Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

The Office That Decides What a Degree Is Worth

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Every year a few hundred thousand people ask a European system to recognise a qualification obtained elsewhere, and the decision is taken by an office that operates with a framework it did not write. This article examines the decision: the four routes of recognition and the one that is used in practice, the comparability that is asserted rather than demonstrated, the regulated profession that closes the route, the applicant who must supply the evidence herself, the delay that costs a career, and the register that would let the system learn. It argues that recognition is the point at which a qualification becomes a right, and that an office which decides a thousand cases a year without publishing what it decided has not produced a policy.

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1. The Volume and the Silence

The recognition of foreign qualifications is one of the largest administrative operations of European higher education and it is discussed almost nowhere.

The volume is produced by mobility: graduates who move for work, refugees who arrive with a qualification and no documents, professionals who follow a partner, students who complete a degree abroad and return. Each of them meets an office, a form and a delay, and the three determine whether the qualification becomes usable.

The consequence is a system whose decisions shape the careers of a population that has no representation. The instrument is a published account: how many decisions, of what kind, with what outcome and in what time, produced annually by every office of the area.

2. Four Routes

A qualification is recognised through one of four routes, and the route determines the evidence that the applicant must produce.

The first is the automatic recognition of a qualification covered by a directive or an agreement, where the title and the programme are on a list and the decision is a verification. The second is the recognition for the purpose of further study, where a university decides on the comparability of a degree with its own entry requirements.

The third is the recognition for a regulated profession, where a competent authority decides on the basis of the curriculum, the hours and the practical training. The fourth is the individual assessment of a qualification covered by none of the three, which is the route of the graduate of a system outside the area and of the person who has lost her documents.

3. The Comparability That Is Asserted

The framework speaks the language of comparability, and a comparable qualification is not a statement that two degrees teach the same thing.

A comparison is made on the level, the volume, the subjects and the outcome, and the four are recorded in the description of a programme.

Where the description is incomplete, the office fills the gap with a judgement, and the judgement is made by a person who may not know the field.

The consequence is a decision that depends on the documentation of the applicant and on the knowledge of an officer. The instrument is a public description of the criteria that the office applies, with the weight of each, so that an applicant can prepare the evidence and a refusal can be contested on a stated ground.

4. The Regulated Profession

The recognition of a qualification for a regulated profession is the route on which a decision determines whether a person may work, and it is the least transparent.

The authority assesses the curriculum against a national standard, and the gap is met by an aptitude test, a period of practice or a refusal. The three are legitimate and the choice among them is frequently made without a criterion that the applicant can examine.

The consequence is a set of outcomes that differ across the area for the same qualification. The instrument is a published table of the compensations required for each profession and each origin, reviewed annually, with the reasoning of the cases that depart from it.

5. The Applicant Who Supplies the Evidence

The framework places the burden of the evidence on the applicant, and the burden is heaviest for the people with the least capacity to carry it.

A refugee who has lost the diploma needs the institution that issued it to send a confirmation, and the institution may not exist, may not answer, or may answer in a language and a format that the office does not accept. The consequence is a person who cannot practise the profession she has, in a country that needs the profession.

The instrument is a route for the undocumented: an assessment of competence by a university or a professional body, on the basis of a portfolio, an examination and a period of supervised practice, which produces a decision without the document. The schemes that exist in Europe have shown that it works and that it is inexpensive.

6. The Delay

The decision is taken within a period that the directive sets and that the offices of several systems exceed, and the delay is the instrument that decides the outcome.

Four months is a reasonable expectation for a professional who arrives with a contract. Eighteen months is a year and a half of unskilled work, and the person who has spent it is unlikely to return to her profession. The consequence is a loss of the qualification that the system has recognised in law.

The instrument is a decision within a stated period, with a silence that produces a decision in favour of the applicant after the period, as in the administrative law of several systems. A rule of that kind is the only one that an office cannot defer.

7. The Comparison Across the Area

The same qualification is recognised in one system within weeks and refused in another, and the difference is a matter of the office rather than of the framework.

The comparison is possible because the framework is common, and it is made by the applicants themselves in the networks of their professions. The consequence is a mobility that follows the offices with the most predictable practice rather than the labour markets with the most demand.

The instrument is a network of the offices with a common form, a common period and a common statement of reasons, and a published comparison of their decisions. A network of that kind has been built for the regulated professions and not for the recognition for study, which is the route of the largest number.

8. The Data

An office of recognition can publish four figures, and the four are the basis on which a system can be judged.

The first is the number of the applications by origin and by profession. The second is the median period from the application to the decision. The third is the share of the decisions that were positive, with the

compensations required. The fourth is the share of the refusals that were appealed and the share of the appeals that succeeded.

The four are administrative facts, and the fourth is the measure of the quality of the first instance, which is the only stage that most applicants reach.

Route	Decided by	Evidence
Automatic	The office verifies	The title and the list
For study	A university	Comparability of a degree
Regulated profession	A competent authority	Curriculum and practice
Individual assessment	An office of recognition	A portfolio of documents

Table 1 Four routes of recognition and the evidence each requires

9. The University as a Gatekeeper

The recognition for the purpose of study is decided by universities, and the decision is taken by an admissions office that applies the criteria of the programme.

A graduate of a foreign system who applies for a master's programme is assessed on the comparability of her degree, and the assessment is frequently a matter of the ranking of the institution and of the recognition of the country. The consequence is a filter that reproduces the hierarchy of the global system rather than the competence of the applicant.

The instrument is a published criterion for the holders of foreign degrees, with the tests and the portfolio that may substitute for a document, and a decision with reasons. A criterion of that kind is the difference between an admissions policy and an impression.



Figure 1 Four routes and who holds the decision

10. The Language and the Profession

The recognition of a qualification does not certify the language in which the profession is practised, and the gap is discovered by the first patient or client.

A physician recognised on the strength of a curriculum may not be able to take a history in the language of the hospital, and the requirement of the language is set by a separate authority with a separate test. The consequence is a recognition that produces a right without a capacity.

The instrument is a language requirement stated in the same decision: the level, the test, the period in which it must be met, and the support that the institution offers. A statement of that kind makes the two conditions visible at once rather than in sequence.

11. The Employer Who Does Not Ask

A large share of the graduates who move do not apply for recognition, because their employer does not require it, and the statistic of recognition underestimates the mobility.

A software engineer, a designer, a manager and a researcher practise without a regulated title, and the qualification is a signal rather than a licence. The consequence is a system that measures the recognition of the professions that need it and misses the mobility of the ones that do not.

The instrument is a survey of the graduates at two years, with the country, the occupation and the recognition obtained, which is the only instrument that measures the mobility of the whole cohort rather than of the regulated part.

12. The Automatic Route and Its Shadow

The automatic recognition of the qualifications covered by the directive is the success of the area and it has produced a shadow: the qualifications that are not on the list.

A programme that changes its curriculum, a new profession, a joint degree awarded by three institutions: each of them falls outside the automatic route and enters the individual one, where the burden re-

turns to the applicant. The consequence is a system in which the most innovative programmes are the hardest to recognise.

The instrument is a mechanism for the joint programmes: a register of the joint degrees, with a common description and a presumption of comparability, maintained by the institutions that award them. A register of that kind is the instrument through which the innovation of the area reaches its labour market.

13. The Sequence of a Reform

An office that decides to reform its practice can do so in a sequence, and the sequence begins with the publication of the decisions.

The first step is the four figures and the statement of the criteria. The second is the decision within a stated period, with the silence that produces a positive decision. The third is the route for the undocumented, with the assessment of competence by a university or a professional body. The fourth is the network of the offices and the published comparison.

A sequence of that kind takes four years and the first step costs a database and a page. A reform that begins with a new form produces a new delay.

14. The Person Behind the File

A file of recognition contains a curriculum, a transcript, a translation and a fee, and it contains a person who has moved and whose career depends on the decision.

The person is frequently treated by the office as the author of an incomplete application, and the treatment is a consequence of a procedure designed for the ordinary case. The consequence is a relation in which the applicant must prove her competence to an institution that has no reason to doubt it.

The instrument is a service standard: an acknowledgement within five days, a named officer for each file, a statement of what is missing, and a decision with reasons. The four are the ordinary practice of a good administration and they are the difference between a right and a hurdle.

15. The Cost of the Fee

The fee that an office charges for a recognition is small in the budget of the institution and large in the budget of an applicant who has just arrived.

A fee of two hundred euros for the first application of a person who is not yet employed is a barrier for the applicants who most need the decision, and the fee is frequently multiplied by the translations and the certified copies that the file requires. The consequence is a procedure whose total cost is invisible in the accounts of the office.

The instrument is a fee that is refunded on a positive decision, or waived for the applicants who arrive as refugees, with the cost met from the budget of the office. A measure of that kind costs a fraction of the administrative budget and it removes the barrier at the point at which it is highest.

16. The Decision and Its Reasons

A refusal that states a reason permits a correction or an appeal, and a refusal that states a conclusion permits neither.

The offices that state reasons produce decisions that the applicants can act on, and the practice is not uniform across the area. The consequence is a system in which the route of appeal exists in law and is unused in practice, because the applicant has nothing to contest.

The instrument is a template of a reasoned decision, of one page: what was assessed, against what criterion, what was found, and what the applicant may do next. A template of that kind is the cheapest reform in this article and the one that the applicants report as the most important.

17. The Sequence of a Reform of the Area

A system that decides to act on recognition can do so in a sequence, and the sequence begins with the transparency of the first instance.

The first step is the criteria and the reasoned decision. The second is the period with the silence that produces a positive decision. The third is the route for the undocumented and the fee that is refunded. The

fourth is the network of the offices with the published comparison and the register of the joint degrees.

A sequence of that kind takes five years and the first two steps are within the competence of the office. A reform that begins with a new directive produces a framework and leaves the office as it was.

18. Conclusions

Recognition is not an administrative formality and it is the point at which a qualification becomes a right, and an office which decides a thousand cases a year without publishing what it decided has not produced a policy.

Three conclusions follow. The decision must be stated: published criteria with their weight, a period with a silence that produces a positive decision, and a reasoned decision of one page for every refusal. The evidence must be meetable: a route for the undocumented through an assessment of competence, a criterion for the holders of foreign degrees in the admissions of every programme, and a language requirement stated in the same decision. And the system must learn: four figures published annually, a network of the offices with a common form, and a register of joint degrees with a presumption of comparability.

An institution that has done the three has recognised a person. An institution that has done none of them has administered a file, and the file is the reason that a physician drives a taxi.

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Biography:

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