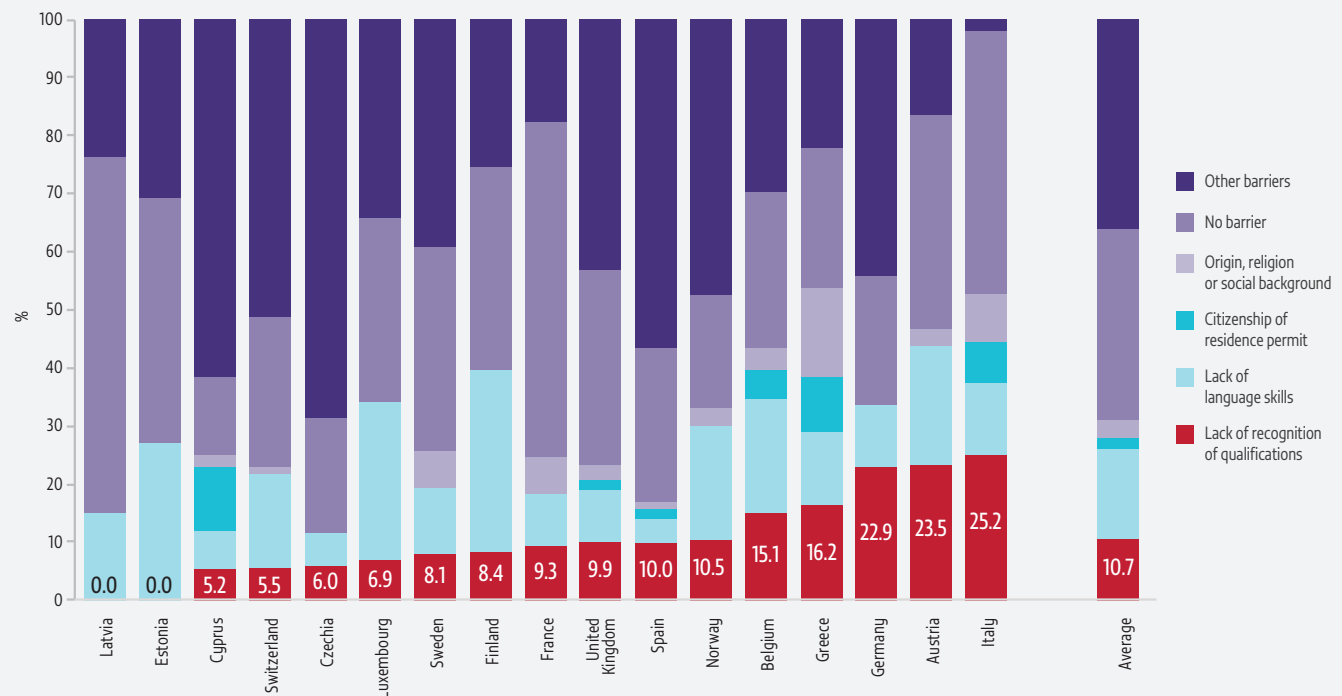
Lack of recognition, along with limitations on the right to work, may seriously affect opportunities for refugees in host countries. Analysis of the European Labour Survey for the 2019 *Global Education Monitoring Report* showed that limited recognition of qualifications was the main impediment for almost one in eight immigrants, who often rate it above inadequate language skills, discrimination, visa restrictions or limited social networks as a challenge (**Figure 1**).

The complexity of having professional credentials recognized is also often mentioned as one of the main obstacles migrants encounter in getting employment in Australia (Wagner and Childs, 2006) and the United States (Batalova and Fix, 2008; McHugh and Morawski 2017).

## **RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AND SKILLS REMAINS FRAGMENTED**

The recognition of professional qualifications and skills takes different forms but can be roughly grouped into two main categories: an indirect assessment of documents, or a direct assessment of skills subject to standards. These standards may be set at the level of the individual employer, the sector (e.g. groups of employers or associations of professionals), or the country (e.g. national qualification frameworks), or at the bilateral, regional or even global level (Braňka, 2016). Procedures and agencies involved in recognition also vary according to the nature of the profession (e.g. whether it is regulated or not) and the way in which learning outcomes were obtained (e.g. through formal, non-formal or informal learning). Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) degrees

**FIGURE 1:**  
**Non-recognition of qualifications is the key obstacle for one in eight immigrant job-seekers in Europe**  
 Major obstacles for immigrants in finding a suitable job, selected European Union countries, 2014



Source: GEM Report team analysis based on the 2014 European Union Labour Force Survey.

and certificates may be less portable than their academic counterparts, due to the greater variability of these systems.

Recognition systems are often fragmented, involving multiple departments and authorities (CEDEFOP, 2016). In Canada, 13 provincial/territorial jurisdictions and 55 government departments/ministries as well as 5 provincially mandated assessment agencies participate in credential assessment, together with no fewer than 400 regulatory bodies, 2 private assessment agencies and over 270 post-secondary institutions (IOM, 2013). Recognition bodies are also frequently disconnected from, and unrelated to, bodies responsible for integration and employment (OECD, 2014).

Traditionally, countries have assessed skills and competencies through unilateral processes. This kind of assessment has been somewhat arbitrary, because the process by which a country decides which skills and qualifications it will recognize tends to be ad hoc

(Keevy et al., 2010; ILO, 2007). Unilateral processes carry various disadvantages, often stemming from lack of coordination. For example, Bangladesh dropped a manufacturing vocational training course from an EU-funded intervention when it was found that companies in Italy, the relevant destination country, were hiring not based on pre-departure skills assessment but instead based on employer assessment of motivation and adaptation skills, and then providing intense on-the-job training to the migrants chosen for employment (Charpin and Aiolfi, 2011).

Mutual recognition agreements, which involve an agreement on reciprocal recognition of certifications and competences, can be a better solution. In the ideal scenario, qualifications or licences are automatically recognized, with no additional assessment or training requirements. The Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Arrangement between Australia and New Zealand offers automatic recognition of the occupations it covers. A bilateral arrangement between France and

Quebec, Canada, has established a basis for developing at least 70 mutual recognition agreements for skilled occupations in regulated professions (including accountants, architects, dentists, doctors, engineers, lawyers and nurses), trades (such as restaurant and construction services) and functions (such as insurance and real estate agents). It provides for automatic recognition of licences when there is overall equivalence in the practices and formal qualifications and learning programmes required to get a licence (Mendoza et al., 2017). The Philippines' Technical Education and Skills Development Authority is working with Gulf States and Hong Kong, China, to develop mutual qualification recognition agreements for emigrant workers and has been carrying out testing and certification of expatriates in destination countries (de la Rama, 2018).

Regional economic integration agreements have encouraged the development of mutual standards and the abolition of work permits to facilitate mobility among skilled professionals. ASEAN has signed mutual recognition arrangements in seven occupations, but implementation through regulations, plans and procedures has encountered difficulties. By 2017, only seven engineers had gone through the full procedure to register in a destination country, and Malaysia and Singapore are the only countries completing the implementation steps (Mendoza and Sugiyarto, 2017). Under the Common Market Protocol, East African Community partner states commit to harmonize and mutually recognize academic and professional qualifications to facilitate the free movement of service providers and have signed agreements for accountants, architects and engineers (Kago and Masinde, 2017). The EU's Professional Qualifications Directive allows architects, dentists, doctors, midwives, nurses, pharmacists and veterinary surgeons who hold an approved qualification to practise in any member state (Sumption et al., 2013). About 500,000 decisions were made under the directive between 2005 and 2015, 84% of which granted full recognition of qualifications (Mendoza et al., 2017).

However, automatic recognition agreements, such as those within the EU, involved a long process of harmonizing standards and establishing quality assurance mechanisms and an even longer process of economic and political integration. Establishing and maintaining such agreements requires substantial

political commitment and resources (IOM, 2013). Less than one-quarter of global migrants are covered by a bilateral recognition agreement (Crespo Cuaresma et al., 2015).

A few agreements allow intraregional mobility through regional qualification frameworks. Within the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Single Market and Economy, qualified people in the Caribbean can move and work freely with a Certificate of Recognition of CARICOM Skills Qualification. While university graduates can obtain the certificate on the basis of their degrees, selected professions, including nurses and teachers, are also eligible if they meet some additional requirements (World Bank, 2009). Since the system came into effect in 1996, 16,000 certificates have been issued (CARICOM, 2017).

Another route into regulated professions with insufficiently harmonized international standards or underdeveloped quality assurance is partial recognition. Applicants may have to pass an examination, work under supervision for a period or refrain from performing certain functions. The Washington Accord is an example of a non-regional multilateral initiative that recognizes substantial equivalence in professional engineering qualifications but gives national authorities discretion to mandate extended periods of partial licensure (Hawthorne, 2013).

## PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION RECOGNITION NEEDS TO BE SIMPLER AND MORE FLEXIBLE FOR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Obstacles to the recognition of professional qualifications include legal concerns and public safety issues, which may also pose limitations to the right to work for foreigners. Immigrants whose qualifications are not recognized may not be able to legally practise in regulated professions, such as teaching and nursing, and often occupy jobs that underutilize their skills. Yet recognition is in the public interest; for instance, vacancies in the health and education sectors exist in many countries, which could be filled by immigrants if their skills were recognized (Girard and Smith, 2012). In Canada, only one-quarter of foreign-educated immigrants with relevant qualifications were working

in a regulated profession (Sumption et al., 2013). In the United States, over one-third of migrants with a degree in education were not working in the sector, compared to less than 15% of natives (Batalova et al., 2016).

Recognition systems often do not meet immigrants' needs (Cangiano, 2014; Lodigiani and Sarli, 2017). In a survey of 13 European countries, only a minority of highly educated migrants had applied for recognition (OECD, 2014). Immigrants may be unable or unwilling to invest the resources required by complex, time-consuming and costly processes (CEDEFOP, 2016; Hawthorne, 2013) or they may just not be aware that such processes exist. Moreover, recognition systems usually identify competences and then validate them, a process which requires original certificates or evidence of attainment that may be unavailable.

Some countries have introduced legislation to improve recognition procedures. In 2012, Germany passed the Federal Recognition Act. Foreign nationals can gain recognition regardless of residence status or citizenship. They can make a legal claim for recognition and receive a decision within three months. Professional qualifications obtained abroad are checked for compatibility with German professional requirements. The law covers around 600 occupational groups (Kovacheva and Grewe, 2015).

Germany has also developed different approaches to provide concise, easily accessible information in foreign languages, as well as centres and networks to assist applicants with recognition procedures (IOM, 2013). The Recognition in Germany website and app, accessible in 9 languages, receive more than 1 million visitors per year (Rietig, 2016). Meanwhile, the IQ Network (Integration through qualifications), established in 2005, has evolved into 16 state networks, with over 70 counselling centres, which help applicants through the recognition process but also teach intercultural skills to employment office and job centre staff (IQ Network, 2018). In 2016, 41% of people receiving guidance at IQ initial counselling centres were refugees and asylum seekers (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). The chambers of commerce and industry (Industrie- und Handelskammer, IHK) established a centre for foreign skills approval (FOSA), which processes

applications for all its members, making decisions more consistent across states and professions (Rietig, 2016).

In Austria, Du kannst was (You have skills), targets low-qualified immigrants, enabling even those without formal education to sit the same examinations as general vocational students and obtain certification (Souto-Otero and Villalba-Garcia, 2015). In Sweden, government, unions and employer organizations have set up a comprehensive programme, which covers 31 professions and provides support not only to skills assessment, validation and recognition but also to guidance, work placements, training, apprenticeships and language learning (European Parliament, 2018).

Governments should ensure that agencies abide by fair, transparent procedures and adhere to best practices. For example, Ontario (Canada) introduced a Fairness Commissioner in 2007 to ensure fair access to regulated professions for those with foreign qualifications (Owen and Lowe, 2008). Assessment agencies, licensing bodies and academic institutions can also harmonize requirements and procedures to streamline the submission of documents to multiple entities. The Care for Nurses Program funded by the Ontario Government and the Government of Canada has since 2001 helped over 3,600 internationally educated nurses from more than 140 countries to prepare examinations, upgrade skills, plan careers and look for work (Care Centre, 2018).

## RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IS STILL INADEQUATE

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) identifies, documents, assesses and certifies mainly non-formal and informal learning outcomes against standards used in formal education and training. It emphasizes that learning should be recognized based on outcomes, rather than on how, when or where the learning occurred. UNESCO has developed Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning, which call on countries to recognize and validate all types of learning and 'develop or improve structures

and mechanisms for the recognition of all forms of learning' (UIL, 2012).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has also published a learning package to support countries in the recognition of prior learning (ILO, 2018). A skill recognition procedure involves the evaluation of documents (e.g. certificates, portfolios, CVs and letters of recommendation) and a direct assessment of skills (e.g. through observation, interviews or testing against agreed standards). Following the process, skills may be recognized fully, partially or not at all.

The RPL process is in many countries still at an early stage of development, especially in youth and adult basic education (UNESCO UIL, 2018). Very few countries have comprehensive and well-structured RPL systems. In 2016, out of 36 European countries, 4 had implemented a single approach covering all sectors (Denmark, France, Italy and Spain), while 13 had developed sector-specific approaches (including Germany, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom) (CEDEFOP, 2017). The recognition of competencies acquired through non-formal or informal learning leads to the award of a national qualification or professional title in just 16 of 36 OECD countries (OECD, 2017).

In Bangladesh, RPL is available for certifications in TVET only, linked to the national qualifications framework (World Bank, 2016). In India, RPL is associated with the National Skills Qualification Framework (National Skill Development Agency, 2016), which sees RPL as a component serving the national objective of moving towards a lifelong learning society. It has thus become a crucial element of the flagship scheme of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (India MSDE, 2018)

Brazil, where about 93 million of adults have not completed basic education, introduced the New Youth and Adult Educational Project, which provides opportunities to learn through an electronic platform. In this programme, the recognition, validation and accreditation process is used mainly for providing non-formal certification (UIL, 2018).

In South Africa, a national policy for implementing RPL was introduced in 2013, covering TVET and higher

education (South Africa Qualifications Authority, 2015). The South African government considers RPL to have the potential to redress the discrimination suffered by those who had no or limited access to education and training opportunities under the apartheid regime (Jung, 2015).

In the United Arab Emirates, RPL has been developed as a priority of the National Qualifications Authority. It is referred to in the Qualifications Framework for the Emirates Handbook and supported by an RPL Charter (NQA, 2012).

## RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IS A CHALLENGE FOR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Where migrants' and refugees' non-formal and informal learning is not recognized, validated and accredited, it compromises their ability to gain access to decent work or further education and training (Singh, 2018). But many systems, while targeting disadvantaged groups, are not suited to the needs of migrants and refugees. Refugees and migrants often need to adapt or upgrade their knowledge and skills to the working standards and culture in the host labour market, especially those who have been unable to work for years due to exile and lengthy asylum procedures. Returning to training to get a degree or certificate could give them access to the labour market but proving their skills in order to do so can be difficult.

A review of EU-funded validation projects found that only 6 out of 124 explicitly mentioned migrants in their overviews. Likewise, an analysis of the 2014 European Inventory country fiches showed that most countries had validation arrangements targeting employees in specific sectors or applicants to formal or adult education, while migrants or refugees were a dominant user group in just 6 out of 24 countries (Souto-Otero and Villalba-Garcia, 2015). Only one-third of 36 European countries had validation initiatives specifically targeted at migrants (CEDEFOP, 2017). France, for example, does not target migrants in its very well developed RPL system launched in 2002 (Validation d'acquis d'expérience, VAE).

Although elements of skills assessment exist in integration programmes for refugees in several countries, a systemic approach is lacking (European Commission, 2017). Under the Federal Recognition Act, Germany offers opportunities to identify and evaluate undocumented professional and occupational competences against the German reference qualifications framework via specialist oral examination or work sample. The number of assessments increased from 60 in 2012 to 129 by 2015. Over half the applications by Afghan, Albanian, Iranian, Iraqi, Kosovan and Syrian refugees in this period resulted in full equivalence. Providing information in Arabic and introducing a multilingual recognition app in 2016 made it easier for refugees to take advantage of the service. Between June 2015 and December 2016, around 20,000 refugees took part in recognition consultations (Germany Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2017a).

The public employment service in Germany has developed the 'My Skills' tool, with the aim of providing more precise information on specific competences of refugees and low-skilled Germans. Standardized computer-based tests, supported by pictures and videos to overcome language barriers, have been developed to capture the relevant competences in 30 professional areas. The tool aims to enable either qualified placement or the arrangement of targeted further vocational training. It is available in German, English, Arabic, Persian, Russian and Turkish (Frick, 2018).

In Italy, the EU and the Ministry of the Interior created the European Fund for the Integration of Third-country Nationals to promote the recognition and validation of immigrants' skills obtained outside formal education and training. The programme so far involves the province of Grosseto along with other regional economic and education partners (VALICO, 2018).

In 2017, Norway introduced a system for electronically mapping the skills of adults in asylum reception centres. Participants answer multiple-choice questions about language, education, work experience and digital skills on an electronic form available in 14 different languages (Norway Government, 2017).

In 2018, Sri Lanka adopted a new mechanism for RPL for returning migrant workers to formally recognize

skills obtained while working abroad. Its primary objective is to disseminate information about RPL, raise awareness and facilitate its uptake. To test the mechanism, a pilot was carried out among 200 returned construction workers in 8 districts. The pilot revealed that information and partnership between vocational training institutions and local authorities would be crucial to the project's success (ILO, 2018).

In Sweden, a secondary level healthcare curriculum was developed by education providers and a healthcare funder (a municipality) for refugees working as healthcare assistants. Prior learning was assessed in relation to the curriculum through group discussions and under teacher supervision. Assistants were then able to obtain accelerated access to an upper secondary diploma (Andersson and Fejes, 2010). Such arrangements need proper coordination to avoid damaging the reputation of the education system, so a national framework for recognition of prior learning has been put in place providing information and guidelines to support industry and education authorities (Sweden National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, 2018).

The Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium, a network of higher education providers offering blended learning solutions for refugees in 12 countries, is co-led by UNHCR and the University of Geneva. Its Quality Guidelines require its members and partners to introduce flexible RPL processes. For instance, Arizona State University offers a distance-learning Global Freshman Academy through its Education for Humanity initiative, where students can begin taking classes without any prior documentation. If they pass, they are awarded credit and the ability to formally enter the university (Arizona State University, 2018).

Digital technologies could facilitate more transparent recognition of skills and qualifications, but the changes they bring to learning modes and materials also raise questions about 'the trustworthiness of data' and 'the ubiquity of the standards' (UNESCO, 2018). Despite the challenges, digital credentials are one innovation with the potential to enable RPL. Blockchain is increasingly considered a promising opportunity to secure documents in country of origin, decreasing the risk of losing educational and professional qualifications and degrees (Grech et al.



2017). But little information is so far available about the effectiveness of experiments with technology-based approaches, such as digital credentials, in skills recognition (UNESCO, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

The recognition of academic and professional qualifications has been a key component of national and international efforts to coordinate and facilitate the mobility of students and professionals. Mechanisms to achieve it have included, at the national level, credential recognition through competent authorities, and, at the cross-national level, regional recognition conventions. These initiatives focus on evaluating *processes* and have been supported by quality assurance mechanisms. However, gradually, and not least due to the growing influence of the concept of lifelong learning, the emphasis has been shifting towards evaluating *outcomes* and recognizing prior learning, including learning achieved in non-formal and informal settings. Mechanisms to accomplish this are still in the early stages of development in most countries.

Recognition of qualifications and prior learning is of fundamental importance for those who have crossed a border, whether voluntarily or forcibly. Whether partial or full, recognition opens up further education or employment opportunities. By making more efficient use of their knowledge, skills and competences, migrants and refugees can help transform the lives of their families and communities. Nevertheless, existing recognition, validation and accreditation services are often not targeted at migrants and refugees, who, in turn, do not use them extensively.

The issue affects migrants and refugees at all levels of education and of all ages. Harnessing their potential requires concrete actions by governments and their assessment, licensing and quality assurance agencies. A series of commitments have been outlined in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees.

Collective action, such as that pursued through the recognition methodology of the Qualifications Passport, can support and strengthen global, regional, national

and local initiatives. It may also contribute to important capacity building at the regional and national level.

The following recommendations outline selected areas that merit closer attention.

- Mechanisms for the recognition of academic and professional qualifications, including regional conventions or mutual recognition agreements, need to include provisions targeted at migrants and refugees that simplify procedures, increase flexibility and reduce costs, such as application fees. While these accommodations should not compromise the credibility of institutions that assure quality and issue credentials, policies must be adjusted to the realities of the populations concerned. This means that governments will need to invest the additional resources required to introduce multiple methods of recognition and increase flexibility.
- The growing interest in shifting from education processes to learning outcomes, exemplified in mechanisms that recognize non-formal and informal prior learning, is particularly suited to the needs of migrants and refugees, for whom it is important to know *what* learning was acquired and not *where* it was acquired. But clear, transparent and coherent frameworks for the recognition of prior learning are needed, and these frameworks should involve social partners beyond education, including trade unions and employer associations.
- It is not enough for public authorities to invest in recognition procedures targeting migrants and refugees; they must also raise awareness about such procedures, using online or mobile phone applications to inform about the existence of procedures by qualification or profession and about the responsible national institutions. To help increase uptake, awareness-raising campaigns should preferably be conducted in relevant languages.
- Recognition services need to be complemented with other supporting services to help migrants' and refugees' transition to further employment and education opportunities, starting from advice and guidance and including language support, bridging programmes, or apprenticeships.

To the extent possible, these services should be planned and delivered in close cooperation with other social partners.

- At the primary and secondary education level, all countries should assess the knowledge, skills and competences of minors and ensure the placement of migrant and refugee students at the appropriate grade level within, at most, weeks of their arrival in host countries. At the post-secondary level, qualification procedures need to be coherent, while links and synergies need to be exploited between countries and regional or global organizations to assist them in exchanging information about practices and raising awareness about challenges and bottlenecks.
- Governance of the recognition of qualifications and prior learning needs to capitalize on the opportunities presented by digital technologies, which can help overcome some of the existing barriers to portability but need to be carefully studied to avoid potential negative consequences.

References for this paper can be found online at the following link:

<https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gem-report/files/QualificationsReferences.pdf>

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