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SESSION III: RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS AND SKILLS IN EUROPE AND ASIA

BACKGROUND NOTE

Summary

This paper discusses the recognition of qualifications and skills as an important aspect of the management of highly skilled persons' mobility, in so far as it affects their integration and labour market outcomes. Some examples of initiatives towards the recognition of foreign qualifications in European and Asian countries are provided. A few major issues emerge from this discussion. The recognition of skills and qualifications necessitates a clear definition of the objectives of the assessment of qualifications, skills and competencies, given the different meanings each of these concepts imply, and the different forms through which a person acquires knowledge and skills. The recognition of qualifications also implies defining which qualifications are regulated or non-regulated. Finally, it entails developing unambiguous and transparent assessment and validation mechanisms in specific sectors. This is an issue directly related to rendering the receiving environments more attractive for highly skilled persons. The latter further entails the establishment of the relevant administrative and institutional structures (i.e. accreditation bodies), accompanied by sufficient financial and human resources for the effective implementation of the defined mechanisms. The simplification and transparency of recognition procedures seem two key challenges that need to be addressed in order to avoid the prevalent underutilisation of highly skilled persons' human capital.

Introduction

This paper discusses the recognition of qualifications and skills as a central aspect of the facilitation of highly skilled migration. It is important to make several distinctions when addressing this topic. First, as suggested by Iredale (2009), it is essential to distinguish between “qualifications” which are normally associated with sets of occupational skills commonly acquired through formal training; and more limited sets of skills for which formal training is not always available. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training further defines formal qualifications as those attested by a certificate, diploma or title, and thus validated by a competent accreditation body, as well as job requirements or specific job-related knowledge and competencies. A competence refers to the ability to apply adequately one's cognitive and technical skills, as well as relevant interpersonal skills and ethical values in a specific



context (CEDEFOP, 2008). Second, it is important to distinguish between different objectives and “modes” of the assessment of qualifications, skills and competencies. The objectives usually respond to the question of what is being assessed, that is, whether one is looking for “equivalence” in content and value of the qualifications, skills or competencies acquired in one country and transferred to another country, or “comparability” in terms of value but not content, for example. The modes of assessment respond to the question of how to assess, or look for that equivalence or comparability. Assessments that focus on equivalence tend to be more rigid than those focusing on comparability. Finally, it is important to notice that intra-corporate transferees may be exempted from or less affected by skills and qualification recognition processes than independent migrants.

The recognition of skills and qualifications is important because it shapes skilled migrants’ labour market outcomes. Some of the characteristics of existing mechanisms for the recognition of qualifications and skills are summarized in Table 1 below. As Iredale (2009: 11) further notes, each method presents advantages and disadvantages in terms of cost, efficiency and reliability.

TABLE 1: MECHANISMS FOR THE RECOGNITION OF SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS	
MECHANISM	CHARACTERISTICS
Mutual recognition agreements (MRAs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual recognition of qualifications in specific occupations • Requires the definition of common standards of training, ethics and practice, and sometimes common cultures, language, laws.
Assessment and recognition of qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifications are assessed for equivalence or comparability by government or government accredited agencies’ • Focus on formal qualifications.
Examinations (of knowledge, skills, language)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct way to assess skills and qualifications • Potential Indirect discrimination intrinsic to testing techniques (format, language of examination, candidates’ lack of familiarity with local regulations)
Competency-based assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional interviews • Tests of competency taken in the destination country and sometimes available in the country of origin • Regional agreements
Source: The table summarizes the characteristics of some mechanisms for the recognition of qualifications and/or skills as described by Iredale 2009, pp. 9-11	

One common problem regarding the assessment and recognition of qualifications and skills refers to the informal acquisition of certain job-relevant skills. Along these lines it seems important to acknowledge that there are different types of learning: formal (occurring within a structured environment), informal (not structured), and non-formal (embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning) (CEDEFOP, 2011). The outcomes of formal learning are those normally at stake in the processes of the recognition of qualifications acquired in a different country than that where these are to be applied. Although the outcomes of informal and non-formal learning are more difficult for authorities to recognize, there are specific mechanisms such as biographical interviews that could help assessing these kinds of skills (see Schuster and Desiderio, 2012). Other obstacles to the recognition of skills refer to structural conditions such as the lack of accreditation bodies, or protectionist attitudes of professional associations and/or governments. Indeed, the recognition of qualifications and skills depends, first and foremost, upon the definition of regulated and unregulated qualifications and the determination of relevant methods to assess, compare and validate the diversity of skills and qualifications. Recognition procedures are more commonly applied to regulated qualifications.



- **Skills recognition in Europe and Asia**

Countries have different motivations to establish mechanisms for the recognition of skills and qualifications, for instance: address skills shortages through the recruitment of foreign professionals, or create human resources able to compete in international labour markets, and prevent their discrimination and deskilling. Some factors affecting the skills and qualification recognition processes are the countries' motivations, but also the degree of regulation or liberalisation of professions¹ and the existence of accreditation bodies, among others.

- **Europe**

In Europe, the intra-regional recognition of skills was traditionally addressed in general mutual recognition directives, directives on specific occupations, and directives on training harmonization. To support the free movement regime, in 2005 the mutual recognition of qualifications in regulated professions with harmonised training requirements was ensured through Directive 2005/36/EC, and mutual recognition applies for other regulated professions (Iredale 2009). The Directive does not prevent Member States from recognising, in accordance to the national law, the professional qualifications acquired outside the EU by third-country nationals. The United Kingdom, for example, recognises automatically the qualifications of lawyers and accountants from the Commonwealth countries.

In Sweden, skills recognition processes are employer-based. Moreover, a special assessment government agency was created in 2009 and a joint working group was established to discuss skills/qualification recognition issues. In Germany, the Federal Law on Recognition of foreign qualifications, that entered into force in April 2012, includes provisions for regulated qualifications as well as supplementary measures concerning the recognition of non-regulated qualifications to acknowledge operational experience acquired outside, and before arrival in Germany (Schuster and Desiderio, 2012; OECD 2012). One example of a country that seeks to prevent the discrimination and deskilling of its own professionals is Lithuania, which provides for the validation of qualifications of medical staff prior to departure (OECD 2012: 119).

Imitating the expansion of international schools (e.g. those accredited by the International Baccalaureate Organization), some European universities are establishing off-shore campuses. They are thus playing a role in facilitating the transferability and recognition of skills and qualifications through: a) the accreditation of specific degree programmes; b) curriculum development and export to overseas universities, and c) institutional agreements for different purposes from student exchange to research collaboration (Skeldon 2009: 19).

Some developments in European countries' higher education systems deserve to be mentioned as potential avenues to facilitate the recognition of formal qualifications. The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, is perhaps one of the most ambitious initiatives aimed at harmonising higher education standards in Europe. The Process put in place a series of reforms in towards achieving a greater degree of compatibility, comparability, and competitiveness of higher education systems. Its three overarching goals include the introduction of a three cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate), quality assurance, and the recognition of qualifications and periods of study. The facilitation of the mobility of students and staff is also an important aspect of the process. Besides the three cycle system, a common credit system (ECTS) for the assessment of study performance was introduced. In 2012, the Ministers of Education committed to making the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees a long-term goal of the European Higher Education Area. The Bologna Process is open to countries signatory to the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe and at the moment has 47 participating countries, including 27 Member States of the EU and the Russian Federation. Some other countries, such as Australia, have



undertaken efforts to align their educational systems with the Bologna Process in a bid to maintain attractiveness to the foreign students.

The ERASMUS programme also facilitates exchange among the EU's 4000 higher education institutions. It is estimated that 2.3 million students have already participated in exchanges since the programme started in 1987 and it is expected to reach 3 million by 2012². In 2007 the programme was expanded to cover student placements in enterprises. In addition, the Erasmus Mundus programme launched in 2004 is an initiative that seeks to promote the European Union as a centre of excellence through the development of top-quality graduate courses, and enhancing the visibility and attractiveness of European higher education in third countries. The programme also promotes co-operation with third countries, namely encouraging the incoming mobility of third-country graduate students and scholars through scholarships; and establishing partnerships with third-country higher education institutions (and encouraging the mobility of EU student and scholars to third countries)³.

○ **Asia**

In Asian countries processes of skills/qualifications recognition, rely largely on bilateral and multilateral agreements, as well as on unilateral initiatives. Some examples are provided below.

Mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) have been signed, for instance, among ASEAN countries⁴. However, the implementation of these agreements requires the clear definition of common standards of training and practice, as well as the amendment of legislations to exempt ASEAN nationals from restrictions applying to the participation of foreigners in certain professions. In addition, sometimes the complex nature of the foreseen procedures hinders the effective implementation of such agreements, or may indirectly discriminate candidates owing to potential biases inherent in the assessment techniques. For instance, this may occur when the main mechanism for the recognition of qualifications rely on examinations to be taken in the national language of the receiving country. Malaysia and China have also anticipated a mutual recognition agreement on higher education (OECD 2012: 178). At the regional level, the Revised Asia-Pacific Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (2011) deserves mentioning as an example of recent developments on the recognition of studies, diplomas and degrees in higher education. The Washington Accord is another example of agreement between accreditation bodies in Canada, Hong Kong, China, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan and Australia to recognize equivalent undergraduate engineering study programmes. Although in 2009 a formal bilateral agreement was not yet concluded, the Accord led to the signature of a MRA between Japan and Australia in 2003. Another example of bilateral agreements is the one signed by Korea to send 10,000 nurses to the U.S. from 2006 to 2011. These nurses would follow an 18-month internship in New York nursing school (Iredale 2009: 17).

As an example of a unilateral initiative, Japan launched in 2001 its "E-Japan strategy" aimed at creating an advanced IT environment in in commerce and government-related realms. As part of this strategy, measures were implemented to facilitate the admission of IT specialists from India, and to promote the recognition of IT qualification standards with India and Singapore (Iguchi 2003: 280). In Malaysia, nurses from Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Albania are allowed to practice in private hospitals after having acquired a Temporary Practising Certificate (that ensures the curricula, credit hours and work experience meet the national standards) (Iredale 2009).

Although not directly concerned with skills recognition, free trade agreements provide in some cases opportunities for the mobility of qualified service providers. The assumption that the latter have skills which are transferable is implicit in such agreements, or otherwise their mobility would not be possible. Japan has concluded trade agreements (Economic Partnership Agreements, EPAs) with India, Thailand,



the Philippines and Indonesia that include labour migration provisions; in the case of the Philippines and Indonesia of health care workers (OECD 2012:-178). Similarly, standardisation exercises have been initiated under multilateral frameworks (e.g. nursing skills examination exercise in the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) forum, as part of the implementation of MRA). Besides committing to the achievement of the free movement of the highly skilled, some countries members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), for instance, Cambodia, Laos PDR, Myanmar and Thailand, have agreed on a common qualifications framework for semi-skilled, skilled, tradesperson, and supervisor certificates in five occupations (poultry production worker, air conditioning and refrigeration technician, welder, concreter and tour guide; Iredale, 2009).

Finally, some higher education institutions in Japan, Hong Kong, China, and Singapore, and more recently in China, have emerged as centres of excellence, and are attracting mostly Asian students and staff. Centres of excellence constitute a channel to create human resources that can be mobilized by both countries collaborating in the establishment of such centres, and the countries hosting the centres.

Conclusions

Overall, some challenges appear to be critical concerning the recognition of (foreign) qualifications and skills. One challenge refers to the definition of regulated and non-regulated professions and the related procedures for the recognition of qualifications. Some professions may be more strictly regulated than others. Another challenge refers to defining the methods for the assessment of qualifications. The language diversity as well as the variety training standards and curricula, professional regulations (i.e. certification and registration procedures), and the lack of accreditation bodies among others, are important barriers to the recognition of qualifications and skills. The complexity of assessment and recognition procedures and the plethora of actors involved may add to the challenges not only referring to the implementation of defined mechanisms. The latter factors may also act as disincentives for highly skilled migrants to embark in difficult, long, ambiguous and complex processes to have their qualifications recognized. The former indicates that transparency and simplification are two key issues to be addressed in the near future if existing recognition mechanisms are to deliver the desired outcomes. One risk of not addressing these issues would be the continued underutilisation of highly skilled persons' human capital. For initiatives undertaken under the framework of multilateral or bilateral agreements, the wide socioeconomic diversity of the signatory parties may pose a challenge in achieving rapid consensus on common standards for assessment and recognition of qualifications and skills.

Bilateral agreements seem to have played an important role in regional harmonisation. Furthermore, the development of accreditation bodies can pave the way towards the definition of compatible and comparable standards of training, ethics and practice, with other countries. Iredale (2009) has suggested a "roadmap" for the Asia Pacific region that can be extended to other regions. It starts with the recognition of the skills of local workers (the development of national qualification frameworks), and the assessment of available evaluation services, followed by the development of bilateral agreements, MRAs and regional mechanisms for the recognition of skills and qualifications. Language barriers need to be addressed in order to facilitate the practice of professionals whose competencies and qualifications have been recognised, for instance through language training or assigning local peers to work with foreign professionals. Many students benefit from language courses before they start the academic year in both Asia and Europe. Finally, it is important to address protectionism and prejudice, as these factors may also be linked to deskilling. Information campaigns may help enhancing migrants' social integration.



In this context, it may seem important to discuss the following issues:

- What positive experiences regarding the different mechanisms used in ASEM countries could be shared so as to enhance the mutual capacities to improve the recognition of skills and qualifications?
- What are the main obstacles towards the recognition of skills and qualifications in specific countries and regions and how these could these be addressed by building on local, bilateral or multilateral support structures?
- How can various public and private actors, including employers, be effectively engaged in facilitation of recognition of qualifications and validation of skills of international migrants?

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Endnotes

¹ For instance, in Asian countries some sectors are highly regulated (i.e. health care) whereas other sectors appear to be more privatised (IT) (Manning and Sidorenko 2007). Likewise, in IT professions the private sector plays a major role issuing globally recognised certificates (e.g. Sun Certified Java Programmer, Microsoft Certified System



Engineer, Cisco Certified Networking Associate) (Iredale 2009: 13). It is clear, however, that the definition of what constitutes a (non) regulated profession differs. In Europe, for example, there are currently 2,600 regulated professions (Schuster and Desiderio, 2012).

² Tertiary Education Statistics, Eurostat
http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_statistics

³ For more information visit: European Commission, Education and Training, Erasmus Mundus
http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/mundus_en.htm

⁴ In 2003 ASEAN countries agreed to develop MRAs for accountants, architects, surveyors and engineers by 2008. In 2009 only Malaysia and the Philippines had developed a MRA in architecture. There is also an ASEAN Engineers register that includes a list of accredited engineers in the region (Iredale 2009: 20).

